

ALYSON CARAWAY

UP
SHE
RISES

THE DEMON KNIGHTS SERIES

The Demon Knights Series

Up She Rises

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To Jesha and Adam, without whom this world wouldn't live
on in the way it deserves to.

Prologue

“You’re late,” God Orko said. Lightning cracked and streaked across the domed ceiling of his sanctuary.

“A thousand apologies, Lord,” Landrathel, the leader of Orko’s army, replied. He flattened his golden wings against his back and placed his hand over his heart as he sank into a low bow. “Your message took some time to reach me.”

“So the others *have* been intercepting my messages.” Orko clicked his tongue, and the lightning above pulsed with bright light. “This race between gods will be a most interesting one indeed. I have important tasks for you and the others. Tasks that, once completed, will ensure Hell’s demise once and for all.”

Landrathel whipped upright. “Then by all means, consider them as good as done, Lord.”

“I am afraid it will not be so easy,” Orko warned. “Information has been passed down from the council to all gods and their armies. The Soul Chalice, thought to have been lost to time, is on Manusya.”

Landrathel’s lips parted. “Where?”

“Hmph. If we knew exactly where it was hidden, it wouldn’t be you lot retrieving it ... that privilege would have gone to Wodan’s group. But we will beat him this time. Many gods and their armies have been tasked with locating the chalice, but *we* will be the ones to procure it. I will be a hero amongst the Heavens.”

“We will not let you down,” Landrathel said, bowing again.

“No, you will not. You will send Cael and Nasnia with a squad to find out as much as they can about the chalice. Have them check the Heavens, Manusya ... capture demons and torture them for information. Whatever it takes. They are to learn as much as they can about its location.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“You will have Jaxel take a second squad. He is to mobilize my human worshippers, find out where manifestations are on Manusya, and capture them. Our abilities alone may not be enough to acquire the chalice. The cup was created for a demon ... we may need demonic powers to reach it.”

“Understood, Lord. And what would you have me do once these commands are dispersed?”

Orko smiled. “I have saved the most important task of all for you, Landrathel. Take a seat ... I have much to explain.”

Chapter 1

“Here we go,” Lamia mumbled on an exhale as the throne room doors parted. Her gaze followed the long red carpet up the stone stairs to the dais within. “Let’s see how this goes today ...”

Today marked six months since Zagan, her brother in arms, finally took his rightful place as King of Hell. Before that, he’d been a skilled demon knight and quick-thinking leader, ruthless in his quest to see Hell win in the ongoing war against the Heavens. He was a legend—the first demon in history to destroy a high archangel and enslave and eliminate a god.

He was also the first demon in history to take one of the Heavens’ angels as his queen.

As Lamia slithered on her serpentine tail down the long carpet runner, she wasn’t sure which version of Zagan she was going to get: the merciless ashmedai demon who would command her to storm a human church on Manusya and leave no worshipper alive, or the angel sympathizer that went soft at anything that made Coryn wince.

“Good morning, Lamia,” Coryn said with a smile from Zagan’s lap. She was stunning, with loosely curled brown hair, striking blue eyes, and red and black robes. Zagan’s tall horns looked as if they protruded from her head, making her appear more demon than angel.

“Good morning, Queen Coryn,” Lamia replied, stopping to sink back and bow. The beams of light that emanated from her eyes made the iridescent scales on her tail sparkle back at her

before she leaned to the side to catch a glimpse of Zagan. She could barely see him behind Coryn's golden wings, only catching one dark red eye and the black markings on one bare shoulder. How many times had Coryn actually sat on the smaller throne built for her just an arm's length away? Maybe once, when they first became king and queen?

"Z, I've come to give my report," Lamia said.

Zagan chuckled. "Always the overachiever. You've already given more reports in your short time as general of the army than I ever did ... and I led the lessers for more than a century."

Lamia smiled and shrugged. "What can I say? You neglected them for a long time, and it shows. I've been quite busy whipping them into shape. Now, the lessers have—"

Zagan gave a dismissive wave of his hand before placing it back on Coryn's side. "You don't need to keep updating me, Lam. I trust you're making the army the best it can be."

She blinked. "I am, but—"

"I have appointed a new messenger. If I need any specific information, I'll send him to summon you, and you can give your reports to us then."

Lamia raised her eyebrows. So she wouldn't be getting orders to raze Manusyan churches today. In fact, her king didn't want to play king at all. Her reports were always no more than a few minutes' worth of information Zagan may find pertinent to the state of his realm and the war against the Heavens. Sure, some of the details about the higher-ranking

demons' performance or what they'd observed in the human realm could be dry—she didn't blame him when his eyes occasionally glazed over or he turned his attention to twirling Coryn's hair while she spoke—but she thought he found *some* value in her words.

“I see,” she said finally, her annoyance forming a raging storm behind her ribs. He'd dismissed her the week before, too—though not as abruptly. The week before that, it was clear he'd been more focused on Coryn's thighs than the outcome of the battle she'd led against a group of messenger angels. “I guess you'll continue to ignore your army and the larger goings-on in the war, then. You know, the one that's going on between the Heavens and Hell? The one we were just starting to win when you first sat upon that chair there?”

She still couldn't see his full face behind Coryn, but knew from his sigh that he was rolling his eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Lamia spun on her tail. “Okay, never mind then. I'll—” She was about to make a snide remark about how she would continue improving on the army's skill after decades of negligence, but stopped herself. Zagan didn't want to hear about her plans, so why should she share them? “Never mind.”

She began making her exit when Coryn said, “You should listen to her, Zagan.”

Lamia slowed her pace.

There was silence for a moment, then he replied, “The Heavens are still recovering from the loss of their god and high archangel. I want to enjoy as much of this quiet period

with you as I can.”

Angel sympathizer. Today, and for many days to come, the king she would get was the angel sympathizer. Still, she hoped Coryn could knock some sense into him.

Instead, the angel queen gave a husky laugh and murmured something Lamia was sure she didn't want to hear. With a shudder, she made her way out of the throne room to the sounds of smacking lips.

As the guards flanking the room began closing the doors behind her, she almost stopped them. She almost turned around and wedged her dagger between the locks, just so she could bust back in and once again insist Zagan allow her to increase their offensive in the human realm. The Heavens were at their weakest. Thousands of angels, an archangel, and a god had died at the hands of Zagan and Coryn. The remaining angels were still recovering, but could be back at full strength soon. Now was the time to keep picking off their numbers.

But as the locks clicked into place, all Lamia could do was sigh. Her shoulders sank, and she continued down the hall.

Zagan had finally broken through Lamia's resolve. She couldn't fight him anymore. She was simply a knight, at the mercy of her angel-loving king's orders ... and that angel-loving king just blatantly dismissed the leader of his army so he could make out with his queen.

She continued out of the castle, hoping Zagan wasn't leading Hell down a path they would all soon regret.

Rile groaned as the shackles above his head bit into his raw wrists. The floor of the wooden boat creaked and groaned beneath him, as if it was also tired of being thrown from side to side in the waves.

“Sure hurts like Hell, doesn’t it?” Stotter, a fellow half-demon, said beside him. The older male looked up at his own wrists, shifting them in his bonds as he shook his head and winced.

Rile always hated that phrase. He’d been born and raised in the human realm of Manusya by his human mother, feared and rejected by humans because of his glowing eyes and pointed ears—marks of his mephis demon father. *Manusya* was what hurt; Hell had always sounded like a paradise in comparison.

But arguing about whether or not Hell truly hurt was a sure way to get labeled as the weird, lonely mannie amongst the group. “Yeah, hurts like Hell,” he agreed. “I hope wherever they’re taking us, it’s close.”

Stotter sighed. “And there’s still no word about why we’re all here in the first place.”

“No, but whatever it is, it’s big,” added Grem, chained up on the other side of Rile. “If the humans were trying to rid the realm of mannies, they would have killed each one of us when they found us.”

Rile nodded, then clicked his tongue against his teeth. “I still can’t believe I let myself get captured by those bastards. I fell right into their trap.”

“How’d it happen?” Grem asked.

“They said they needed me to charge a battery for them. I was happy to show some regular guys that my powers weren’t scary, you know? That mannie powers could be useful and I was like them, just trying to make it in the world. They offered to buy me a drink before I started the job. I remember taking my first sip, then my face on the floor, and then I woke up here.”

Stotter shook his head. “I wasn’t captured by a human. I was walking along, minding my own business, when something slammed into the back of me and lifted me from under my arms. I saw gold wings and realized I’d been scooped up by an angel. She told me to cooperate or she’d drop me, and by then I was looking down at the tops of trees.”

“A few of the mannies over here were captured by angels the same way,” Grem said, motioning with his chin to the dozen more prisoners chained up on his right. “They need us for something, and what’s the one thing we have that angels and humans don’t? Powers. Demonic special abilities.”

Down the row, one mannie after another whispered to each other.

“Here comes another message,” Rile said, sitting up straighter in anticipation.

The whispers came closer until the mannie on Grem’s other side spoke into his ear. Grem shook his head, then leaned close to Rile. “Do you have fire or shadow?” he repeated in a murmur.

Rile shook his head. “I’m afraid I have the most useless ability of all in water ... electricity. I would shock you all to

death.” He relayed the question to Stotter, who passed it to his neighbor, and it continued down the line. As each mannie shook their head, Rile was glad he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t help with whatever those toward the front of the ship were planning.

“At least you have a cool power,” Grem offered. “Electricity is badass. I can only stab poison into people, which is useless when your arms are up in the air or you get hit from behind and knocked unconscious. I still can’t believe I let those bastards sneak up on me. At least you had an excuse, Stot. An angel is silent in the air.”

Stotter shrugged. “You guys are lucky you’ve got electricity and poison. I’m half-incubus. My powers only really come out in the bedroom.”

“Oh, stop bragging. That’s the most important power of all!” Grem said, and they laughed.

Rile had never found humor in demonic powers before. He was used to hiding them or hearing screams and accusations when they came out. He didn’t need to expose his powers for humans to be afraid. His pointed ears, silver hair, and almond-shaped eyes that spewed bright neon-blue light took care of that for him. Friends and allies were few and far between, but here, he felt like he’d found family in Grem and Stotter. The rest of the mannies aboard seemed just as happy to have found more of their kind.

“I gotta say, it feels good to be able to talk about my powers with people who understand,” Rile said, “and who evidently think they’re badass.”

“The judgment is harsh out there,” Stotter agreed. “Life as a mannie is hard. It’s a shame it took getting rounded up by angels and humans to bring us all together.”

“At least we got each others’ backs against them,” Grem added. “They may continue to judge, but we’ll poison, electrocute, and uh ... love ‘em to death.”

They roared with laughter. Every mannie on this ship could be in a life-or-death situation, captured by angels who were in a war against half of what made up their kind—yet Rile, for the first time in his life, felt like he belonged. Demons were a rare sight, but mannies like him were even rarer. Until he was captured by humans and angels and placed on this boat, he’d never seen a fellow manifestation in his life. Now dozens of others like him lined the inner walls of the immense wooden boat, all shackled and chained just as he was.

As much as his wrists hurt and he was nervous about what the angels were planning, he never wanted the boat ride to end.

Chapter 2

There was nothing like swimming in the frigid waters of Manusya to cool off and keep from punching Zagan in the throat instead.

Lamia cut through the ocean currents with an occasional flick of her tail. The waters in these parts of the human realm were murky, not allowing her to see more than a few feet in front of her, but that suited her mood. Drifting, alone and suspended in the cold sea, made her feel like she was flying in a realm all her own.

But flying made her think of angels, and angels made her think of Zagan.

With a grunt, Lamia angled herself downward, inhaled sharply through the gills on the sides of her neck, and undulated her body to propel herself farther into the deep. The water grew colder, and the pressure around her increased, enveloping her in a tight embrace that nothing else—or *anyone* else—could offer her. Not that she would ever want someone to offer her anything like Zagan and Coryn had. They were a clear example of how a lover could leave one distracted and apt to make stupid decisions.

Lamia jolted as something slammed into the water above her. It was impossible to tell just how far from the surface she was, but her skin stung just from hearing the slapping noise the object had made. She gave another flick of her tail to swim away, but a second loud smack—and a scream?—gave her pause. Curious, she began her ascent.

The water pressure eased around her, but even with the full moon shining high and the beams of light emitting from her eyes, Lamia should not have been able to see as much of the surface as she could. It was as if the sun hovered just above the water, showing her that each loud slap hitting the water was a body. Each one hit hard and fast, then slowed as the sea enveloped them and sent their splayed limbs swaying in all directions. Some struggled. A few more were either unconscious or dead.

Lamia grabbed one of the writhing bodies and pushed it back toward the surface. When they broke through, she was met with screams and crackling wood and a powerful heat that made her recoil.

The person in her arms coughed and gasped for breath. "Please, my sister!" she shouted. She pointed toward the fireball before them and fought futilely to see through the blinding light.

The girl may not have been able to see through the brightness, but Lamia could. The light from her eyes allowed her to see even the finest details of the enormous, blazing ship before her.

The vessel was burning up quickly as it sank into the sea, spewing steam as fire met water. Dozens of humans were jumping, but the boat was still so high that their bones snapped on impact.

Lamia spotted horns on a few of the passengers as they plunged. When she turned her attention back to the girl she held, she noticed round red eyes and small tusks.

“You’re ... mannies?” she asked. The girl nodded and tried to say something else, but Lamia already began tearing back through the water. These creatures were all manifestations—she needed to save her brethren!

She towed the girl with one arm and collected more victims with the other. They all made a chain, shouting to and supporting one another while keeping the unconscious ones above water as they circled the boat.

They were a few miles from shore, but Lamia saw coastline in the moonlight. She pulled them all toward it while focusing her energy on her breathing. Swimming with dozens of half-demons holding onto her was tough but rewarding work. Knowing she was saving the souls of those who could one day be reborn as full demons kept each stroke purposeful and each breath measured.

There were collective sighs of relief and whoops and shouts as the water became shallow enough for the mannies to stand in. Lamia split her tail into legs before she stood and helped move people toward the shore.

The mannies ran, making loud splashes before they reached the sand. They stumbled and panted, and most clapped her on the shoulder in gratitude as they passed.

“What happened out there?” she asked one, a middle-aged man with yellow eyes and rounded horns. A half-incubus, if she had to guess.

The man shook his head, and his shoulders drooped. “We were prisoners on that damned ship, captured by humans and angels. They certainly underestimated the power of us, or

didn't realize that an asura mannie was on board." He turned and pointed to a stout, unassuming fellow farther inland surrounded by others trying to kiss his hands. "That heroic bastard burned through his chains, helped the rest of us, and we tied the human crew up instead."

Lamia raised her eyebrows. "So the humans all went down with the ship?"

"Yes, and good riddance to 'em."

"And what about the angels?"

"There were only a couple, and they flew away as soon as the fire got out of control."

Lamia laughed. "Sounds like their pathetic lot."

The man nodded. "What Arryn, the asura, didn't think about was how we were all going to get to shore. None of us have wings, and we would have died if not for you. Thank you." He extended his hand.

Lamia smiled and gave it a couple of good shakes. "My pleasure. But with whatever's going on, you all should hide out for a while. Do you need shelter?"

The mannie shook his head. "You've done enough for us, Lady Demon. We'll find a way. We manifestations always do."

"Lady *Knight*," she corrected.

The man's eyebrows knit together, and he tilted his head to the side. "I apologize, Lady Knight. I was brought up by my human father, so I'm afraid I don't know what that is."

"I see." His ignorance didn't surprise her. Few demon

species raised their young, even in Hell—Lamia had no idea who her own mother and father were. It would have been more unusual for his demon mother to have stuck around. “My name is Lamia. I am a demon knight, making me the most powerful of my species—gorgon—and personally appointed to protect and defend the demon king.”

The half-incubus’s eyes widened. “My name is Stotter, and Lady Knight, I am so sorry! It is an honor to be in your presence, and we cannot thank you enough for your help.” He bowed his head, then winced as a shout rang out behind them. “But if you will excuse me, I need to help my friend Grem over there ... I think his arm is broken.” He gave Lamia a low bow as he took a few steps backward toward the halfling cradling his elbow.

“Get your friend and bring him to me!” she called after Stotter, then splashed over to those still making their way inland. Some were holding unconscious victims or urging limping or shaking mannies along. “Line them up on the sand there! I can help.”

First in line was a small female asleep at the base of the dune. An easy warm-up. Lamia knelt and placed her hands over the girl’s collarbones, lightly brushing her fingertips over the skin as she felt for pain. A dull, throbbing ache grew in Lamia’s skull, telling her the girl was moderately injured—no broken bones but a few bruises and flesh wounds. Lamia opened her eyes wide, feeling her face heat as they glowed brighter, and she drew the pain and injury out of the girl’s body. A gash on the female’s cheek knit back together, and slurping noises came from other parts of her body as it

repaired. Once a bruise on the girl's forehead faded away, Lamia's headache subsided, and the girl's eyes fluttered open.

The second manifestation in the row was Grem, frowning at his arm, which was bent in a way it wasn't supposed to be. Lamia reached out to touch it, but he jerked away and hissed in pain.

"I won't lie to you ... healing that is going to hurt," she said. "But the quick flash of pain it'll take for me to mend it completely now will be worth it compared to the marathon ache you'll feel as it heals over time."

Grem looked from his arm to her open hand and back again. He scooted forward in the sand and gingerly placed his elbow in her palm.

She didn't warn him about the gruesome sound the bones would make as they healed, but was sure he barely heard them over his own screams.

Stotter cupped a hand over Grem's mouth as he thrashed. "Shush, Grem! There could be other ships out there!"

One minute longer and she released Grem's arm, fully healed. The halfling bent his elbow a few times and rubbed at his bicep, then exhaled slowly.

"Demon, thank you," he said hoarsely.

"*Lady Knight*," Stotter corrected.

Lamia healed a third victim, then a fourth. With each mannie she helped, more surrounded them to lift them up and take them farther inland.

After Lamia healed more than two dozen manifestations, one remained. She took a slow breath and sighed, tired after dragging dozens of half-demons through the water and then healing their wounds. She had just enough energy left to give this final male her all.

She knelt beside him and looked him over, allowing herself a moment for her last headache to fully subside. He was unique, even amongst the other manifestations surrounding them. He had no horns, tusks, or tail, and could have passed as full human if not for his pointed ears and jagged eyebrows. The moonlight made his silver hair appear as if it glowed. He was fit; his damp dark-blue sleeveless shirt clung to his muscled torso, and she watched his chest slowly rise and fall with every breath. He looked so serene; she almost didn't want to wake him.

"Be careful with him," warned Stotter. "That's Rile. He's half-mephis. I worry if you startle him that he could electrocute you."

She nodded in thanks. As a water-based species, gorgons didn't get along well with electricity. If he so much as sneezed a spark on her, he could leave her temporarily paralyzed ... or worse.

"Okay," Lamia whispered to herself, then placed her hands on Rile's chest. As her eyes warmed and glowed, they further brightened his face, and she focused on drawing out what was ailing him.

She did not feel the usual pain in her head, and his energy refused to shift.

Lamia's eyebrows drew together.

"You're sure he's hurt?" she asked Stotter. But it was a stupid question. The mannie was unconscious.

Without waiting for Stotter's answer, she pressed her hands harder against Rile's chest and forced more of her own energy through him, causing the brightness of her eyes to increase as she willed the male to wake.

Still, she felt nothing.

"Come on," she said through grit teeth. She craned her head back and looked up at the stars as if they could give her more energy.

The lights of her eyes were two beams that shot into the sky, and those around her gasped in awe.

But she could only keep her energy up that high for so long. She fell forward with a groan, and the light dimmed. Her eyes cooled as she panted above Rile.

"Shit," said Stotter, and his curse was met by panicked murmurs from those around them.

"RUN!" another shouted, and Lamia looked up to find a few pointing out toward the ocean. Two hulking shadows approached from the horizon.

More ships?

"Her light led them right toward us!" someone spat.

"What?" she asked dazedly, but the mannies were already sprinting into the brush beyond the shore.

She looked around. "Stotter?" But he, too, had disappeared.

She and Rile were the only ones left in the sand, listening to the shouts of those on the ships.

“Come on, Rile,” she said, struggling to pick up the half-mephis demon. He was so heavy, and she was so tired ...

Many of the manifestations left her to fend off the ships, but they were half-demons, and she needed to do everything in her power to help them escape whatever fate the angels and humans had in store for them.

She plunged a nail into the sand and drew a perfect circle, then a series of intersecting lines inside. On the north side of her pentagram, she drew the symbol for “immediate,” then to the south, “danger.” On the east and west, she drew “100” and “soldiers.” From her pocket, she extracted a small bead and tossed it into the center.

The pentagram opened a small portal, and one lesser demon after another began climbing out from the depths of Hell.

“Kill everyone on those ships,” she commanded, “and make sure no mannies get caught.”

She didn't have the energy to stick around and make sure the demon army did as told, but hoped their training would be enough. When humans died during acts of prejudice against demons, their deeds were considered evil, and that gave their darkened souls the chance to be reborn as a manifestation or full demon. Lamia smiled at the thought. *See you all in Hell.*

Instead of dragging Rile into the brush, she led him back into the waves and merged her legs back into a tail. She would use a lot less energy carrying him through the water than on

land.

No matter what, she would regain her energy and make sure Rile survived.

Chapter 3

Lamia swam away from the beach with her eyes shut tightly and Rile cradled against her chest. She swept her tail one way, then the other, careful not to make a sound—one small splash or stray light from her eyes, and the ships would be in hot pursuit. Rile’s head jostled between her breasts when an arrow whizzed past her ear and made her flinch. Screams rang shortly after from the lesser army on the shore.

Lamia stifled a gasp each time another arrow sailed past, and the adrenaline coursing through her veins begged her to swim faster, or at least open her eyes to assess the danger—but her lighthouse-like gaze would easily give away their position and put her and Rile in more danger.

The methodical swaying of her tail was like a metronome, and as she continued to propel them through the water, she tried to match her heart rate to the slow rhythm. Back and forth, back and forth ... and when her heart rate slowed and the adrenaline subsided, she found she could no longer hear the sounds of shouts and combat.

Lamia cracked her eyelids open and looked tentatively from side to side. They were alone, save the whitecaps of small waves crashing around them. She sighed in relief. One problem down.

Now she needed to figure out what to do with her charge in the middle of the ocean.

She gave more forceful sweeps of her tail to pick up speed. She wasn’t familiar enough with Manusya to know where to

go from here, but she needed to find another coast as soon as possible. What if Rile woke up and thought he was still a captive? He could lash out with his lightning, and his power would be amplified by the water around them. She shuddered at the thought of being paralyzed and sinking like a stone to the bottom of the sea, unable to use her gills to take a breath. It was the first time she'd ever considered what it would feel like to drown.

But she would have to take the chance—she couldn't just abandon this half-demon in the middle of the water. She was a demon knight; it was her responsibility to help him, no matter the danger.

Unsure of what else to do, Lamia focused on the brightest star in the sky and swam in that direction. By the time it led her to another shoreline, the sun peeked over the horizon and gave Rile a bit more color. His lips were blue and his skin was ice cold as she dragged him up onto the sand.

It was then she noticed it: an arrow buried deep inside Rile's bicep.

She bit out a curse. The embedded arrow kept him from bleeding out, but he was already weak, and the new injury was doing him no favors. With anyone else, she would have simply yanked the arrow out of his muscle and flesh and healed them with her touch. But she'd been useless to this mannie. She told herself it was because she'd run out of energy, but deep down, she knew there was more to it than that. His energy didn't move for her *at all*. She'd never experienced that before.

"Rile?" she asked, surprised by the nervous shake in her

voice. Whatever she was going to do with him, she needed to do it quickly. The sun wasn't going to rise soon enough to warm him, and hypothermia was a real concern.

“Rile,” she said louder. She took him into her arms, then gave him a gentle shake before angling him upward and bringing their faces closer together. Goodness, he was handsome. His hair still had that silvery shine, and his skin was the same bronze as the wet sand beneath them. It was if everything about him, from the pointed tips of his ears to the angle of his jaw, was purposefully chiseled by a master sculptor.

His light breaths made her shiver. It had a salty scent that made her feel calm and ... at home.

He smells like the sea because you just dragged him through it, you idiot.

She shook her head at her own stupidity. She was drooling for this guy like Jinn and Oriax would in pursuit of their next score—and she never participated in that hunt. She was a warrior, a leader. She didn't have time to spend on appreciating this mannie's physique and gentle face.

Maybe I should just leave him to fate, she thought. His soul would decide whether to leave his body and move onto the next or keep its current vessel alive.

As if fate itself heard her, Rile's chest stopped moving.

Lamia's eyes widened. “He's not breathing,” she announced as her stomach roiled. She looked around as if they weren't alone on the shore.

Shit, shit, shit ... When she said she would leave his soul to fate, she didn't mean it!

"Rile!" she called, and before she knew it, she was on top of him, tilting his jaw up and pressing the crown of his head into the sand.

His lips, though frigid, were soft and smooth as she met them with her own. She must have been more tired than she realized; she had the bizarre impulse to linger there, like her head was too heavy to lift anymore, and wouldn't it be nice to just settle on these lips and rest? Lamia shook her head to free herself from the fog before sealing her mouth tightly over his and blowing, forcing air down his throat.

She pulled back and gave forceful shoves against his chest. "Come on, Rile," she pleaded, then bent down to begin the process again.

Blowing, pressing. Blowing, pressing.

No response.

She was about to drag him farther up the shore in search of help when he gasped and hoarsely sucked in air. Rile's body sizzled and electrified, giving Lamia no time to distance herself. The electricity acted like a chain between them, and she was unable to pull her hands away despite her brain screaming for her to. She convulsed uncontrollably as sharp pain traveled from her hands, up her arms, and through the rest of her body. She couldn't find the means to shout as lightning overwhelmed her.

A moment later, Lamia's hands were against her own chest,

and she was on the ground, spasming. She panted, staring at Rile as he began to regain consciousness.

Rile grunted, and another course of bright electric shocks ran over his body. His head jerked. “Water?” he begged, eyes still closed. His voice sounded like it was being ground against stone.

Lamia sat up, shaking her arms as she finally regained control of her body. If he knew what he’d just done to her, he didn’t show it. She couldn’t be upset—it wasn’t his fault his body acted in self-defense.

“Water,” he whispered again.

She shook her head to clear her mind. “Water, yes,” she agreed. She stumbled into the shallows and dunked her hands in, stifling a shaky exhale as the cold water eased the tingling in her palms. Both of them blistered from burns his electricity gave her. She shuddered as she held them there, then scooped up some water in one hand while fishing for the canteen from her belt with the other. As she poured the water from her hand into the cup, she was thankful the scales on her palms weren’t too damaged and she could still filter out the salt.

She made her way back to him, gingerly angling the canteen to his lips. “Water,” she reassured, but he was already sitting up and drinking greedily.

He took several long draws from the container, swallowed hard, and gasped for air. “Th-thank you,” Rile said, his voice smoother and deeper than she was expecting.

And if that didn’t add enough to his appeal, she was wildly

unprepared for his eyes when he opened them.

Not only were his long, almond eyes beautiful in shape, but they gave off a bright blue glow to rival her white. Her breath caught—glowing eyes were a rare trait among demons.

Rile looked just as surprised to see her, but as he went to move his arm, Lamia jolted forward.

“No!” she shouted, startling him into jerking it away anyway. He recoiled and hissed in a breath as he looked down at the arrow jutting from his skin.

“I’m so sorry, that’s all my fault,” she said. “We need to get that thing out of you. If you were any other demon, I could have taken that thing out and healed you before you woke up, but for some reason, my power was useless on you”

Rile shifted in the sand, keeping his arm in his lap. “Lucky me,” he said. He lifted it an inch, but grimaced and let it hang again.

Lamia extracted a dagger from the belt around her waist and cut strips off the bottom of her tunic. “The good news is, humans rarely use barbed arrowheads. It should be a clean extraction.”

He exhaled a deep breath. “Okay.”

“The bad news is, it’s still going to hurt like a bitch ... but I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

She was hesitant to make contact with him again, but the healer in her couldn’t resist. She placed her palm on his skin and braced where the arrow was lodged.

He groaned when she applied pressure. Sweat dripped down his temple. “Ah!” he shouted as she reached for the middle of the arrow, making her hesitate. “I think you should hold the shaft as close to the skin as you can. There’s more control that way.”

She supposed he was right. All of this wouldn’t be an issue if she could use her damned healing powers on him! She grasped the arrow as delicately as she could without jostling it.

Rile sucked in air, then said through clenched teeth, “I’ve never ... ngh ... asked a girl to hold my shaft so soon after meeting her. Especially when I don’t even know her name.”

Lamia couldn’t help but laugh nervously while steadying her hands. “Lamia,” she said, leaning in to take a better look at the wound.

He replied with a howl of pain as she yanked the arrow free.

“Seven Hells,” he cursed while she wrapped her makeshift bandages as tightly as she could around his arm.

He took a few deep breaths, wide chest heaving beneath his soaked sleeveless top, then looked up at her with those electric blue eyes.

Anyone else would have winced at the brightness of them, but she stared right back.

“Thanks, Lamia. I’m Rile. Are you ... like me?”

She scooted away in the sand, grateful he hadn’t electrocuted her again. “No. I mean, I’m like you in that I’m a demon, but a full demon ... a gorgon. The prisoners with you on the ship, they said you’re mephis?” She knew their eyes

could light up when they used their powers, but Rile's eyes stayed bright, like hers. They were special. Breathtaking.

Rile nodded. "Human mother, mephis father. But he disappeared when I was born, so I never knew another demon before getting captured—" He looked around the beach; the sand was pale yellow in the sunrise. "Wait ... where are the others?"

The story of the ship and the beach was a good way to distract him from his arm. "The lesser soldiers kept the others safe, I'm sure," she finished. "Safer than I kept you from that damned arrow, anyway."

Rile shrugged his good shoulder and gave a small smile. "Those guys can hold their own, but I'm sorry they blamed you for what happened. You shouldn't blame yourself—for the humans *or* my arm. I don't know what the crew's plans were for us, but they certainly didn't sound good. Something about using our abilities to collect something?"

Lamia shook her head. "It's the first I've ever heard of anything like that. I've never seen that many of you—manifestations, I mean—in one place before. Don't the humans usually leave you alone, or even go out of their way to avoid your kind?"

"If only. Some are intrigued, but most are flat-out awful. Sometimes they'll ignore me, but most of the time I can't go anywhere without someone saying or doing something to try and provoke me. I have to move a lot so humans in one place don't figure out where I live and kill me in my sleep."

"I'm so sorry. Why don't all you mannies make a town of

your own somewhere, far away from the humans?”

“I didn’t think there were that many of us around. Like I started to say before, I’d never met any demons, half or otherwise, before that ship ... and you ...” He smiled, a red hue appearing on his dark cheeks. “You’re the first full demon I’ve ever met. And may I be so bold to say, you’re absolutely stunning.”

Despite herself, Lamia blushed. “I had no idea mannies were treated that way. We’ll have to change that,” she said, looking down at her open palms—anywhere but at him.

She suddenly felt Rile’s forehead very close to her own.

“I’d know an electrical burn anywhere. Did I give these to you?”

“It was your body responding to a potential threat. It’s fine. Like I said, gorgons have healing powers. Watch.”

They both focused on her open palms in silence as she willed the skin and scales to repair themselves. Rile gasped as the swelling around her wounds deflated to allow the skin to fuse, but it began to crinkle as the edges tried to join.

Lamia furrowed her brow. “It doesn’t usually leave scarring,” she said. “I think I’m just tired. It’s been a long couple of days. I’ll finish it up later.”

Unable to heal him, unable to fully heal the injuries he gave her ...

“You’re frowning,” Rile said. “You don’t think you’ll be able to fix them, do you? Seven Hells, I’m so sorry.”

Lamia fisted her hands so they could no longer stare at the shining rips in her palms. She leaned forward, examining his legs before slowly turning her gaze upward. “What about you?”

Rile’s chest rose, and he turned his crimson face away. “Wh-what about me?”

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

She looked him over, and when she didn’t see any other injuries, she gripped him gently by the elbow and ran her fingers over the bandage at his arm.

He winced and sucked in a breath. “It’s tender!” he whined, then seemed to catch himself. His jaw slackened, and he hunched forward. “I mean, that arm still smarts a bit, but I’m fine otherwise.”

Lamia chuckled. “Okay, Mr. Manly. Do you have anywhere you need to be? Because I would love to take you back to my place so we can tend to that and get to the bottom of why my powers aren’t working on you.”

“Your place? No, I mean, if I wasn’t here, I’d be on that ship being sent off somewhere, and other than that, I would just be at home, and I don’t even know where that is from here, and if you’d like to take a look, you’re more than welcome to, because if this interests you, it interests me ...” He seemed to catch himself again and took a deep breath. “I mean, no. I have nowhere to be. Where do you live?”

Lamia smiled. “In Hell. Let me show you the realm you came from.”

Chapter 4

“I wasn’t sure where we were before, but now that the sun is up, I recognize the Wilhall mountains over there,” Lamia said.

Rile followed where she pointed. The sandy shore led up to tree-lined dunes, and snowy mountaintops peeked over those in the distance.

“Go through those trees there. I’ll meet you in a moment,” she continued.

Rile lowered his brows and tilted his head as he turned back to her. “Why? What are you going to do?” he asked and regretted the words as soon as he said them. It was none of his business what she was planning on doing, but despite her saying she’d meet back up with him, his first reaction was not to believe her. It was a trick he’d fallen for dozens of times before.

Lamia blinked as one side of her lip fell. She looked just as offended as he was embarrassed by his question.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was out of line for me to ask. You’re really going to meet back up with me, though?”

Her expression softened as she placed her hands on her hips. “Of course I will. I just need to take care of something. Now, head through those trees and walk straight back until you can no longer hear the waves. I’ll be right behind you.”

He pursed his lips and nodded. “Okay. See you soon.”

As he stepped onto the dunes and sand gave way to soil, he resisted the urge to look back. What did he care if she went

back into the waves, anyway? He'd only just met the demon—the only full demon he'd ever seen—and she surely had better things to do than hang with him and his busted arm. If she was only sticking around because she felt bad about his wound, their time together would be short anyway. Still, how he'd longed to see Hell and to have friends that were more like him—like Stotter and Grem. He wondered how they'd fared on the beach. Lamia said they were likely safe, and he would hold onto that for now.

Lamia.

In the short time he'd known her, he'd gathered a few things: she was beautiful—almost painfully so—and wore her heart on the small patches of scales that peppered her skin. Whatever she was doing now, she absolutely did not want him to see it—and he would respect that.

That didn't stop him from thinking about what she could be doing, though. Was she agonizing over the scars he'd left on her palms? She'd feigned indifference, but he could tell she was concerned about them. So was he. Why did he have to be the special half-breed that she couldn't heal and that broke her healing powers even when she tried to use them on herself?

“It's always something with you,” he mumbled to himself as he shook his head.

Rile stopped when he could no longer hear the waves. He held his breath as he finally looked back over his shoulder, but Lamia was still nowhere in sight. He perked an ear, listening for her calling his name. His arm started to ache as he stood there, and he wondered if he hadn't walked straight back into

the woods as Lamia had requested and had somehow meandered away.

Please, please come back.

He'd brought his hand halfway up to his mouth in order to shout for her when he heard the crunching of leaves. Rile turned around to face farther inland again, half to show he was still following directions not to look and half to hide his relief. He called, "Can I look now?"

He could hear the smile in her voice. "Yes. Thank you."

He spun to face her, and the gorgon closed the distance between them in a few long strides. The stringy ends of her torn tunic, tattered from making bandages for him, ran along two long, shapely legs that replaced the tail she had on the beach. Like the skin on her arms and shoulders, islands of scales glimmered in the sunlight on her thighs. Matching gray boots ended above the knees, but he imagined those same types of scales graced her calves, too. And had she fixed her hair?

She'd sent him away ... so she could make herself even more beautiful?

"H-hi," he stammered, eyes shooting from her legs to her eyes. He loved that hers were as bright as his.

She laughed. "Hello. Shall we move onward? How's your arm?"

"Onward, and it's fine, thank you."

"Great. I used my last portal bead to summon the demon army to help your friends, so I can't just conjure one here. We

need to use one of the permanent portals to get home. This way.”

Lamia walked past him to lead them along, and he was thankful for the view. Did all demons have such great asses? Hers was perfectly rounded, and a little tease of cheek popped out of each side of the bodysuit beneath her tunic. Her scales were mesmerizing as they glinted iridescently in the sunlight.

He should probably say something lest she found out he was concentrating too much on her backside. “So is there anything I should know before waltzing into the underworld? Don’t lock eyes with certain demons? Punch one right in the face to establish dominance, et cetera?”

He loved when he made her laugh. “I have one particular demon in mind that you could punch in the face. His name is Zagan. He would probably rend you from the inside out, though, so maybe don’t. Not that I think you couldn’t hold your own or anything, but perhaps refraining from making eye contact with any demon while we’re down there is a good call.”

He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have just continued staring at her ass, because that was better than making an ass out of himself and pointing out that he was weaker than a full demon. And who was this Zagan character? “Right. Sure.”

They’d walked about a mile inland by the time Lamia announced they’d made it to the portal. He looked around but saw nothing that resembled some otherworldly Hell gate. He was surprised when Lamia approached the side of a large

boulder, moved some vines out of the way, and pressed her hand against the stone to reveal a maze of bright red lines. When she traced them, they exploded outward, making the boulder look like it was on fire as it emanated a brilliant red hue.

“All right. Let’s get you to my study so we can fix you up and figure out just what in the Seven Hells is making me unable to heal you,” Lamia said, then extended her hand to him.

Excitement and dread filled Rile all at once. He’d often thought about what Hell would be like, and now he would finally see it. Would demons accept him better than humans did? He wanted so desperately not to make a fool of himself in front of Lamia. He straightened, silently braced himself, then took her small hand in his. Electricity nearly shot from every one of his pores, and he strained to control himself at their contact.

“Are you oka—”

“Yes,” he said, shaking as he redirected the energy that threatened to harm Lamia. “Just go.”

The strain the electricity caused inside himself disappeared as soon as they entered the portal. Lamia should have warned him about what it would feel like—he’d imagined jumping through and landing on his feet on the other side, but was immediately disoriented with sensations of floating, then being crushed, then floating again. It was pitch-black, and it was as if he’d plunged himself back into the sea, its undertow pulling him further into the depths as he rolled. He had no idea which

way was up. He could breathe, but that grew more difficult with the changes in pressure around him.

He felt like he was back on the ship with the mannie as it burned, and the same panic he'd experienced before he'd lost consciousness set in.

He shouted as he tried to squeeze Lamia's fingers and found his hand empty. He tumbled alone. A distant whooshing noise grew louder and louder, until his screams were either drowned out or he'd lost his voice—he wasn't sure which. He prayed he was nearing the end of the trip—was it right to pray on his way to Hell? It didn't matter now—and a loud popping sound silenced the whooshing. His tumbling body flew through the air and crashed into the ground, where he rolled a few more feet.

His electricity whipped at the ground with every contact his skin made, assaulting his ears with snaps and crackles. He curled into a ball, panting, as he tried to get himself back under control. He couldn't risk harming Lamia again.

The strain of holding himself so compactly made him shout as pain shot from his injured arm. He'd forgotten about it in the portal. It was the kind of pain that reverberated through his entire body, which worked to his advantage to help extinguish the lightning around him.

“Ugh,” he groaned, rolling so he lay flat on his back, and looked up at a blood-red sky. Hell smelled like a confusing mix of sweet campfire and pungent sulfur and the air felt warm and balmy.

“Are you okay?” Lamia said, standing above him with one

arm outstretched.

It took a minute for his vision to stop spinning long enough to focus on her. *Way to make a fool of yourself once again*, he thought, though happily accepted her hand as he rose to his feet.

“Fine, just ... disoriented. Perhaps a warning is in order for new travelers going through that thing.”

When his vision finally cleared, he noticed the red sky made the ground look as if it smoldered. The sandy terrain reminded him of his current home back in the human realm, but beautiful red, black, and orange roses replaced the cacti and drought-resistant brush he was used to. In the distance was a small group of boxy homes, but the area was otherwise desolate and quiet.

Rile jumped as the whooshing sound filled his ears again. He turned to see the bright red portal get swallowed up into the limestone behind them, taking the alarming noise with it. The racket was replaced by the lapping sound of small waves, which Rile spotted in the opposite direction of the homes.

“I don’t know why, but I didn’t expect Hell to have bodies of water,” he admitted. He supposed it made sense, since there were demon species that thrived around the element like Lamia, but he figured water would be impossible to keep from evaporating. In truth, Hell was hot, but not uncomfortably so.

Lamia smiled. “That’s where I live,” she said, motioning toward the sea with her chin. She laughed at his confused expression. “I’ll show you.”

She led him to the water and closed her eyes, taking on the same look she had when she concentrated on healing. She placed her hands out in front of her, palms together, then began to pull them away from one another. As her palms separated, so did the water, leaving a path for them to walk down that led to a white dome buried in the sand like an enormous pearl. Rile was so mesmerized that he barely registered he was walking on sand where the water should be, the water level rising higher and higher above his head with each step he took.

Lamia followed, nodding to him to push the towering double doors open when he got to them.

“Water isn’t going to flood the place when you let the sea go, right?” he asked.

She shook her head as the concentration on her face made the skin around her eyes crinkle. Okay, so she was clearly unable to speak while keeping so much water at bay. He anxiously pushed against the doors and found them to be deceptively light; he almost fell to the ground inside but managed to stumble instead. He turned to see Lamia’s shoulders shaking until the doors were closed firmly behind them. Then she began to laugh.

“Don’t do anything funny or try to ask any questions while I’m doing that!” she said. All around them the water crashed against the outside walls and enveloped the dome.

“Noted, for sure.”

The inside of the dwelling looked like the lovechild of an armory and a library. Bookshelves lined with tomes acted as

walls that divided the otherwise open space. Suits of armor and a wide variety of weaponry replaced the art or tapestries one would usually find on the walls of a home. Down the hall he found an entire back wall of glass, allowing him to look out into the ocean life surrounding them.

The reefs were similar to what could be found on Manusya, but colored with muted reds, oranges, yellows, and grays. The fish that swam by looked like they would eat him alive with their sharp teeth and razor-like fins, even if many of them were only the size of his palm. A few larger fish—*much* larger fish—gave him an angry glare as they passed by.

“They all look so friendly,” he said, then turned to find the windowed room had a big, plush bed.

Heat flooded Rile’s cheeks as he realized he’d wandered right into the most private spot of Lamia’s home: her bedroom.

If Lamia was embarrassed or angry about his exploration, she didn’t say anything as she made her way down the hall with a small pouch in hand.

“I’ll admit, I know little about traditional healing techniques since I’ve always been able to use my powers,” she said, pulling open the pouch. “Other gorgons are more knowledgeable in salves and wound care, but I’ve been able to completely heal any other injury I’ve ever encountered. Have you ever heard of a demon knight?”

“Of course. One of them descended upon the next town over from mine when I was little. My mom wasn’t a demon, but she told me what she knew: they’re the most powerful demons in Hell, sworn to protect the demon king. A couple of mannies on

the ship knew they recently helped the latest prince rise to power, but they said the knights made the wrong choice.”

Lamia quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Rile stood taller, excited to share what little knowledge he had of his demon side. “Not that it sounded like either choice was a good one, but apparently the new king is whipped by the angel he chose as his queen. How did an angel come to be the queen of Hell, anyway? Why would the knights have allowed that?”

Lamia sighed. “Honestly? It seemed like a good idea at the time.” She pulled a chair over and motioned for him to sit.

Rile nodded in gratitude and sat as Lamia set the bag down on the bed and rummaged through it. “An angel as a queen in Hell sounded like a good idea? Hmph. I think that’s just asking for trouble.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Too bad they didn’t have us to make sure they didn’t make any stupid mistakes, huh?”

A weak smile played across Lamia’s lips. “Yeah, too bad.”

“They have to be smarter than that. I wonder if the angel cast some kind of spell on them or something.”

“You could say that. *Most* of the knights are very smart. Some of them are goofballs and could stand to take their jobs more seriously.”

“Oh? Do you know one of them?”

Lamia’s smile grew wider. “I *am* one of them.”

Rile's face went cold, and his heart dropped into his stomach. He'd made an ass of himself once again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Lamia shook her head as the sound of the front doors sealing shut echoed across the domed ceiling. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I think you and your mannie friends were onto something." She straightened, smiling widely to someone over his shoulder. "Hi, Putha! Thanks for coming." To him, she said, "Aside from the other knights, Putha is one of my closest friends."

Rile turned to find another gorgon making her way down the hall. She and Lamia looked similar, though Putha had two small tusks that protruded from either side of her jaw that Lamia lacked. The scales that blended into her skin were less shiny than Lamia's, and her eyes were much less bright; her irises were still visible among the light they emitted. Lamia was curvier than her friend, and Putha chose to slither over on her tail rather than walk on legs.

"Long time no see, Lady Knight," Putha said with a low bow of her head.

Rile wanted to smack himself across the face. He'd been traveling with one of Hell's most powerful demons for less than a day, and even one of her alleged closest friends still addressed her by her title. Yet here he was, appreciating her ass and calling her by her name, all while inconveniencing her and taking up her time.

He should have convinced everyone to stay on that boat and suffer whatever fate was in store for them.

Lamia motioned toward him, and he straightened his sagging shoulders.

“This is Rile. He’s half mephis, and I am unable to heal him. I was hoping you could help me get him patched up.”

Putha approached, tilting her head to the side. “What do you mean, ‘unable to heal him?’” She rummaged through Lamia’s pouch and extracted a bottle and some gauze.

“Just what I said. I can’t heal him.”

Lamia probably sounded bitter because she wanted to prove her power, though Rile preferred to think it was because she cared about his well-being and was warming up to him, just as he was to her.

He shook his head. Like he had a shot, based on his track record so far.

“If you can’t heal him, I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to help ... but I’ll try,” Putha said.

Lamia scoffed. “Enough with always selling yourself short, Puth. You’re precisely the gorgon to help with this. If you can’t heal him with your powers either, you’re an expert in traditional first aid and can bandage him up properly instead. I have no idea how to even start with that.”

Three thundering strikes against the roof of the dome made Rile duck and cover his head, the sudden movement of his arm making him bite back a yelp of pain. “What in the Seven Hells is that?”

He peeked out from behind his elbow to find Putha trying to hide a smile, while Lamia frowned with her hands on her hips.

He was about to apologize to her for his cowardly reaction when Putha gestured toward the door.

“Go. I’ll handle him,” she said.

“Thanks.” Lamia placed a hand on Rile’s good arm and leaned in.

His heart knocked against his ribs with the same intensity as the three more strikes that suddenly sounded from the roof.

“Knight business. I’m being summoned,” Lamia said. “I’ll come back as soon as I’m done. You’re in great hands with Putha.” She glanced over at her friend, who nodded, but Lamia looked troubled as she bit her bottom lip. Her hand tightened on his arm, and she leaned closer, closer ... then placed a light kiss on Rile’s cheek.

She. Kissed. His. Cheek.

Lamia. The demon knight.

“O-okay.” He stood straighter and lifted his chin. “Be safe.”

Lamia turned toward the front door. That small kiss warmed him to the core.

Maybe she *could* heal him after all.

Chapter 5

Why had she kissed Rile's cheek? The moment replayed in her mind over and over as she pulled the front doors open. She didn't look back for fear of him seeing her flushed face.

She'd wanted to make it very clear to Putha that the mannie was off limits ... but why?

Sparks were flying between her and Rile, and not just the kind he generated and she couldn't heal.

Not that she was going to do anything about them. As attractive and sweet as she found the mannie, he was a distraction. Lamia would escort him back to Manusya once he was patched up, and that would be that. They would both get on with their lives, and Lamia could return to her duties.

Knighthood suited Lamia; she never felt more purposeful than when she was fighting for Hell. But her passion was always backed by her belief in the one who sat atop the throne, and it pained her that she was losing that faith in Zagan.

For the first time in her life, she dreaded going to work.

She sighed as the water split apart at her gesture, allowing her to step over the threshold and close the doors behind her before she was engulfed by the sea. She craned her neck, her gills opening up to take in air. She took a moment to center herself, then fused her legs together and sprang off the bottom of the sea floor on her tail, rocketing past the top of her dome.

Through the windows in the roof, she watched Putha leaning toward Rile with his arm in her hands.

As if he sensed her gaze, Rile looked up through the glass, smiled, and gave a small wave. Heat rushed into her cheeks again, and she gave an awkward wave back before propelling herself over the roof.

Perhaps a little distance from him to re-shift her focus was a good thing.

A metal rod stemmed from atop her dome and extended past the surface of the water. The messenger used this to knock on her roof, signaling she was needed. She followed it up and broke through the waves, then spotted a hulking figure in a deep bow on the sand dune to the west of her home.

After more than three decades of meeting the fallen god Ouranos as the messenger, enslaved to the king of Hell by Zagan himself, it was jarring to see someone new on the dune. At least he was a native Hellcreature—a towering weredemon, at least two feet taller than Lamia, with arching horns that grew from either side of his head. He was covered in fur, with broad shoulders and thick thighs. Though he stood on two legs, they bent like a canine's and ended with clawed toes.

The weredemon stroked his pointed beard as Lamia slid onto the sand.

“You are the new messenger, I presume?” Lamia asked.

“That is correct, Demon Knight Lamia,” he greeted, still in his low bow, nearly tapping her on the shoulders with his horns as he tilted his head further downward and flared his wings. She had no idea how they supported the weight of his form in flight.

She wondered how Rile would have reacted to this demon, picturing his curious, wide-eyed stare as he looked out over the reef.

The messenger's wings folded, and he straightened. "The king demands your immediate presence at the castle," he said.

After their last meeting, she wasn't expecting Zagan to call for her for quite some time, but his timing was perfect. She needed to tell him about the mannie ship. "Did he say what it was about? Or who else he's summoned?"

"He has summoned you and Demon Knight Oriax. I'm afraid I do not have any further details to share, Lady Knight."

"That's fine. I'm on my way."

"Thank you, Lady."

"Thank you. You are dismissed."

He bowed his head again before kicking off the dune and took to the sky, showing no signs of strain as he gracefully cut through the air toward town. Lamia dove back into the water, heading north toward the castle in the distance.

"About time," Zagan said the moment Lamia walked into the throne room. His lips quirked as Oriax also turned to greet her with his usual goofy smile.

Lamia returned the smiles in kind. Based on the messenger's surprise visit, she'd expected to walk into a somber room where Zagan was the same grumpy self he'd been of late, barking orders from atop his throne with Coryn in his lap.

Instead, Coryn sat on her own throne, looking down at a scene of old: Zagan and Oriax standing together and sharing a laugh at the base of the stairs.

“What’s up?” Lamia asked as she closed the distance between them.

“I was just telling Z about our sweet Malarath,” Oriax said.

Malarath was the knights’ favorite waitress at Jinn’s Denn, the demon knight Jinn’s popular nightclub and a frequent gathering place for the king’s protectors. She was smart, quick-witted, and strong, so when Oriax described her as “sweet,” she knew the story would be anything but.

“Oh boy, I can only imagine where this is going.”

Oriax wagged his eyebrows. “So me and Raum were ordering drinks and catching up when some douchebag decides to play grabass with her. Mal’s a succubus, so he totally expects her to welcome it, right? Wrong. So, so wrong.” He thought for a moment, gazing up as if watching the scene play out before him. He let out a hearty laugh and a snort. “This guy is a complete tool, I think he was a shedim. Big, hairy, ugly bastard. Anyway, Mal turns around and gets right in his face. She’s doing exactly what he wants, acting like she’s enjoying it, wanting him to give her more, y’know, when all of a sudden her tail comes around and whips the guy so hard in the face, I thought his whole head was gonna fly off. She stays totally cool, then slaps him again, telling him he should have expected that, since she was a succubus and he obviously thinks he knows how to handle one. She smacked him all the way out of the club. He was crying the whole way.”

Though the story was perfectly Mal and funny on its own, it was Oriax's infectious laugh that made her crack up.

He hunched over, gripping his stomach and wiping away tears. "Seven Hells, it was funny shit," he moaned between cackles.

Zagan shook his head with a grin almost as wide as Oriax's. "Okay, O. We get it." He chuckled as he pat Oriax's back. "But let's get down to business, shall we?"

Oriax nodded and sobered, taking a moment to wipe away the wet streaks on his face and let out a couple more laughing moans as he straightened.

"If you don't mind, I would like to go first," Lamia said.

Zagan's grin didn't falter. "Still giving reports, I see."

"This is a big one."

"Then by all means," he said with a sweep of his arm before rising up the stairs to take his seat at the throne. Coryn gave him a small smile, but did not get up to make her way into his lap. Instead, she sat with her hands folded over her stomach and leaned forward as she trained her eyes on Lamia.

At least one of them looked invested. She hoped Zagan's face would match Coryn's once he heard what she had to say. "King Zagan, Queen Coryn. I came across a human ship commissioned by the Heavens to capture and carry hordes of manifestations. They overheard the humans talking about using their abilities to collect something on Manusya."

"What kind of something?" Zagan asked.

Lamia shrugged. “That was all I was able to learn.” She explained the size of the ship and the state she’d found it in. As she described how she’d helped bring the mannies to safety, she was interrupted by a loud groan from Coryn, who caught her head in her hands.

Zagan’s attention snapped to the angel. He was on his feet in a flash, then kneeling before her. “What’s wrong, my queen?”

She shook her covered face, and her fingertips grew white against her forehead. Whatever pain she was experiencing, it didn’t look like she could talk through it.

“Coryn!” Zagan shouted, trying to pry her hands away from her face. She screamed, and a furious knock came from the other side of the throne room doors.

“My liege!” someone called.

Zagan turned to face the doors, his face pale and his eyes wide. “Piss off!” he roared.

Lamia and Oriax got to the first step leading up to the dais before Zagan threw his hand out, a silent command to pause. They froze as he turned back to Coryn.

She had one hand on the middle of her forehead now, massaging it with her eyes squeezed shut as the other hand sought Zagan’s. “It’s fine.”

“Is it the—”

“It’s *fine*,” she reassured again. “Let them in ... please.”

With wild confusion plastered on his face, Zagan turned to look down at Oriax and Lamia, then at the doors. Coryn

requested whoever was on the other side of that door be let in, and Zagan obeyed. He always did when it came to his angel. He adjusted her robe, stood, and tentatively settled back into his own seat.

The furious knocking resumed.

“Come the fuck in!” Zagan shouted.

Lamia turned as the doors swung open. Two high-ranking soldiers, one incubus and one towering oni, bowed low before stepping over the threshold and making their way toward the dais with their catch: two angel prisoners, silver-winged, the mark of mid-ranking Heavenly soldiers.

At the sight of the trembling angels, it became clear why Coryn was experiencing such intense pain. Angels shared a connection to one another, a hive mind. If one angel was in distress, the others around them would feel it. Since Coryn and these two prisoners were the only angels in Hell, those sensations would be multiplied a hundredfold.

Zagan’s claws sank into either side of his chair. “Why did you bring me angels!”

The oni’s eyebrows sank, while the incubus’s smile widened. “They are a gift to our liege and lady. *On your knees!*”

Both demons kicked the angels in the back of the legs, causing them to crash onto the rough stone floor in a heap. They kept their eyes trained on the ground before them with their wings tight to their backs.

The demons bowed low, and the oni explained, “They were

after something in the human realm, my liege. It sounded big, as if it would turn the war in their favor.”

Lamia stiffened, and she and Zagan briefly locked eyes.

“They called it the Soul Chalice,” he continued.

Coryn was ghostly white as she stared down at her knees. “But the Soul Chalice is a myth,” she forced through labored breaths. She cringed and jerked her head up. She looked toward the angels, but not at them. Her eyes didn’t seem quite focused. “Yet, you both believe it really exists ... I can feel it.” Her shoulder twitched, and she trembled. “Zagan ...”

“Say no more, my queen,” he replied. “Take the angels and wait outside the doors until Lamia and Oriax come for them. You are dismissed.”

The incubus slumped his shoulders. “Yes, my liege.”

Any other king would have praised these demons and rewarded them with the blood of their Heavenly prisoners. Instead, the two demons looked as let down as Lamia felt for them.

As they turned away, Lamia said what Zagan should have. “We are grateful for your achievements here today.”

They gave her a small smile, but Zagan growled behind her.

“No, we are not. You are to bring no more angels to this realm,” he commanded. “Make sure every demon understands this rule.”

“Yes, my liege,” the oni replied. He and the incubus hastily bowed and backed out of the room with their prisoners in tow.

Lamia shook as she waited for the throne room doors to shut, ensuring the demons wouldn't hear her complaints to their king. "They brought you valuable prisoners who might have priceless intel on that thing the angels are after, yet you dismiss them without a thank you or a note of their names and tell them to never bring such valuable catches here again?"

Coryn fell to her knees at the base of her throne, wings flapping like a distressed bird who couldn't take flight. "The instinct ... to help them ... is too much," she whimpered into the rug.

"I did not consider just how badly your connection to the angels would affect you down here," Zagan said as he took her into his hold. He braced her with one hand on her back and the other beneath her chin, coaxing her to lift her face so he could study it. "They're gone. Are you stable?"

"I can still feel them," she said, closing her eyes. She trembled as he slid his other hand under her chin to cup her cheek.

They had more important things to worry about. "What is the Soul Chalice?" Lamia asked.

Zagan bared his teeth at her as he wrapped his arms more tightly around Coryn.

"No, it's okay, Zagan. It's important," Coryn said.

"What's important is—"

"Is *this*." Coryn took a deep breath and pushed out of Zagan's hold to return to her throne on shaky legs.

Zagan's hands were splayed, reaching for her, but he

retreated to his throne beside her.

“The story goes that, when the Supreme God still ruled, he fell in love with a demon,” Coryn said.

Lamia and Oriax both looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

“What?” Oriax said. “Impossible. How could we have not known this?”

Coryn shrugged. “His other creations did not welcome the demon into the Heavens, and, fearing for her safety, He forged the Soul Chalice. She could drink from it, cleanse her soul, and they could remain together. The demon pretended to use it, but lied to Him. She hid the cup on Manusya, and they lived out their days in the Heavens, but she continued to taint His soul. It became so dark, and she became so powerful, that the gods He’d made were forced to destroy them both. By then, she’d corrupted others—hence why the angels and deities up there can be so evil.” Coryn let out a loud moan and dipped further toward the rug.

“Coryn, we need to take you upstairs,” Zagan insisted. He glared at Lamia. “That’s enough for now.”

Hardly. “So this Soul Chalice can turn a dark soul toward the light?” Lamia asked. “Can it go the other way?”

“I can’t say for sure ... always thought ... it was a myth ...”

Sweat beaded on Coryn’s chest as she looked up at the ceiling, as if silently praying to the Heavens. Her wings flapped again, and she sprang forward, then stopped herself before letting out a whimper. “I need to protect them.”

Zagan tore after her and wrapped her in his arms. “We are the king and queen of Hell, Coryn. As queen, you should hunger for the Heavens’ demise ... yet as an angel, you are drawn to aid them.”

She exhaled a shuddering breath. “I know.”

Lamia expected Zagan to demand Coryn fight through her instincts and somehow rid herself of them, despite knowing that was an impossible task. He would once again remind her that she was his angel of darkness, and that spark that proved he was a sound demon king would shine through.

But instead of his face hardening in anger, it softened. “No more angels. You will never suffer again. I vow that I will always protect you, my beautiful queen.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Lamia mumbled.

Zagan’s nostrils flared. “Collect the angels, take them topside, and kill them.”

“Topside? If their hive mind can be that strong, what’s stopping them from being an immediate beacon to other angels on Manusya? Any angel around would find our portal as soon as we brought them through it. Let us bring them to the dungeons, torture them for information, and dispose of them here in Hell.”

“Enough with your insolence, Lamia! You will bring them topside, you will wait for the portal to close, and you will kill them!”

She stared at Zagan, waiting for him to come to his senses. Yes, Coryn was suffering, but the entire realm would suffer

more if the angels got the Soul Chalice before the demons could. The king's duty was not to his queen; it was to protect demonkind and ensure their survival.

“Waiting for the portal to close could take thirty seconds or more,” Lamia said.

“Then you will have to keep the angels in your charge for thirty seconds until it closes. I will not risk the temporary connection between worlds keeping Coryn in pain as you kill them.”

“Do you realize what you're saying, Z? You're willing to risk the Heavens finding one of our portals because you're afraid of hurting another angel's feelings?”

“YOU WILL LISTEN TO YOUR KING AND YOU WILL KILL THEM TOPSIDE. NOW!”

Lamia was dizzy with rage as Oriax placed a hand on her shoulder and tugged her backwards.

“Yes, Zagan. We got it,” he said, though his short tone made him sound just as annoyed as she felt.

Oriax and Lamia left the room in silence. Before the doors shut, she turned to see Zagan take Coryn into his arms and sit in a ball with her, rocking her on the ground before his throne.

Chapter 6

“She was hurting, Lam,” Oriax said as they made their way through the castle with their angel prisoners in tow.

“I know she was, but this entire realm, including her as queen, will hurt a lot more if we don’t get our hands on that cup. Tell me you’re as surprised by Zagan’s behavior as I am?”

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “We probably shouldn’t talk about this now.” He gave her a look and cocked his head toward his own angel.

Lamia scoffed. “What’s the difference? They’ll be dead in a few minutes anyway.”

“You didn’t sound so sure of that when you were arguing.”

“It was the principle of it!” she said through gritted teeth. “Taking them topside to do this is stupid.”

One floor down from the throne room was a long banquet hall that could hold hundreds of demons for feasts and festivals. Behind a tapestry in the back was a secret portal a privileged few knew about that was closer than the one in the gardens. When Oriax saw Lamia leading them toward it, he stopped her.

“For someone that was concerned about this whole scenario, you’re sure being careless with what paths we’re taking,” he said.

She didn’t care anymore. If Zagan was going to be careless, so was she. “They’re dying. Anyway. If Zagan isn’t

concerned about the angels knowing our secrets, then neither am I. Now come on.”

Oriax sighed, and his footsteps echoed behind her a few heartbeats later.

Lamia drew back the tapestry and traced the circle and lines along the pentagram. The lines cracked, then exploded in red light.

“Glory be to Orko,” she heard her prisoner whisper.

“Is that your god? Well, he can’t help you now, sweet cheeks.” With one hand on the blade at her belt, she used the other to tug the angel through the portal.

She knew from Coryn’s and Rile’s first traversals into Hell that the ride was disorienting. But as the darkness enveloped them and they sped through the air, Lamia felt chains slip over her head and beneath her chin. She coughed and gagged as they tightened around her throat, and cried out as they penetrated her gills. She fought, but in the darkness, even she was disoriented. She fused her legs together, using her tail as a whip to slam against the back of her attacker’s head, but it did nothing to loosen the chains around her neck.

She wasn’t sure if the distant whooshing noise marked the end of the portal or the end of her oxygen supply. Luckily it was the former, and Lamia, still holding on tightly to her own prisoner, rolled across the grass as the portal ejected them into Manusya. Lamia brought her tail up and around the attacking angel’s waist, heaving him up as she ducked and slipped the chain over her head. She tossed the angel, turning onto her back to gasp for the air she so desperately needed.

“Lamia!” Oriax cried. It was his angel that had gotten away and attacked her. Before he could pursue his lost prisoner, Lamia shoved the chains of her own into his hands and was up on her tail, rushing toward the thrown prisoner.

But it was too late. The gods-damned, once-feeble angel rolled to his feet and sprinted away, silver wings spreading wide. He gave them a few forceful flaps and went airborne, just as Lamia’s nails scraped against the sole of his boot.

She tried to scream to paralyze the angel and bring him back to the ground, but the sound died in her throat, and she doubled over coughing instead. The chain had done more damage than she’d realized.

She swung her arms in front of her, but the closest source of water wasn’t close enough. Large waves formed in the pond a hundred feet away, but they didn’t rise and reach up to the angel like she’d hoped. The water in the pond sloshed in its hole as Lamia helplessly watched the angel escape.

She took a deep breath and prepared to shriek despite her injured throat, but her open mouth captured a raindrop that singed the inside of her mouth. Gagging, she turned around to find the portal closed off and the other angel now dead on the ground with silver blood pooled around him. The sun shower began to fall harder around them.

“Take cover!” Lamia croaked out, wincing as another drop of holy rain burned her skin. Then another. It was cleansing and healing the angel prisoner they’d lost, while the drops made the corpse of the other melt into the ground. The rain was concentrated enough that they didn’t have to run far to

escape, but being dry after a holy rain was no consolation for what they'd just let happen.

"Fuuuck," Lamia whined hoarsely, punching the tree she and Oriax had ducked under. Her neck burned.

"I'm so sorry," Oriax said, eyes wide, breathing heavily, as he stared at the spot where the dead angel once lay. "He slipped my grasp. I wasn't expecting it."

Lamia wrapped her hands around her throat and widened her eyes, feeling them warm as she willed her healing energy to soothe the burns and clear her voice. At least her healing powers worked this time. "It could have happened to either of us, O. You were absolutely right. I shouldn't have led us through the castle portal." She shook her head, cursing herself. She was supposed to be a knight, a protector of Hell, its castle, and its king, no matter how much of an imbecile that king was. "We need to tell Zagan what happened."

"*I'll* tell him. You guys left that meeting on a bitter note as it was. Let me handle him, and I'll let you know how it goes."

Lamia shrugged, too frustrated by everything happening to argue. "Fine. Find me here on Manusya when you're done."

Lamia shoved the front doors of her dome open to find Rile and Putha with their backs to her. They jumped and spun as soon as the two doors slammed against the walls and their loud booming sounds reverberated across the dome. Rile stood in front of Putha with his hands splayed and clawed, balls of electric energy hovering and crackling above his palms. He

extinguished them when he saw her.

They stared at each other until Rile's shocked expression softened, his clawed hands relaxed, and he raised his arms to the sides. She realized he was beckoning her for a hug.

She trailed her gaze from his hand, up his arm, and down the other. She found herself taking a small step toward him and raised her arms a couple of inches before stopping and dropping them again.

She wasn't a hugger; why did she respond to him like that?

"I'm sorry," Rile said, looking at his arms as if wondering why they were outstretched. "It was instinct ... are you okay?"

Maybe it was because Rile *still* kept his arms awkwardly extended, or because his expression was so sympathetic, but she closed the gap between them and accepted his embrace.

He was warm and firm and smelled like fresh salt air. He held her tight to him, and though her muscles were still tense from everything that had happened with the angels, they relaxed a bit.

"What happened?" he murmured, and she shivered as his breath hit her ear. His arms tightened around her, and she pressed her forehead so hard into his shoulder, she thought she might fall through him. She needed to transfer some of her tense energy, and he was a willing conduit.

"Yes, what's wrong, Lady Knight?" Putha asked from beside them. Putha's hand came to rest gently against Lamia's back, rubbing the space between where Rile's arm rested at the small of her back and her shoulder blades.

It reminded her of Zagan rubbing between Coryn's wings, and she pulled back from both of them.

"What did Zagan want?" Putha asked, taking a few steps back to create a comfortable distance. Rile followed suit.

"Hell in a handbasket, to give to the Heavens," she said, shaking her head. She didn't want to rehash the events, instead turning her attention to Rile's bandaged arm. "How is it?" she asked, motioning with her chin.

Rile pursed his lips. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. How's your arm?"

He looked down at the floor, then back at her with a half-smile before twisting his arm so his elbow faced her. There was a small circle of red seeping through the white bandage on the back of his bicep, but it looked clean. "Putha did a great job patching it up for me. See?" He moved his arm in a circular motion and smiled wider, but she caught his grimace when he lifted it over a certain height.

"I was unable to heal him with my power, either, but I got the arrow out and stitched him up. He'll have to keep it clean to avoid infection, and it should be back to normal soon."

"Thank you," Lamia said.

Silence hung in the air between them for a few heartbeats before Rile asked, "So what happened with Zagan?"

She sighed and shook her head when Putha motioned for her to sit down. "He made me realize that I need to leave Hell for a while. Don't give me those looks. I'm serious. I need to clear my head."

“Can demon knights take breaks like that?” Rile asked, eyes wide.

“Of course we can. Demon knights can do whatever the hell we want. Zagan was never down here when he was a knight—and Manusya was the only thing maintaining his sanity because it’s obvious he’s losing it now that he’s confined himself here. I know you just got here, and I wanted to show you around, but I’m sorry, Rile. You’re welcome to stay if you want, but I need to go topside.”

Rile shook his head. “I’m coming with you. I can see Hell anytime. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

That was sweet, but did he forget he was talking to one of Hell’s elite warriors? She could handle herself. “I’ll be just fine, thanks.”

He either ignored or didn’t pick up on her sharp tone. “I have a place you can stay on the western continent if you want. It’s not much, but it’s something. Y-you know, if you don’t have a place to stay already.”

As much as she hated to admit it, she felt drawn to the hope in his eyes and his nervous energy around her. He’d been so excited to see Hell and learn about his demon side, but was willing to give that up for now to support her. She could rely on her fellow knights to have her back, but that was always a short pep talk and a slap on the shoulder before she was sent on her way. None of them stuck around to make sure she was truly fine—but Rile did.

She nodded. “Thank you. I have a few respites across the continents, but laying low where the others can’t find me is

just what I need. I won't stay long—only until I clear my head and figure out what to do next.”

“You're welcome to stay for as long as you need,” he said.

“I will take my leave, then, Lady Knight.”

“Of course. Take care of yourself, Puth. Thanks again for all your help.”

“Yes, thank you,” Rile said, enthusiastically moving his arm around until he winced.

“Take it easy,” Putha said with a laugh, “and it was my pleasure. I hope you find the peace you need on Manusya, Lady Knight.”

“Thank you. I'm going to pack a bag. Then where on the western continent will we be heading, Rile?”

“Leeside.”

They both stared at each other for a long moment.

Rile smacked his face. “How stupid am I? You're a water demon, and I live in the middle of the Sanlow Desert.” His eyes furiously scanned the air. “But I can move—”

“That's perfect. Let me get my things, and we'll go.”

Chapter 7

Lamia and Rile emerged from a portal Lamia had never been through, because she'd never ventured into the Manusyan desert before. She'd had no reason to, and this experience quickly confirmed how smart she'd been to stay away. Her energy and power came from the water, and the dry desert air immediately assaulted her lungs and left them begging for humidity. Coarse grains of hot sand ground into her ankles with every step. As they trudged toward Leaside in the distance, she wondered if she would have an easier time sliding over the land on her tail.

Lamia bit her lip. She was proud of her abilities, and that included being able to transition between having legs and a tail, but she wasn't fond of the disturbing slurping and crunching sounds her transformation made as bones combined and muscles shifted. But here, out in the open desert, she couldn't tell Rile to walk through the trees to avoid him seeing or hearing her shift. There was nowhere to hide.

"I'll be right behind you," Lamia said, which prompted Rile to stop and turn to look at her.

She should have just stayed quiet, shifted, and waited to see if he heard her before calling attention to herself.

"My shifting is kind of disgusting," Lamia admitted. "I don't know if you want to stand there watching me like that."

Rile shrugged and shook his head. "I'm fascinated, actually. Not fascinated in a scientific sort of way, I mean, like I'm studying you or something, just ..." He took a deep breath and

sighed. “I want to get to know you as much as I can. I don’t mind seeing you shift if you don’t.”

She hesitated. The only demons to ever see her shift were the knights, and Oriax still turned green every time she had to transform in front of him. Rile stood there with his hands in his pockets and an eager smile on his face, as if he was going to see something miraculous. He had no idea what he’d agreed to see—or hear. The knights always found the snapping and twisting sounds more off-putting than watching her body contort.

Though the knights made it clear they didn’t like hearing her shift, she never hesitated to change from legs to a tail in front of them. But now that she was in front of Rile, and despite the oppressive heat, a chill snaked up the back of her neck and left goosebumps in their path. That same self-conscious feeling she’d had with him before sending him into the woods at the beach returned.

I need him to like me.

She shook her head and blinked at the thought.

Rile plunged his hands further into his pockets and hunched his shoulders. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

He moved to pivot away from her, but she found herself saying, “No!”

He stopped and slowly spun back around.

She caught a glimpse of his handsome profile before his bright eyes locked back on hers again. A warm, gentle breeze

made his silver hair glint like waves in the sunlight as he relaxed his shoulders again.

Lamia bit the inside of her lip. Fine, Rile was attractive—and not just because of his tan skin, tight clothes, and fit body. He was kind, sweet, and adorably awkward, because it was obvious he liked her, too.

She needed to put a stop to that immediately.

Lamia knocked one leg against the other, and they suctioned together, combining as if her thighs were trying to overtake one another. Her bones ground and rasped as scales fanned over her skin and clothes. She sank back with a series of pops as her leg bones became vertebrae and stretched so she could wind her lengthening tail in the sand while her muscles reformed.

The process took a minute, but as she watched Rile watch her, it felt like hours.

Rile was staring wide-eyed at the base of her tail, and she couldn't tell if the sun made him appear paler or if the color had drained from his face.

The sand was hot on the underside of her tail, but the weight distribution felt better already. She slithered backwards a couple of feet and wrapped her arms around her middle. That face was what she'd been looking for ... so why did it hurt so much?

His thousand-mile stare at the place where her legs once were snapped back to attention, and he lifted his head. His wide smile made her recoil.

“That was amazing!” Rile said. “I thought switching from legs to a tail would take a lot longer than that. Does it hurt?”

Lamia blinked. “A little, but I’m used to it.”

“Wow,” he whispered, walking in a wide circle around her. “It would be so cool to have a tail. Trudging through this sand gets old, even for me. So are you ready? It’s my turn to show you my house. It’s nothing compared to what you have, but it’s home, and you’re welcome there for as long as you need.”

Lamia stared at the back of Rile’s head when he turned away and resumed his walk toward town. That was it? He wasn’t going to vomit in the sand and help her shake off her crush? Instead, he was going to act completely fine about her repulsive transformation ... and seem excited by it?

She shook her head once again before slowly following him, replacing his footprints in the sand with a trail of her tail. *Well, that plan backfired.*

Eventually, they walked up a giant sand mountain with small, run-down houses on both sides of the hardened paths. The homes—which were more like shacks—were built using wood or concrete. Many of them had boarded-up windows and doors, but each one had been painted in its own bright, unique color once upon a time. Since then, most of the paint had faded or chipped off entirely.

Lamia couldn’t hide her disgust quickly enough before Rile turned to face her. His smile faded as hers brightened, but Rile had already read her true feelings. Not only had he initially failed to mention he lived in the middle of the Sanlow Desert, but he’d also neglected to tell her that his town was a shithole.

“Like I said, it’s not much,” he said, and whether the flush on his face was because of the heat or embarrassment, she wasn’t sure. “I realize it’s a bit out of your element ... literally.”

Her heart sank. It hurt more than she expected to disappoint him. “I admit, it’s not what I’d imagined ... but it’s perfect. If Zagan, the other knights, or even the messenger wanted to find me, this is the last place in all the realms they would ever look ... including *after* they searched the Heavens.”

Rile smiled ruefully as he motioned toward an electric-blue house that matched the hue of his bright eyes. “This is it. Welcome.”

The metal door opened with a loud creak, and Lamia peeked in. Even though the hot sun beat down on the house, it was remarkably dark and cool inside.

Lamia slithered in, sighing in sweet relief as the cool air ran over her skin. “It’s perfect,” she said again, collapsing onto the only soft furniture in the room, a small brown couch.

SNAP!

An electric shock ran through her, and she yelped in surprise, springing off the couch to look down at the fabric.

“Ah shit, I’m sorry,” Rile said. “I should have thought to warn you. The air here is really dry, and static shocks are pretty common. They don’t bother me, obviously, but we’ll have to be careful with you.”

The place kept getting better and better. “I can take static shock so long as it doesn’t maim me like your rogue

lightning.”

He closed the door to the shack and carefully took a seat beside her, then held his hands out to hers. “Precisely my point. I don’t want electricity causing you any more pain around me, static included. And speaking of which, how are the scars I gave you doing?”

Lamia sighed as she placed her hands onto his with her palms up. “Are they still bothering you?” she asked.

“Of course they’re still bothering me.” He brought her palms closer to his face and studied the thick raised lines of the injured skin. She shivered again, but it wasn’t due to the cooler air—he’d run his thumbs delicately over her palms.

“Does that hurt?” he asked, pulling his fingers away.

Lamia smiled and shook her head. “No, sorry. They’re just sensitive.”

She bit her lip as Rile took her hands in his again. He brought them just a few inches from his face and inspected the injuries ... then brought them closer ... and closer ...

Yes, Rile ...

Her whole body quaked when his soft lips kissed the angriest part of her scar.

Wait ... no! I meant no!

With a gasp, she pulled her hands away and crossed the room.

Rile put his own palms up “I’m sorry,” he said quickly. Based on the heat emanating from her cheeks, she was sure

she looked the same. “I ... I don’t know why I did that. I’m sorry, Lady Knight.”

She pressed her hands tightly to her chest, but relaxed and dropped them to her sides at the apology. “Lady Knight? Since when do you call me that?”

He had one hand behind his head, training his eyes on the floor to avoid her gaze. “Even your close friend calls you that. Don’t all demons address you that way?”

“Not the ones I’m close to, except for Putha. That girl is all about manners, and when I was knighted, she never said my real name ever again.” She frowned. “But I wish she would ... and I would like you to as well.”

His eyes finally found her face and blinked. “You consider us ... close? N-not that you shouldn’t, I really appreciate that. I’ll call you whatever you want me to call you. And I’m here to help you with whatever you need, whenever you need. Wanna whip that Zagan guy into shape? Let’s do it.”

She laughed. “Trust me, I’d love to, but I don’t think he’s the real problem—and Coryn isn’t, either. It’s not her fault she was created to be everything Zagan desires. I don’t think the Heavens expected Zagan and Coryn to actually make it out of our last battle alive or imagined what would happen if they ascended the throne. I think it’s working in their favor, though. Zagan won’t let us kill angels in our realm because Coryn reacts too strongly to them. In our war over the Lake of Souls, Zagan is doing nothing to make sure we stay ahead.”

“I’ve heard about the Lake of Souls and how Hell tries to corrupt souls while angels try to save them, but I’m not sure

why that matters so much.”

Lamia was grateful for the subject change. As Rile’s cheeks returned to their normal color, her own shoulders relaxed. “Souls are finite. However many there were at the dawn of this world is how many there are now, and how many there will ever be. Do you know what happens when someone dies?”

“Their soul gets sent back to the Lake.”

“That’s right. And if your soul fills with light, you’re reborn as an angel. If it’s dark, you’re demon. And if you’re somewhere in between, you come back as a human—making you ripe for the Heavens or Hell to take. But if the angels save more human souls than the demons can corrupt, there are fewer souls that can be reborn as demons. The same goes for if demons turn more souls; there will be fewer angels. It’s all about making sure the scales don’t tip too far toward the light for our own survival. Having fewer angels to fight is nice, too.”

“So what about my soul? I’m not quite demon, not quite human.”

“Your soul was dark, but with just enough good in it to be somewhere in between. But if we stop darkening souls, new manifestations like you or demons like me can never be conceived. Every soul would go toward the creation of an angel or human.”

Rile made his way toward the kitchenette on the far side of the shack. He grabbed a pitcher of water and began filling a glass. At the sight of it, Lamia salivated. She didn’t realize how thirsty she was.

“I see now what you mean by survival,” he said as he handed her the water. “Without souls to inhabit bodies, those bodies can never be made. And if they’re never made, they can never be born.”

“Exactly.” Lamia shook her head and sat down again. “I’m afraid Zagan will grow softer and cease combat with angels altogether. If that happens, we’ve surrendered. If the angels go unchecked, we’re doomed.”

She drank the water greedily, gulping it down so fast it made her throat hurt. Rile watched with concern.

“Well, the angels aren’t going to wipe out the Lake of Souls today. There’s time, and you can take however much of it you need to stay here and rest up.” He motioned toward a small door on the wall near the kitchenette. “That’s my room. Gorgons sleep, right? Good. Feel free to use my bed, and I’ll head to the market and gather some supplies. You’ll be okay, Lamia. Hell will be okay. We’ll make sure of it.”

We’ll.

The butterflies in her stomach made her bolt from the couch and into his room, drawing the curtain behind her.

Rile made sure Lamia would wake to a spread of fruit, bread, cheese, and all the water and lemonade she could handle. Because they were in the middle of the Sanlow Desert and the town of Leaside wasn’t exactly opulent, the fruit the local seller had wasn’t the best, but it was a treat, and he hoped she saw it that way.

He sighed. It didn't matter if she saw it as a treat or not. Her disgust at his living situation was clear, and she'd sprang away from him when he kissed her hand. He was ridiculous to think he had a chance with Lamia.

Regardless, he would be there for her.

"Hey," Rile said when she opened her eyes. He sat at the desk an arm's length from his bed after taking some time to tidy up while she slept. His elbow brushed against a tall pile of folded clothes on his desk, and he launched forward to keep it from toppling over.

Lamia laughed softly. "Hey. You tidied up, I see."

"I tried," he said, cheeks heating as he steadied the tower. "Hungry?" He slid the plate off the desk and presented it to her.

He sighed in relief when she didn't seem phased by the condition of the fruit. She stacked a piece of bread, cheese, and a couple of dates before popping it all into her mouth, then picked up an orange slice as she chewed.

"How long was I sleeping for?" she asked.

"Not long, only a couple of hours. The sun's peaked now, and it's much hotter out. Are you going to be okay?"

"If I don't trek back across the sand again, I'll be fine."

He jumped up as she moved to push the blankets off of her. "Hold on, watch for static." He placed his hands on either side of where her legs lay beneath the blanket and felt for the electric buildup inside the fabric. "I'm trying to absorb the charge, but I don't think I can. I've always pushed energy out,

not taken it in.” He looked over at the glass of water on the desk. “Hmm. Are you able to control water at a molecular level?”

“I’ve never tried.”

“Well, let’s find out.” He slowly drew back his hands from the blanket so he didn’t encourage a static charge. He grabbed the glass of water and electrified it.

The top of the water began to spark and shake as he concentrated, willing the electricity from his fingertips to travel up and inside the glass. Soon, the water became hot enough that steam began to pour from the top.

He took one of his shirts and wrapped it around the hot glass, then extended it toward her. “Moist air diffuses a static charge,” he explained. “Can you manipulate the steam like you do regular water?”

Slowly, Lamia drew her hand out from under the blanket and faced her palm toward the steam. Though there was no wind in the room, it sailed through the air and around the bed. Lamia closed her eyes and took in a long drag of the humid air.

“I guess you can control steam!” Rile exclaimed. He electrified and reheated the water again, intensifying the amount of mist that flew into the air. They worked together to saturate the air in the room. “I can feel the electric energy in here dissipating,” he said with a nod. “You should be safe to come out from under the blankets now.”

Lamia smiled as she threw the blankets off. “All that just to

make sure I didn't get zapped again?"

Rile shrugged, placing the glass of water, now only a quarter full, back down on the table. "I promised I would never hurt you again. I plan on keeping that promise." He leaned over, resisting the urge to graze her knee with his fingers as he reached past her and picked up the plate of food. He held it up to her, and she popped a few more dates into her mouth.

"So what's the plan?" Rile asked as he placed some cheese on a slice of bread for himself. "I doubt you're going to want to stay in this dry, run-down shack for very long. You can, though, of course."

"Thanks, and it's really not bad—I'm sorry if I made it seem like it is. It's just not very gorgon-friendly."

He tried to fix that by electrifying more water and sending more steam into the air. She waved her fingers idly, and they watched it swirl around.

"If I'm being honest, I feel ... *lost*," she said. "I've always known I was going to be a knight. I trained to be a knight. My whole world is knighthood. And I love it, and I love Zagan, but I just can't support his decisions anymore. I can't defend a king that protects a creation of the Heavens over his own subjects."

Rile nodded. "People—and I guess demons—change. It sounds like Zagan has changed, and you're allowed to change, too. If you don't want to be a knight anymore, that's okay. I can help you figure out what you want to be next, if you'd like."

Lamia stared at him for a moment before tilting her head to the side. “I’ve never considered anything other than being a demon knight.”

“O-of course. It’s a powerful title,” he said quickly. “And I’m sure you’re wonderful at it. I never meant to suggest you *shouldn’t* be a knight, just ... you can always walk away if it doesn’t suit you anymore.” He shrugged. “That advice has always done well for me in the past.”

She paused in thought for another moment until she shook her head and picked up another date. “So what’s your story? Why are you so interested in helping me? Don’t you have your own life you want to get back to?”

He shrugged. “This world wasn’t built for half-breeds like me—despite the fact that my soul thought it would be good to be born on Manusya. I’ve never felt like I’ve belonged here. And like I said, I’ve never known another demon. I want to know that side of me better. I want to know *you* better.”

Lamia blushed. “What happened to your dad?”

“Who knows. He impregnated my mom and left her to raise me on her own. I would have been better off fending for myself in Hell than delivering the hell she faced every day raising a manifestation like me. Prejudice runs pretty deep in this world.”

“I’ve never known a mephis demon. They’re pretty uncommon.”

“Probably because they’re self-centered pricks.”

Lamia frowned. “I’m sorry about your dad. But if you hate

him so much, why do you want to learn more about that side of you?”

He caught himself staring at the ground, heart aching. He didn't like talking about this because he wasn't quite sure he understood why himself. “I guess I just want to belong, and if demons can better accept me for who I am, then I would rather be mephis than human.”

Lamia gave him a half-smile. “I guess I shouldn't be complaining about wanting to be away from where I belong for a while.”

“That's different,” Rile said as footsteps sounded outside. They both looked toward the door. Though they were in the back of the shack, the glassless windows and small space made it sound like anyone outside was right next to them. “That would be my roommate,” he said, rising to his feet.

“You have a roommate?” Lamia asked.

He winced, hoping that wasn't a strike against him.

The door opened, and his roommate slipped in, setting a small bag on the ground.

“Heavens everlasting, Rai, here you are! Where have you been? I was looking everywhere for you!” he said.

“Hey man, sorry to have worried you. It's a long story ... but I have company here. She and I can fill you in on the crazy couple of days I've had.”

“Okay,” he replied, combing his hands through his hair as he crossed the living room in a few strides and leaned against the doorframe to Rile's room. When he laid eyes on Lamia, his

eyes widened, and his jaw dropped.

Lamia had an equally confused expression, making Rile let out an uncomfortable laugh.

“Uh, Alex, this is Lamia. Lamia, this is my roommate, Alexander.”

Lamia sat straight up as she eyed Rile’s roommate. She would recognize that face anywhere.

What the Hell?

Rile said he’d never known another demon or manifestation before, but he did—his roommate had been a manifestation in a past life. And close with Zagan, no less. One night when he and Zagan were corrupting human souls together, the humans managed to impale Alexander. He was reborn as an angel and named Alexandrael.

The last time Lamia saw Alex was when they were surrounded by the corpses of demons, angels, archangels, and a god. He’d had snowy white wings—which he lacked in the human form he had now. What could he possibly be doing with Rile? They made an unlikely pair. Though they were around the same height, Rile looked about ten years older than the young Alex. Silver hair clashed with jet black. Rile’s blindingly bright, intelligent eyes gazed at her beside Alex’s pair of angelic blues that reminded her of Coryn.

Had Alex been reborn as human, or was he simply an angel masquerading as one?

Rile would have told her if he knew Alex was an angel. If

Rile cared about Alex, he never would have brought Lamia here for fear she would kill him. She was certainly thinking about it.

Rile cleared his throat, making Lamia snap out of her thoughts. “Alex, Lamia isn’t human,” he said, seemingly assuming that was what caused the awkward, drawn-out silence between the two. “She’s gorgon. I have a lot to tell you about the past day or two.”

“You sure do,” Alex said with a friendly smile. He stepped fully into the room and held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Lamia.”

So this is how we’re going to play this game? No matter if he was angel or human, she knew based on Alex’s initial reaction that he’d recognized her. “Nice to meet you as well,” she said, eyeing him as she placed her hand into his and gave it a solid shake.

He gave her hand a hard, knowing squeeze before letting go.

“It’s rare for full demons to be hanging out on Manusya, no?” he asked.

What was he fishing for her to say?

Rile, ignorant to her suspicions, answered on her behalf. “The demon king is going a little nuts, so I offered for her to stay with us for a bit. A little vacation.”

That was more information than an angel should know, but Lamia returned the smile Rile gave her. “And I just wanted to make sure Rile was okay after yesterday.”

“I was wondering where you’d gone off to,” Alex said,

turning his attention to Rile. When he spotted the bandage on Rile's arm, he balked. "Oh shit, she wasn't kidding! What happened to you?"

"I'm fine. I went down to do that—*thing* we were talking about—and then was in chains on a ship." He described the entire ordeal to Alex, whose jaw slackened with each detail. "I would have been a goner if Lamia hadn't saved me. I got an arrow to the arm is all, I barely notice it."

Lamia was sure that he was downplaying his pain, but found his desire to dispel their worries about him endearing. And what was "that thing" he was going to do?

"Heavens everlasting, I'm glad you're okay. I can't believe I wasn't there to help you." Alex turned to Lamia and gave her a small bow. "Talk about right place at the right time. I'm glad you were there to save him. What happened to the other mannies?"

"They all made it to the beach," Rile said, "but after that, we're not sure. I was out cold, honestly."

"The humans ambushed the beach pretty quickly," Lamia said, still feeling guilty that she was the one who gave their place of refuge away. "I got Rile out of there as quickly as I could."

"Heavens everlasting." Alex was definitely still an angel with how often he used that damned phrase. "I need a drink. How 'bout you guys?"

Rile looked hopefully at Lamia, who shrugged and sat back down on his bed. "Sure," she said. "Why not."

Alex retreated back into the common room. Cabinet doors opened and closed.

“So how long have you and Alex known each other?” Lamia asked.

“Only a couple of months. I move quite a lot.”

That explained the minimal possessions he had.

“How did you two meet?” She doubted it was by coincidence on Alex’s part.

“Through work,” Rile replied, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

Lamia smirked. “Doing ‘that thing’ you were talking in code about before?”

“Something similar,” Alex responded as he strode back into the room with three glasses and a half-filled bottle of light brown liquid. Rile accepted two of the glasses and set them down on his desk before snatching the bottle from Alex.

“Have you ever had netsilana before?” Rile asked Lamia as he unscrewed the bottle, grabbed it by the neck, and began pouring her some. “It’s made from a local cactus plant called a netsi, a big purple spiny thing. It has wide leaves that trap water inside and keep it from evaporating. Once the water sinks into the heart of the plant—”

“We all know you’re trying to change the subject, Rai,” Alex said with a laugh. He took the glass from Rile and handed it to her, then took a swig from his own. “Lamia is a demon; corruption is in her nature. I don’t think it’s going to bother her that we’re moving some Demon’s Horn around.”

“Demon horns?” She stared at Alex in disbelief. He was still an angel, then. A demon hunter, collecting demon horns to sell on the black market? She sat up straighter, ready to pounce on Alex and rip his insides out. “How could you?”

Rile’s face flooded with color. “No, no, not actual demon horns. Demon’s Horn! It’s a hallucinogenic and grows here on Manusya. It’s a plant! Seven Hells, Alex, come on ...”

“Wait ... so it’s just some kind of drug?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rile replied.

“Oh.” Well, good, then. She would have to find some other excuse to destroy Alex.

Lamia brought her glass to her lips and took a sip of the netsilana. It had a sweet tang to it that assaulted her temples just before it burned a trail down her throat. She shook her head and smacked her lips together, swallowing a few more times to soothe her esophagus. “Interesting, but it’s no hellsglory.” She smiled when Rile cocked his head. “It’s a liqueur made from angel blood and quite delicious. In fact, it gets demons high ... maybe like this Demon’s Horn you’re talking about?”

“Demon’s Horn is just a hallucinogenic,” Rile repeated, shooting another glare at Alex. “It’s not a *hard* drug or anything, just something that can only be made here, so it fetches a good price in other regions. And it’s named after the look of the spikey leaves it’s packed in. We mean no offense.”

“If you were actually taking horns off of demons, this would be an entirely different discussion. But as it stands, you don’t

have to defend your livelihood or its name to me,” Lamia reassured him with an honest smile. “Like Alex said, I kill angels and corrupt humans. I’m not Heavensly; I don’t judge.” She stole another glance at Alex, only to be met by that same unreadable expression.

Alex changed the entire atmosphere around them, and not only because she knew who he was and could only guess at his motives with Rile. The way he stood a couple of inches too close to Rile, with his arms crossed and feet spread apart, bothered her. It was as if he was the guy’s bodyguard. She didn’t get the feeling that Rile was endangered by him, exactly—more like he was being overly protected.

But why?

She would hang around Rile for as long as it took to find out.

If only that excuse didn’t also make the butterflies flood her with excitement.

Chapter 8

It was the worst and best thing Lamia could hear from Rile the following morning: “I’m running out to get a few more things for us. Do you want to come?”

It was the worst because, yes, she did want to go with him—she didn’t like how much she wanted to be with him at all times—but that also meant she could have some time alone with Alex.

“No thanks, I don’t think I’m ready to face the sun out there quite yet. I’m going to hang here. Be safe, and don’t get taken by any more crazed humans.”

She debated going with him just in case. She wanted to make sure he was protected ... but the biggest danger to Rile could be the one living with him.

After Rile left, she sat in the common area and stared at the dark blue curtain that closed off Alex’s room. She watched it move in the warm breeze that came through the windows as she thought about just what she wanted to ask the bastard.

A few minutes went by before she decided he wasn’t getting up fast enough. He jolted awake when she shoved the curtain off to the side, the rings holding it up squealing as they crashed against each other.

“Heavens everlasting!” he shouted. He was shirtless, and his black hair was tousled.

“What in the Seven Hells are you doing here?” Lamia snarled. It took one step from the doorway to stand over him at

the edge of his bed.

He sat up. “He’s not here?”

“Correct. What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same.”

Insolent angel. “Where are your wings?”

“Hidden.” With a roll of his shoulders, they sprang from his back, vast, white, plush-looking things that would be beautiful if one didn’t abhor the gods’ creations. “We guardians can do that.”

“A guardian angel?” She barked out a laugh. “Of a half-demon?”

Alex shrugged. “I just do what I’m told ... like you should be doing with Zagan. You ran away from him, huh?”

She ignored his question. “You used to listen to him, and look at you now. The gods told you, ‘oh hey, go guard this mannie on Manusya’ with no explanation, and you didn’t ask why?”

“Takes a mannie to know a mannie, I suppose. I’m the only guardian who used to be one. Maybe that’s why they’re having me look after him?”

“Cut the shit. I know you know why the humans were rounding up those mannies, including Rile. I know you’re searching for a certain ... relic.”

Alex ran his tongue over his teeth before clicking it in annoyance. “So you know about the cup.” He sighed. “I wish I knew why Rile’s my charge. I can’t be with him every moment

of every day or he'll suspect something's up, and I had no idea about the mannie ship. You saving him is the only reason I'm answering your questions now. My god would have slaughtered me if anything happened to him."

Well, good. She would take advantage of the opportunity. "If you had to guess why your god has you watching Rile, what would it be?"

He shrugged. "The Heavens have been a shitshow ever since High Archangel Michael and God Ouranos were killed. No one knows who to trust. They all wonder which other gods might be corrupt or which archangels are scheming. Because of what happened with Erelim Coryn ... being created specifically to appeal to Zagan ... some of the angels are questioning their very existence. The one thing that seems to be rallying them is the Soul Chalice, but different groups are going about hunting it down in different ways. I suspect the humans that captured Rile and the other mannies may be working with one of those groups and wanted to use their powers to try and track it. Perhaps my god has a theory that Rile's powers may help him find it, and I'm here to protect him until it's time."

"And Rile knows none of this?"

"He doesn't, and I prefer to keep it that way," Alex said, rolling his shoulders again. His wings sank into his back with a slurp.

"Why?"

"I think I've given you more than enough information today, Lady Knight."

“Nah. Tell me why, and I’ll consider keeping your secrets.”

Alex eyed her. “Even though my directive is to keep watch over him, the more I get to know him, the more I like him. Being a mannie in this world sucks, and because he moves around so much, he doesn’t have a lot of friends. If he knew our relationship started out of obligation, it would devastate him. I’d like to avoid that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, but isn’t he going to find out anyway when your god tells you it’s time to use him to get the Soul Chalice?”

“There’s a chance it will never come to that, and I’m taking that chance. Actually, you may be of more use getting it than Rile could ever be.”

“And why is that?”

“The latest theory is that it’s at the bottom of the Tristah Sea.”

The Tristah Sea held Manusya’s deepest trench, a place even Lamia couldn’t swim down to. “That’s big information to be sharing with a demon knight, wouldn’t you say?” she asked.

Alex studied her for a moment, then sighed. “I know. But if the gods get their hands on it, it will turn every human soul toward the light. The war will be over ... and even though I’m an angel now, something about that still twists my stomach into knots.”

Rile’s steps bounced a little more the closer he drew toward his home. He was anxious to see Lamia.

It was a beautiful morning, but a lonely one. It worked out in his favor, though, because he was able to purchase a few things for her without worrying she'd see them.

He pushed the front door open to find Lamia leaning up against the door frame to Alex's room.

"I suggest you tell Zagan," Alex was saying, but as soon as he stepped inside, they turned. Shirtless and still in bed, he craned his head from behind Lamia's hip, his hair tousled from sleep.

A fire ignited in Rile that nearly caused him to combust. "Morning," he greeted, eyes traveling back and forth between the two. "Tell the demon king what?"

"Nothing," Lamia said, shrugging nonchalantly as she stood from the wall. She turned her body to face him. "Alex was just asking me some things about Hell."

"I see." Rile set his two bags down, and Lamia looked inside one. He used his body to shield the contents of the other. After watching their exchange, he wanted to give Lamia everything he'd gotten for her—to stake his claim—but he was trying to play it cool.

It was improper to ask a female her age, but based on what Rile knew, Lamia could be hundreds of years old. She could also be younger than his thirty-two years; Alex was just twenty-five. Did she prefer younger men? They were both of similar height and build, but Alex was just a regular, ordinary human. Surely, Lamia wouldn't go for that, right?

Right?

“Did you guys eat breakfast yet?” he asked, pulling out more bread and a few eggs from the bag Lamia peeked into.

“No, but I’m gonna head out.” Alex was already out of bed and pulling a shirt over his head. “You kids have fun. I have some errands to run, people to see. You’re in good hands,” he said to Rile, but winked at Lamia.

Rile found himself grinding his teeth. “Yeah, okay. See ya later.”

If Alex was after Lamia, he certainly didn’t show it while he quickly finished getting ready, gathered up his bag, and headed out the door. They didn’t so much as look at each other, which made Rile feel slightly better. *Slightly.*

“How long was Alex talking to you before I came back?” Rile asked as he lit the stove with a match and began to prepare breakfast.

“Just a couple of minutes. I’ve been up for a while, and I heard him stir. I just wanted to say hi. You know, learn a little more about you from the people you’re close with.”

That made Rile smile and his muscles relax. She wanted to learn more about him! “And what did he tell you?”

“That he really likes you and he’s glad your nomadic life took you down here,” she said. “He said you don’t have a lot of friends because you move around so much.”

Rile shrugged as his face heated. *Thanks, Alex. That’s not at all embarrassing info.* “Gotta keep moving to keep people off my back. Living with Alex seems to reassure the other humans here, though.”

Lamia nodded. “How was sleeping on this couch last night?”

“Comfortable enough.” Rile slid an egg off of his pan onto a plate beside some fresh buttered bread and leftover fruit. As he handed it to Lamia, he asked, “How’d you find the bed? Was it staticky this morning?”

“Not at all, actually.” She took the plate and gave him a nod of thanks before retreating to the couch.

“Good. We should do that steam trick again today.”

She nodded. “What about a bath? Do you have enough water for one?”

They didn’t; running a full bath would deplete their water supply. “Of course we do. I can run one for you right after breakfast.”

He finished preparing his own plate before taking a seat beside her. She was picking idly at the crust of the bread.

“I got a few things for you,” he said, looking down at his own meager meal. She deserved better than the run-down, dry, staticky, old shack and mediocre food he was giving her. As a knight, she was probably used to servants, decadent meals, and luxurious things. He wanted to give her what he could. Anything to keep her from leaving.

“You did?” she asked. It was difficult to tell if she sounded surprised or confused as she chewed.

He nodded, then took a couple more bites before setting his plate down on the cushion beside him and standing, picking up the canvas bag he’d previously hidden from her.

“Your tunic is thick, and the short sleeves and length leave you prone to sunburn.” Though her current clothing hugged her curves tighter and showed more skin than what he was about to show her, he was still excited to see her dressed in the local garb. “I figured you wouldn’t want to wear white because it’s a Heavenly color, so I opted for these.” He pulled out the pants first, light gray and wide in the thighs. “These are loose fitting and moisture absorbing, so you’ll remain cool and protected from the sun.” He pulled out a matching loose long-sleeved shirt, with a crisscross pattern of golden cuffs at the ends of the sleeves. A pleased smile grew across Lamia’s lips as he showed her the garment, which made the cost worth it a hundred times over. It had a wide collar and would sit at her shoulders. He got her one more piece—his big reveal. “I thought this would look stunning on you,” he said, unable to see her reaction because he was too flustered by his admission to make eye contact. He pulled out a lightweight, translucent red top adorned with gold accents to match the shirt she would wear underneath. It had an intricate lace collar with golden designs of desert flowers woven in that would accentuate the grace of her long neck. “And this goes around it to hold it all in place, or something.” He showed her the wide green and gold belt that would sit between her ribcage and just above her hips, with two smaller leather brown belts attached to hang bags and weaponry.

“Rile,” Lamia said breathlessly, rising to feel the red fabric and run her hands over the golden fringe at the bottom of the piece. “This must have cost you a fortune.”

Rile shook his head, smiling warmly. “A small price to pay

to the demoness who saved my life. I knew you had to have it as soon as I saw it. Maybe you can try it on after your bath.”

He was embarrassed to show her where she would be bathing, but his excitement to see her in her new clothing pushed him through it. He urged her to sit and finish her meal as he went to the corner and gripped a large metal basin, then dragged it across the floor. “I normally use the public bath in town,” he admitted, “and only freshen up in this with a sponge.” This was mostly because they had to collect their own water, and there wasn’t much to go around, but she didn’t need to know that. He’d drag buckets of water from the ocean across the desert if it meant she would be comfortable. He brought the large tub to the sink, connected a hose, and began running water from the reservoir beneath their house to the tub. “How hot would you like it?” he asked, then offered quickly, “And don’t worry, I’ll be outside while you’re in here to give you your privacy and make sure Alex doesn’t barge back in.”

“I like my baths cold, actually,” she said, rising and placing her empty plate on the counter beside the sink. “And ... why don’t you stay? I want to ask you some things.”

Rile’s curiosity and attraction to her were palpable, and she was flattered. After all, he was charming, handsome, and humble. She couldn’t deny she was interested in learning more about him, too.

But she was also a demon knight, sworn to protect Hell. If there was one thing Zagan taught her, it was how to identify an

opportunity and use it to her advantage.

Alexander's god flagged Rile as an important piece to the Soul Chalice puzzle, and she was going to use his attraction to find out why.

She was doing this for Hell. Just Hell. Really.

"Stay," she said again.

"I ..." Rile angled his pointed ear toward her as if he hadn't heard her correctly.

"It's really okay." She took the bottom of her tunic into her hands and lifted. She tossed it onto the floor, watching him watch her with his lips slightly parted.

As she stood before him in her dark blue bra and panties, she found herself holding her breath. His look ... she didn't quite anticipate how sultry it would be. Even though her lingerie wasn't fancy or overstated and was made for function over beauty, for once, she felt like a desired female instead of a fearsome warrior.

Another thing she didn't anticipate: there was a heat between her legs she hadn't felt in a long time, and it was uncomfortable enough to make her consider abandoning this plan. He would probably have told her everything he knew without this seduction, but she pressed forward—whether because she thought she would get *more* information from him this way or because it excited her too much to stop, she didn't want to contemplate.

Rile was frozen in place, watching her with the basin between them as she unhooked her bra and brought her hands

in front of her, letting the straps slide down her arms and onto the floor. He unabashedly shifted his focus away from her face and down to her chest. Her nipples hardened in response.

“Seven Hells,” he cursed, “you’re so damned beautiful, Lamia.”

Her breasts were heavy with the need for Rile to cup them in his hands, to knead them like his expression said he wanted to. She wasn’t afraid to show her body, taut and shapely from her training, but his compliments gave her goosebumps nonetheless.

She let her panties drop to the floor and quickly stepped into the tub, shivering as the water made contact with her hypersensitive skin. The water was cool, as requested, but now she wanted Rile’s body in there to warm her.

She cleared her throat once she was settled in. “So I wanted to ask you”—was that her voice trembling? The water wasn’t *that* cold—“what are the extent of your powers? How much electricity can you control?”

She felt silly asking that question amid the tension between them, and he seemed disappointed by it as he frowned and ran a hand through his hair.

“Um ... I don’t know, I’ve mostly just conjured it instead of manipulating it from other sources. I’ve never hit a limit before, but I’ve also never really tested what that limit would be. I use it to start fires to cook with, for defense when I need it, or to zap mosquitoes, mostly.”

She chuckled. “Are there a lot of mosquitoes in the desert?”

His troubled frown softened, and she thought she saw a slight hint of a smirk before he said, “No, not here. It’s amazing anything survives out here. Mosquitoes were a bigger problem when I lived in Akagon.”

“Akagon? Between what you and Alex have said, it sounds like you’ve lived in more places than I have respites in this realm ... and I have more than half a dozen. Where all have you lived?”

“The question should be where haven’t I lived,” he grumbled, rolling his shoulders before sitting down on the ground an arm’s length from the basin. He hooked his hands together and rested his arms on his knees. She expected him to start listing places once he got settled, but he stayed silent.

She chewed her bottom lip. If part of the reason why the gods wanted Rile was for his familiarity with a place, it sounded like that list was very long. Lamia moved her hand in the water to remind Rile she was naked with a thin barrier separating them, hoping to make him open to sharing again. “Can your electricity do anything else? Can you somehow use it to ... I don’t know, hover objects or something?”

He shrugged as he studied his entwined hands. “I don’t think so. Honestly, I’ve never had anyone around who could teach me what I’m capable of, so everything I know is just what I’ve been able to figure out on my own.”

His fingers turned white as he pressed them against his hands.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. I just don’t know a lot about mephis demons or mannies.”

“It appears no one does.”

The questioning wasn't worth upsetting him over. She was no closer to understanding why the gods would want Rile to help procure the Soul Chalice. Maybe other manifestations really were given guardian angels, too?

“May I ask you a few things?” Rile said, pulling her away from her thoughts.

She was taken aback—she wasn't used to anyone questioning her, a knight—but with how she'd just grilled him, she decided it was only fair.

“Sure,” she said, rubbing the cool water on her arms.

Already, the spark in his eyes returned. He straightened up and crossed his legs.

“When was the last time you were in a relationship with someone?”

The water splashed as her entire body tensed.

“A long time ago,” she said. “A long, long time ago. My focus has always been on knighthood.”

“And you've never considered one of the other knights?”

“Hell no. They're my brothers.” She cringed. “I could never think of any of them like that.”

“I see.”

Rile tore his shirt off his body and tossed it into the pile with her clothes, leaving him in nothing but his navy blue pants. Every muscle rippled as he leaned over the basin.

Just who was doing the seducing around here? She had to admit, he looked good ...

“How do you keep in shape?” she asked.

“I thought it was my turn to ask the questions, Lamia.”

She shuddered, only because the water was so cold—certainly not because he’d said her name as his voice grew thick and husky. His eyelids were half closed, dimming his bright eyes. He swung his body over to the side of the basin, knelt down, and grabbed the cloth draped over the side.

“May I?”

“*That’s* your question?” She was buying time; she didn’t know what she wanted him to do. Despite the temperature of the water, heat rose from her body and into her cheeks. She was unable to stop herself from adding, “Of course you can.”

The rough cloth met the skin at the base of her neck, and she tilted her head away to give him better access. He brushed down over her clavicle, then up and around to the back of her neck.

Lamia shivered again, luxuriating in his ministrations. She tried not to pant as his tender yet needy touch explored her shoulders, arms, neck, and upper chest. She wanted him to dip down to her breasts, but each time he hit the top of the swells, he would retreat back up. She resisted the urge to lift them into his touch, but their silent tease was a game she was going to win. After all, this was just a ploy for her to get information.

Yes. Just a ploy.

Her head fell back against the basin, and she writhed as he

dipped the cloth just over a swell and back up again. His shuddering breath at her ear made her shiver.

“Rile,” she whispered, eyes closing as she arched toward the ceiling. He groaned in response, a husky, primal sound that made her want to plunge her hand between her thighs. Instead, she raised her arm and found his hair, tangling her fingers in it as her nails grazed his scalp.

She should use this opportunity to ask him another question.

“What are you thinking about?” was all she could manage.

He lowered his head, panting against her temple. His hand trailed lower, down the side of her breast and over her stomach. He traced small circles around her navel, up toward the underside of her breasts, and back down to the top of her mound. “About how badly I want to touch you,” he murmured against her ear before giving it a playful nip.

She tightened her grip on his hair. “Then do it.” She was surprised by the headiness of her own voice. Every pore and patch of scales stood at attention, collectively seeking release.

“But I’m enjoying this,” he whispered. They could torture each other all day.

Their lips hovered an inch from each other. Rile’s breath was sweet, the perfect complement to the spicy scent of his skin. Together it was intoxicating, drawing her closer ... closer ... It felt like every part of her, down to the hair on her head, was leaning toward him.

Kiss me, Rile. Do it. Please.

Rile jerked suddenly, gasping as he pulled away from her in

a flash. Her body felt the distance immediately, but it took her a few more heartbeats for her brain, foggy with lust, to understand what was happening.

Rile had rolled away and was now curled into a ball, spine facing the ceiling with his head tucked between his knees. The sound of cracking whips echoed around the room as streaks of lightning lashed out from his body. He breathed heavily, and with each exhale, the lightning began to dissipate.

Once the lightning stopped, his head snapped up, and his eyes went wide as they immediately sought Lamia's. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." She wasn't sure that sounded convincing. She really was fine, but was still processing what the hell just happened.

"Fuck," he murmured in relief. Every muscle in his back relaxed. "Seven Hells, Lamia ... I could have killed you."

Chapter 9

Rile knelt before Lamia, staring at her in that metal basin, half-submerged in water. If even one part of him had still been in contact with her or that bath before he lost control, she would have been electrocuted to death.

“I could have killed you,” he repeated breathlessly. His entire body was numb, rocked by the force of the sensations she aroused in him and the magnitude of what could have happened—the consequences of a lightning demon losing control to a water one. “I’m so sorry.”

Lamia sat up in the tub, the top swell of her breasts exposed. The basin still covered the rest of her from his angle on the ground.

That’s for the best. You can’t handle all of her.

“Nothing happened,” she reassured him. Her cheeks were still flushed, but the shock was plain on her face. “Nothing happened, meaning I’m still alive, but ... what happened to you?”

“I guess I got too excited,” he said, shaking his head. He was flushed as well, but more with embarrassment at his admission. The figurative sparks between them had been so fierce that he couldn’t hold his literal sparks back. “I wanted to touch you too badly. I wanted more than that with a desperation I’ve never felt before.” He was relieved that his instinct to protect her pushed through the fog.

“Oh,” she said.

He groaned. Seven Hells, was she disappointed that he had to pull away? Even now the electric currents inside him pulled toward her, threatening to strike her if they made contact. He breathed slowly in and out, desperate to push it all back down into his core, but it was as if she'd unlocked a cage inside of him that held his power. It now ran, unbridled, throughout his body. He scooted on his knees to the metal door that separated them from the outside world, placing his palm flat against it. He dumped the electric surge inside him through his fingertips and into the door, but for every amp he sent coursing through it, more generated inside of him.

“Rrragh!” he bit out, leaning into the metal and sending one final push of energy out of his body. But it was no use; he couldn't be drained. He was his own power source, ignited by lust and longing for the beautiful female behind him.

“It's a good thing you never tested your limits before. It appears you don't have any. You're going to blow the door clear off your house if you're not careful,” Lamia warned. He heard the water jostle and splash as she rose behind him, followed by a towel unfolding and the rustle of clothing.

Though he didn't turn to look at her, he knew she'd gotten closer by the pull of electricity in his back. He snapped around, ready to warn her to keep her distance, but found her a few arms' lengths away from him, wearing the new clothes he got her.

She was radiant.

“I don't know what's happening,” he said, staring into the bright white lights of her eyes. “I've never felt like this before.

It's like I have endless amounts of power coursing through me, yet I'm powerless because I can't touch you." He tried to reach out to her again, continuing to keep her gaze locked with his as he slowly extended his arm toward her. The closer he got, the more the electricity inside of him surged into his fingers. "Stop," he said, commanding the electricity out loud, but it would not relent.

"I don't understand," she said. "We've touched dozens of times by now. Just seconds before you rolled away from me, your hands were in the water, on my body ..."

"I know." Seven Hells, did he know. "Something inside me ... *shifted*. Nothing feels right." He stood and put more distance between them, unsure if a spark would try to sneak out and lash at her. "It seems my power wants you just as much as I do."

He dropped his chin and sighed. He hadn't meant to admit that.

She echoed his sigh, with the same exasperation. "I can't heal you, you can't touch me ... It seems the universe doesn't like us being together."

"Well, the universe is wrong, and I want to kick it right in the nuts."

That got a smirk from her. "That's how I feel about the universe most days."

Silence fell between them as Rile continued to agonize in his own mind. He turned away from her again, staring at the floor as if it would provide the answers to how to control his

power.

“Please don’t think what I’m about to say is because of what just happened ...” Lamia said.

He braced himself and turned to her, nodding despite knowing what she was about to say was definitely because of what had just occurred.

“Since I’ve been here, I’ve gotten a tip about something I need to tell Zagan. I’ve sat on it for longer than I should have.”

He didn’t think his heart could sink any further, but there it went. She’d been sitting on intel, and only now was she inspired enough to act on it. “Was it what you and Alex were talking about?”

Her silence disappointed him. Less than a day ago, they were running from Hell together, and now she was running from him to return to it.

“Do you ... want to come?” she asked.

He noted she didn’t answer his original question. Of course he wanted to join her—he enjoyed her company so much and got so used to having her around already—but it was clear in her tone that she’d only asked the question to be polite. “No thanks, I have some things I need to take care of here.”

Another long pause. “Okay,” she said. She was harder to read now. “Well, see you, then. Thank you for everything.”

For the crappy living conditions, crummy fruit, and nearly killing her?

“Sure,” he said. “Do you need help getting back to the

portal?”

“I can create one here.” She reached into the pocket of the folded tunic she held in her arms and pulled out a small red marble. She placed it on the ground, drew a circle around it, and drew lines connecting one side of the circle to the other in various spots. When the pentagram completely outlined the marble, it sank into the ground and exploded in bright red light. As it sank, Lamia took the time to go around the shack and stuff her old clothing into her shoulder bag.

When they faced each other again, it was from a few arms’ lengths away.

With a slow breath, Rile took a step toward her. Then another. The lightning behind his ribs pushed forward, but not violently.

Encouraged by his smile, Lamia took a step forward, too.

As if his powers were a guard dog, it knocked against his chest, wanting to bite. As it propelled him forward, he forced himself back with a shout.

Lamia stopped, and her expression fell. She adjusted the strap on her arm and nodded to him. “Thank you again, Rile. See you,” she said.

He doubted it. “See you, Lamia.”

She stepped into the circle and began to sink through the floor.

He added, “You look beautiful, by the way.”

The last he saw of her was a sympathetic smile on her soft

lips. She disappeared, and the light faded.

“I’m sorry.”

She should never have tried to seduce her way into getting information from Rile. She stepped out of the portal confused, aroused, and horrified at herself.

She’d pretended the seduction was all to get information out of him, but she had to be honest with herself: the way he looked at her body thrilled her, and she didn’t stop because she wanted more.

And now, because she couldn’t control herself, Rile had lost control of his powers. Would he ever be the same around her again?

This was all far too intense for her liking, and she was regrettably happy that he’d turned down her fake offer to return with her to Hell. She never thought she would return to the demon realm this soon, especially of her own volition, but she needed to find a new space to think, to calm down. She still ached for Rile to touch her.

She looked down at her scarred palms as the portal closed beneath her. Of all the demons, she had to be attracted to the one who couldn’t control himself long enough to refrain from frying her alive.

She shook her head. This was for the best. The universe was telling her to stay away from Rile, no doubt because he would make her a weaker knight.

Lamia looked around, unsure of where she’d told the portal

to drop her. She was on the main road in the town leading up to Zagan's castle, with Jinn's Denn a short distance ahead. Her legs felt heavy as she took one step, then two, in that direction. In a few more steps, her legs were fused together, and she mindlessly slithered down the road on her tail. She could go to Jinn's place for a quick drink, Zagan's castle to tell him about Alex and the Soul Chalice, or home. She craved her own bed, longed to see if her good friend and fellow knight Jinn was at his club for a chat, and felt obligated to go straight to Zagan. She'd already sat on the information about the Soul Chalice for a few hours now. What was just a little more time while she tried to work out what the hell just happened on Manusya?

To Jinn's Denn it was.

The line to get into Jinn's club usually wrapped around the block with misfit lesser demons. The wait could be up to a half a day or more, and if you survived the breakout fights and occasional devourings that occurred outside, you were granted access to dance, drink, and fuck the hours away inside. Today's line, however, was only seven demons deep, and those who did wait for entry were calm, orderly, and looked as tired as she was.

Eyebrow raised, she studied them as she passed by. They barely acknowledged her, though some bowed their heads and muttered, "Demon Knight Lamia" toward the ground. If she wasn't also so drained, she would have impaled them all for their insolence.

She was still eyeing the sullen lessers when the two bouncers outside bowed low and pushed the doors open.

“Lady Knight,” they greeted in unison, and she bowed her head in response before making her way inside.

The club was full, but there was something different about the sea of demons before her. They weren’t as devoid of life as the others outside, but there was an air of unease on the dance floor. She made her way back to the far corner of the club reserved for her and the rest of the knights, relieved to find Oriax, Dantalion, Raum, and Jinn.

“Wow, hey,” Oriax greeted. The others looked her way, and she was warmed by their welcoming smiles. She loved these knights. If only she loved their king just as much these days.

“Look at you,” Jinn said, exaggeratedly looking her over from head to tail.

She looked down at the clothing Rile had given her and smiled. “Look at me good, or look at me bad?”

“It’s beautiful, but isn’t that what’s worn in the deserts? A gorgon and the desert don’t really mix.”

Lamia shrugged. “I’ve been trying new things. Now pour me some hellsglory. I’m parched.”

They all looked at each other and frowned.

“So listen to this shit,” Jinn said. “Zagan banned hellsglory Hell-wide.”

“What?” She supposed she should have seen the news coming, but it still surprised her nonetheless. Looking back out over the dance floor, she realized what was missing: the silver glow of angel blood in the drinks of all the patrons. “Seven Hells, is that why it looks like a funeral around here?”

They all nodded slowly.

Lamia's frustration with Zagan roared back to life. Demons thrived on angel blood—and their angel-sympathizing king just took that away from them, too.

“Whiskey?” Dantalion offered instead, his skeletal fingers wrapping tightly around the bottle. Lamia shook her head.

“Do you have netsilana?” she asked Jinn, whose face screwed into an ugly grimace.

“I think so, somewhere ... but really? That stuff is shit.”

Lamia shrugged. “I like it.”

Jinn, eyebrows raised, looked her desert outfit up and down once more before excusing himself. Raum, the most human-looking of all of them, with no horns, wings, or scales, but with bright yellow eyes, scooted over so she could join them on the plush seat of their booth.

“So, what other nonsense has been going on since last we saw each other?” she asked the group as she slid in beside him.

Oriax shrugged, swirling the whiskey in his glass. “Training exercises with the lessers,” he offered, not looking up from the liquid sloshing before him. “Seems that the next most responsible knight inherits the misfit army when the previous most responsible knight doesn't want to be responsible anymore.”

Of all the demons at the table, O should have been the one to understand her leave the most. He'd seen everything that went down—and it was the angel in *his* charge that escaped, not hers.

“I had to leave after what Zagan did,” she said.

“Then why are you here now?” he asked, finally looking up to meet her eye.

Oriax was always the quick-witted, funny, easygoing one. The last thing she’d expected was an interrogation from him. She was tired; she came here to relax and blow off steam, and here he was, making it come out her ears. “I saw Alex on Manusya. He gave me more information about the chalice.”

Raum straightened. “You ran into Alex? That’ll make Zagan happy, at least. Was he still, y’know...” He flapped his arms and bobbed his head like a duck.

Lamia raised her eyebrows. “Is that supposed to be an angel flying? Then yes, but a lot less stupid-looking than that.” She laughed. *That* was the kind of behavior she expected from Oriax, not him acting like he had a stick up his ass like Zagan.

Dantalion nodded. “Zagan told us about the cup shortly after you and Oriax were sent to take care of the angels. Seere and the others are up looking for it now.”

“If he knew the true magnitude of it, he would have us *all* looking for it,” Lamia said.

“Then again I ask, why are you here?” Oriax said as he crossed his arms over his chest. “If the information is that good, you should have told Z already.”

He was right, and she knew it. “I’m too afraid he won’t take the information seriously and let us down again.”

“You mean let *you* down again.”

“Enough, Oriax,” Dantalion said. “Seven Hells, you’re wound. Now, Lam, what’s the scoop? If Zagan won’t listen, we will.”

“Alex said his god thinks it’s at the bottom of the Tristah,” Lamia said.

Raum hummed as he nodded his head, then tapped his finger to his chin. “That makes sense, actually. If the Supreme God fell in love with a demoness, and that demoness wanted to hide the cup from him, of course it’d be in the spot closest to Hell ... but the most impossible place for anyone to get to.” He turned to Lamia. “I’m sure even you can’t move that much water, and even if you could, the pressure would squish you like a grape down there.”

“Maybe that’s what Alex wants to have happen,” Dantalion offered. “This is the angel boy from the last battle we’re talking about.”

Stupidly, Lamia hadn’t considered that Alex would be out for her demise or trying to distract her. She needed to remember that just because he and Zagan were close in his former life didn’t mean Alex loved him now. “The very same,” she said.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t trust him any farther than I could throw him,” Dantalion said. “Especially since he flies.”

They all turned their attention toward Jinn as he returned with a dusty, three-quarters-filled green bottle and set it in front of Lamia.

“Took me forever to find it,” he said, setting a small glass

down beside it. “I think the only one to have ever drank from it is me. It tasted like ass, so I shoved it in a corner in the back room. I thought, ‘Who in the Seven Hells would ever want this?’ and here we are.” He shook his head in disappointment as he smirked. “I always knew you had weird taste, but this is over the top.” Winking, he wagged his eyebrows at the rest of the group and turned to pull the curtain shut, closing them off from the rest of the club. “Plus, I brought this,” he said, setting down a small glass bottle with shining silver liquid inside.

“Oh shit,” Oriax said, his words thick with saliva as he leaned toward the bottle. “I thought Zagan came here personally and took the whole stock.”

“As much as I love that demon, I’m not stupid enough to give him all the angel blood I’ve so carefully harvested all these years. I was waiting to break it out when someone really needed it, and Lamia looks like she really needs it. Also, she needs a good mixer for this burning ass-water she requested.”

Lamia laughed and shook her head as Jinn unscrewed the lid of the netsilana bottle. He gave her a healthy pour of the stuff, followed by an equally healthy pour of the precious angel blood.

Every eye was trained on her as she accepted the glass from Jinn and took a sip. The salty tartness of the blood hit her tongue first, followed quickly by the sweet tang of the netsilana. The two flavors were in perfect harmony with one another, and the silky smoothness of the angel blood eliminated the burn she’d expected from the netsilana as she swallowed.

“Seven Hells, this is amazing.” She licked her lips and slid the cocktail back to Jinn. “Try that, and thank me.”

The rest of the knights watched the glass as Jinn picked it up and brought it to his lips. Before he finished his first swallow, his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“This is ... outrageous,” he said, staring at the half-finished glass with bewilderment. “It’s salty and sweet, yet savory. You throw some spices in there, and you have a perfect drink.” He passed it around to the rest of the crew, who each took a sip and nodded approvingly as they passed it to the next.

“What are you going to call it?” Jinn asked Lamia.

“Me? Name such a perfect drink?” None of them had ever had the honor. After Jinn invented hellsglory, he was the all-knowing cocktail genius. She immediately knew what she wanted to name it, but hesitated. This wouldn’t be the last time she or any of the other knights would be having this drink, and the name she thought of would forever remind her of what could have been.

Maybe it was because she was already feeling the buzz from the angel blood, but she could think of no other perfect title for the perfect drink. “A rile. It should be called a rile.”

“Arile,” Jinn repeated. He tested it on his tongue just as he had the actual drink, then nodded his approval. “Everyone, may I present to you, the arile!”

He’d mistaken the name, taking the “a” and appending it to Rile’s name, but she liked it and decided not to correct him. They all clapped before Dantalion said, “Now pass me another

glass, and let's get ariled up!"

Chapter 10

Lamia left Jinn's Denn feeling rejuvenated.

She knew she would be seeing Zagan and opted not to drink too much of their new arile cocktail, lest she give away Jinn's secret stash of angel blood. Instead, she was pleasantly buzzed on plain netsilana by the time she stepped out of the club.

She loved her fellow knights; they always knew just what to say and do to make her feel better. Well, everyone but Oriax. What had gotten into that demon? He could go scratch as far as she was concerned. But Jinn, Raum, and Dantalion had all helped lift her spirits, and now she was prepared to deliver what knowledge she had about the Soul Chalice to Zagan firsthand.

Every demon servant in the castle hallways kept their head down as they passed Lamia, mumbling "Lady Knight" or "Demon Knight Lamia" to their chests but otherwise keeping to themselves. The entire atmosphere in Hell had changed so quickly, all because of Zagan's overprotection of Coryn. The downtrodden way the servants carried themselves threatened to sober her, but she shook her head and balled her hands into fists as she slithered down the hallways toward the throne room. Zagan wasn't going to upset her today, not after she delivered the news she carried.

"Demon King Zagan, Demon Queen Coryn, I'm sorry to disturb you ... but I have some news that may be of interest to you."

"Welcome back, Lamia," Zagan said flatly. He tapped his

claws together as he regarded her from atop his throne. “Good to see you alive. I was told you were unable to be located since last you were here, despite my summons.”

She fought to keep her balled fists from shaking. “Apologies, my king. But I think you will find my absence bore fruit. I have been in contact with Alex, and I have information about the state of the Heavens and a possible location of the Soul Chalice.”

As soon as the young angel’s name left Lamia’s lips, Zagan’s pointed ears twitched, and he leaned forward. “Go on.”

She told him everything she knew, from the chaos in the Heavens to the hunch that the cup was deep in the Tristah Trench. “So now it’s a race to see who can get to the bottom. And before you ask, even I wouldn’t be able to reach anything at that depth.”

“You’re sure? How deep could it be?”

“I’m sure. I practice diving regularly, and there are spots even outside the trench I still can’t touch.”

Zagan shook his head and sighed.

Lamia prickled, ready to explain how the depths of the trench would kill her, when Coryn interrupted.

“How does Alex seem? Happy?”

Zagan looked expectantly at her.

Here we are, our king and queen concerned most about the wellbeing of another angel.

“Fine,” Lamia said, forcing friendliness into her tone. “He is a guardian angel now. Big white wings.”

Zagan glanced at Coryn with raised eyebrows, and she nodded and smiled widely back at him.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “Of all the ranks of angels, guardians spend the most time outside of the Heavens and have more freedoms. That’s the best rank he can be.”

“My queen,” Lamia said, “Alex said that the Soul Chalice would turn every human soul to the light. Is it really that powerful?”

“No one can say for sure—different stories have been told by different gods across the Heavens. It may be able to turn just one soul, like the demon the Supreme God had fallen in love with, or it could have the potential to turn many. It may be able to not only cleanse souls, but perhaps turn them dark. Whatever the case, we can’t let it fall into the Heavens’ hands.”

“Of course,” Lamia replied. She shuddered to think about what would happen if the gods could dispense an unlimited number of angels while the demon population whittled away.

Zagan caught Lamia’s eyes, and they stared at each other for a long moment before he added, “That means we must go to any length—or depth—to secure that chalice before the angels do.”

There it was—a not-so-subtle way of continuing the thought he’d had before Coryn changed the subject. That translated to, “You will get the Soul Chalice, even if that means your

compressed carcass is what brings it to the surface.”

“What do the angels have that can get them to the bottom of the Tristah Trench?” Lamia asked Coryn.

“I’m not sure. I don’t even know of a god who would be able to reach those depths.”

Lamia gave Zagan a look, wanting to say, “It’s not as easy as you think, asshole.” But out loud, she asked, “What kind of demon seduced the Supreme God?”

Coryn gave a helpless shrug. “I’m sorry I can’t better answer these questions, because they’re good ones. I believe that information has been lost to time, but I can’t venture into the Heavens to find out for myself. It would be a good question to ask Alex. Do you still have access to him?”

She wasn’t quite ready to see Rile again, but nodded. “I do. I will find out what I can.”

She bowed low before turning on her heels to exit the throne room. But she wasn’t going to procure the Soul Chalice for them. She was going to get it to protect the lives and livelihoods of the demons in Hell.

The ones Zagan continued to ignore.

Behind her, Coryn gasped sharply just as the throne room doors opened. Demonic screams and the clanging of swords rang in the distance. There was only one type of metal that made that particular pinging noise—destiel, one that could only be forged in the Heavens.

She turned to find Coryn standing with her face drained of color and her white-knuckled hands gripping her robes.

“Lamia!” Zagan cried, watching the wall above her where the portal map was. “The banquet hall!”

Before she could process her thoughts, she was off and running. She knew exactly what had happened.

Angels had used the portal she’d revealed to them to infiltrate her realm.

Rile lay in his bed and stared up at the dark ceiling of his room, mumbling, “What a fucking moron you are.”

Despite never having his father or another demon around to mentor him, Rile had learned to control his powers from a young age. A spark here or there escaped him if he was startled or surprised, but the first time he’d accidentally shocked his mother at three years old was the last time his powers ever unintentionally hurt someone.

That was, until Lamia.

With her, he thought his body was so aroused that he’d lost control. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized it felt like his electricity had become a separate, sentient entity inside of him. As soon as he went to kiss Lamia, it was as if his powers became jealous of his attraction to her. After that, his electricity acted like a rabid dog, snarling and on the attack whenever she got too close.

Even thinking about her now sent his powers into a tizzy. “Why the hell are you doing this?” he mumbled, and they slammed against his ribcage in response.

Rile shattered the glass of water he was holding against the

far wall, causing the water and shards of glass to bounce back at him.

He growled, throwing the blankets off of himself and stepping around the glass on the ground to make his way into the living area. There was no vast underwater scene beyond a picture window, no rows of shelves where books were carefully curated and filed away. The tub still sat filled with water in the middle of the floor, and the door still had burn marks in the metal from his powers. “Who are you kidding, anyway?” he said to himself. He was stupid to have taken a knight as beautiful and refined as Lamia to his run-down hovel in the first place.

Well, that was all in the past now. The moment before she’d disappeared into her portal was the last time he would ever see her.

He grit his teeth as he imagined Lamia laughing with Putha, telling her all about how Rile couldn’t control his own body. He picked a shirt up off the couch and threw it on. He had to get out of his shack before the mortification became too much to bear.

Rile pulled his shoes on, grabbed his tool belt, and stepped outside. He sighed and closed his eyes as the dry, sweltering air stole his breath and hot rays of sun assaulted his skin. He welcomed the warmth, willing it to calm him as he tried to exhale the embarrassment out of his body. Again, the electricity inside him was more active than ever, and he could tell that it, too, felt better being out beneath the sun.

“You can’t let this plague you all day,” he said, “and you

can't talk to yourself all day, either." He set out down the hill toward town. After his shopping spree for Lamia earlier, he had to harvest and sell more Demon's Horn to fill his wallet again.

He passed a lot of small netsi plants growing along the side of the road, still recovering from the last time he and Alex had harvested them. The spikes were short, but a beautiful shade of royal purple. When they were ready to be harvested again, they would turn brighter, like a plum. The tips were starting to lighten, but it would be some time before that color made its way into the base of the spines.

Just beyond those plants were rows of bright netsi cacti ready for harvesting. He pulled some long pliers out and knelt next to the first plant. Carefully, he stuck the pointed tips of the pliers through an opening in the spikes, secured them at the thick base of one, and pulled. It took a little wiggling, especially with his muscles still tender from his arrow wound, but eventually the spike loosened and came free. He sat cross-legged in the sand, set down and smoothed out a towel before him, took out a long, skinny chisel, and dug for the meat inside the spike. The act of hollowing it out took concentration, something he needed to distract himself from his other thoughts. He extracted another, hollowed it, and set it down on the towel. He extracted and hollowed another, and another, until he had access to the base of the plant: a translucent white dome with an orange core. With a small saw, he cut a hole into the white, pulpy base, careful not to puncture the core, and gently pulled it out. It looked like the inside of an orange wrapped in thick onion paper, hollowed out on the inside and

replaced with a milky honey-like substance. Carefully, Rile put a small funnel into a hollowed spike and poured some of the netsi nectar inside. He clamped the end together, sealing in the hallucinogen, and repeated this process with every hollowed spike he had. The process almost made him forget about Lamia—almost. But no matter what he did, over how much time, he knew she would always be there, torturing him with what could have been.

Nothing was what it was ever going to be. A demon knight and an orphaned halfling? There was no chance in or out of Hell that he'd ever had a shot.

There were still a few pours of nectar left over from the core by the time Rile got through the spikes he'd already extracted. He grabbed his pliers and went in for more supplies, gripping the bottom of another spike and wiggling it around. It cracked as it came out, spewing cactus meat everywhere. He spit the vile stuff out of his mouth and tossed the spike, going back for another one. He started slow, but got impatient by the end and cracked that one, too.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” he growled. He threw it into the discard pile. He wasn't himself when he thought about Lamia, and if he was going to think about Lamia from now on, then who was he? Aside from an impatient and moody half-breed who needed to get over himself.

Between successful extractions, he cursed each time he cracked another spike. By the time he'd stripped the plant bald, he still had nectar left in the core. This plant had been fruitful; despite taking out his impatience on a few spikes here

and there, he didn't expect to run out of vessels. He'd already collected a sizable stack of Demon's Horn for Alex to sell.

He looked over at the next plant just out of reach, and his arms went heavy with fatigue. He looked down at the core in his hand, considered shimmying over to the new plant and sliding the rest of the nectar into a couple more spikes, but found himself lifting the bulb to his lips instead. He tossed the empty core into the pile with the other garbage, then lay back in the sand and stared up at the endless blue sky, awaiting whatever trip the Demon's Horn wanted to take him on.

Despite being high on angel blood from the arile cocktails—or perhaps because of them—the rest of the knights made it to the castle quickly and eager to fight. They each clawed, strangled, and stabbed through one Heavenly being after another, helping themselves to warm angel blood as they waited for more winged prey to enter their realm. Could they close the portal and stop the influx of wingers? Sure, and they would, once they'd slaked their bloodlust.

Lamia wound her tail tightly around an angel, crushing him in his armor as she licked silver blood off her hands. She whipped his body to the floor, and it slid into a pile with the others as she cheered for Dantalion. He projected images of various gruesome demon types on his bones each time he ran angels through with his sword. Raum picked off the next angel that came through the portal before she shouted, “Dibs on the next one!” and was met with howls of encouragement by the others.

As fun as this was, she knew something was wrong. What were the Heavens hoping to achieve by sending this slow trickle of angels into Hell? These weren't their best ranks; they all had plush white wings like Alex. Erelim angels, the highest-ranking battle angels in the Heavens, sported golden wings like Coryn.

A loud roar emanated from behind her, shaking the castle and silencing the room. Each knight, with their hostages in hand, slowly turned. Zagan panted in the doorway, his chest and shoulders expanding to take up the entire space as he stared wide-eyed at the scene. He pushed off the door frame and sprinted forward, and for some reason, Lamia expected him to join in their fun. At one time, there was nothing he loved more than destroying angels, ripping into them with his claws and strangling or puncturing through them with his barbed tail. With her clouded mind, it took Lamia a moment to remember that these were not those days.

Zagan blew past Lamia, pushing through angels and knights alike to slam his fist into the center of the portal just as another angel started pushing through. The stone cracked in all directions, disrupting the calculated lines of the pentagram's design and cutting off its power. Two arms sliced off above the elbow and donning angelic armor fell to the ground at the base of the wall, leaving the rest of the angel on Manusya. The glowing red light died, closing off anyone from entering or exiting Hell through there again.

"Do not kill any more of them!" Zagan shouted, his fist still pressed into the wall. He stared at the stone, chest and back heaving while he sucked in huge breaths of air. "Do not kill

any more of them. *Guards!*”

Only three angels remained, each just as shocked into immobility as the knights who held them.

A dozen oni, incubus, and drude guards swarmed the hall, descending on the angels Raum, Dantalion, and Jinn held, but did not harm them. They carefully took the shaken angels from the knights’ grasps and ushered them forward.

“Shall we take them topside, my liege?” a drude asked.

Zagan was about to answer yes, and Lamia probably should have just kept her mouth shut, but the liquid courage that was angel blood urged her to do otherwise.

“And repeat what just happened?”

She got the sense the guards agreed with her, but none of them said anything. Of course they didn’t.

Zagan growled low in his throat, slowly pushing his arm off the wall. His tall horns scraped against the stone as he turned on his heels to face the guards. They leaned away from him, toward the open door.

“Take them topside,” he commanded, “and kill them. You are more capable of this job than my *elite* knights.”

They were gone before Lamia had a chance to rebuke. Zagan’s eyes snapped up to meet Lamia’s. He glared at her before he did the same, one by one, to the rest of the knights.

“How dare you,” he hissed. “You blatantly disobeyed my orders and stand here, in my castle, slaughtering angels ... knowing full well your queen feels every stab, strangle, and

bite. As the angels suffer, *she* suffers. And then you reward yourselves by drinking their blood!” He let out another castle-shaking roar. “You are demon knights, sworn to protect the king and queen of Hell and, more importantly, OBEY THEIR ORDERS!”

“Yes, we’re *demon* knights!” Lamia shouted, trying to match the volume of his roar but falling short. “We kill angels because they threaten our very existence. We are sworn to protect Hell, not just blindly protect and obey what our brainwashed king says!”

“Lamia ...” Jinn warned quietly.

“No!” She pointed a finger at Jinn. “You know I’m right. Banning angel blood? You see how that’s affected the entire realm. Resisting the slaughter of angels and the want for their blood is unnatural!”

“Lamia,” Zagan said. His voice was low, rife with a rage on the brink of explosion. When she steadied herself and turned to face him, he continued. “You have no idea what it is to lead this realm. I am your king. Coryn is your queen. We set the rules, and they are to be obeyed—*especially* by the knights at the king’s command. If you do not like these rules, you can leave this realm ... and never return.”

Lamia tried not to rock on her tail. After all they’d been through since they were fledglings, this was how he was going to treat her? “Why, Zagan ... that’s the best idea you’ve ever had during your entire reign,” she spat.

“Now come on!” Oriax interjected. “Lamia, you don’t mean that ...”

“I’m doing nothing but standing up for the subjects of Hell. It’s something *you* should all try sometime.”

Zagan held out a hand. “Your portal beads, Lamia.”

She glared at him, the demon she would have once gladly died for. Her brother. Her friend. “What about my portal beads?”

“Since you’re leaving, you will not be using them—or any portal, for that matter. Oriax, who *will not say another word*, will escort you to your home. You will pack your things, and you will go topside one final time. From there, we cannot help you. You will not return.”

“Such a shame.” And it was. She wanted to cry, wanted to take it all back and apologize—but refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much this hurt her. *He is not the demon you once knew*, she told herself, raising her chin and looking up at the ceiling to stop the tears that threatened to fall. She unhooked the small bag of portal beads at her belt and gave it to Jinn.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jinn said as he accepted the bag, but she shook her head.

“No, I do.” She gave Jinn a weak smile and placed her hand on his bicep.

Jinn placed his hand over hers and gave it a tight squeeze. His eyes betrayed his words. “Okay.”

“Okay,” she replied. She looked at Raum and Dantalion, still stunned into silence. “Okay,” she said again.

She gave one more glance at Zagan, only to be met with his

stone-cold stare. She backed up, holding her breath as she waited for an eyebrow twitch, a softening in his eyes, a frown—anything to show he really wanted her to stay.

Zagan didn't flinch.

Oriax appeared on her left, offered her his arm, and she linked hers with it. Together, they silently made their way down the long carpet in the middle of the banquet hall and out the door. It closed behind them, and Lamia let out a trembling exhale.

Chapter 11

Rile flew.

The sky was so blue, so endless. He closed his eyes and experienced the true freedom of that sky, void of obstacles, judgment, and responsibility. He was weightless. He had no care in the world.

The powers inside of him were at bay for the first time since the bath incident with Lamia. He and his powers were one again, enjoying the warm sun and fresh, cool wind. This was pure, unadulterated joy; his soul felt just as light as he did.

No! Lamia will come back only to hunt you down if your soul is light.

Like the wind being taken from a sail, dread made him fold in on himself. The thought of Lamia made his powers split away and roar back to life inside again.

And then he fell.

“No,” he said out loud, and despite plummeting toward the ground, he did not panic. He did not open his eyes. Through his eyelids, he could tell the sky grew dark; the air became moist and cold on his skin. A clap of thunder boomed all around him, startling him into opening his eyes wide.

He was surrounded by tall, black thunderclouds. Lightning tore through them, reminding him of how the electricity might look inside his own body. The rain started with another clap of thunder, pelting him with icy drops the size of large stones. He grunted each time one struck him. He ducked forward,

covering his head with his arms as he flipped to face downward and fall through the clouds as quickly as he could. He wasn't sure what he was going to do to stop himself from becoming a pancake on the ground, but he'd have time to figure that out next. Hopefully.

Another clap of thunder shook him as he broke through the bottom of the storm. He winced as the brightness of the sun assaulted his vision. The ground still looked far off, but it was hard to tell when desert sand was the only thing he could see. He scrambled to adjust to the light and get his bearings to figure out how to stop himself, but as quickly as the desert had come into view, it disappeared again. Bright sparks covered his vision, until all he could see was white. All he could hear was a high-pitched buzz. He was completely disoriented, and panic finally set in.

His back hit something hard and turned his scream into a breathless heave as all the air left his lungs.

And then he was awake.

Rile gasped, trying to get his lungs to inflate again. It took a good few desperate tries, but eventually his body got the air it needed. He was able to focus on where he was now.

He was back in the desert, lying in the sand beside his collection of Demon's Horn. The sun was lower in the sky, so he'd been out for at least a couple of hours. He moved nothing but his eyes for a time, taking in what his mind had just shown him. Demon's Horn was a powerful drug; it'd even tricked his body into thinking the wind had been knocked out of him. He would have thought it had all truly happened if he'd been

soaked to the bone, but he was completely dry. The rain had not been real. Neither had the flying or the fall. “That was an awful trip,” he said to the pile of netsi needles. He was tired.

Every muscle in Rile’s body screamed as he got to his feet. The spikes of the netsi plants surrounding him wavered like Lamia’s hair, and he knew the trip was not yet over. With a groan, he gathered his things and stumbled back toward his shack.

There is no good in a thunderstorm, he thought. Lightning and water, evoking powerful winds and miserable conditions.

Everything was telling him to stay away from the beautiful water demon, but the more he was shown, the more he wanted to prove it all wrong.

Lamia released the water she’d been holding around the dome as soon as the front doors closed. Oriax jumped as a strong wave slammed against the walls.

“This is for the best,” Lamia said. For the thousandth time since they left the throne room, she tried to convince them both of that.

“Let’s go back,” Oriax insisted, also for the thousandth time. His defeated tone made it sound like it would finally be his last. “You aren’t even into angel blood all that much. Is it really worth denouncing your knighthood and leaving Hell for?”

“This isn’t about angel blood, and you know it—but know that I’ll be drinking as many arile cocktails as I want topside.

You're really okay with Zagan bending to the will of angels?"

"He's just trying to protect Coryn, Lam. He loves her."

"Exactly. He loves her over his realm, and I can't stand for that."

"We can make this work, all of us. Let's all sit down and tell Zagan how we feel."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who feels strongly enough to stand up to him. As soon as we all sit, the rest of you will roll right over. Not interested."

Oriax sighed. "We wouldn't."

"You would."

He looked away with a wince. "Where will you go?"

"Somewhere none of you will find me."

"So the Sanlow Desert, then."

Lamia tried not to act surprised. She looked down, saw her outfit, and shrugged.

Oriax smiled. "You know how much Jinn likes fashion. He knew where you'd been as soon as he saw you. But why the desert?"

Lamia turned away from him to begin gathering a few things to take with her. "Why not?"

"Becaaaause there's no water in the desert, and you're a water demon?"

"There's some." Rile was a tall drink of water, for starters. She smiled to herself. If she didn't have him to turn to, leaving

Hell would have been a lot scarier. “Just let me be, okay? You’re only here to make sure I leave Hell, and I’m going to make your job very easy.”

She continued to keep her face turned away, afraid to see the pain she knew was on Oriax’s own. For every one thing she took, she mentally said goodbye to fifty others. Her beautiful furniture, her art and diagrams on the walls, most of her books—she was leaving it all behind for good. She was proud of the home she’d curated, but now, it was time to make another.

When she opened her desk drawer, a leather pouch shoved in the back caught her eye. She’d been saving its contents for so long, she’d forgotten she’d had it. Inside was a rare jerky that might help—

“Wait a second,” Oriax said. He stopped pacing and turned with his mouth agape. “You saw Alex in the desert. Do you have the hots for *Alex*?!”

“What? Fuck no, Oriax. Seven Hells.” She shoved the jerky into her pack and continued assessing the rest of the room. “He’s an angel, too, you dimwit.”

Oriax shrugged. “He wasn’t always.” He ran his fingers over some of the books she was leaving behind, picking at the peeling spine of one.

She opened her mouth to demand he leave her books alone, but stopped herself. Those weren’t going to be hers for much longer. “I will be joining a manifestation, but one that’s a mannie *now*, not one that was reborn as some Heavensly nightmare.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t tell Zagan. Please don’t tell any of them.”

“What? Why not? Was your plan all along to get kicked out of the knighthood so you could go be with some manifestation?”

Lamia rolled her eyes. “Always the hopeless romantic. If that was the case, he could have just lived with me here.” She moved to one of her other bookshelves and selected two tomes. “I’m not leaving to be with Rile. He’s just making it easier to go.”

She focused on placing the books in her bag instead of looking at Oriax again.

“He’s why you’re going to the desert,” he said slowly. “He’s your desert oasis.”

Lamia couldn’t help but snort. “That’s the corniest thing you’ve ever said, and you say some corny shit, O. Yes, he lives in the desert. Yes, I will be joining him there.”

“But is that really wise? You’ll shrivel up like a raisin. Will he move with you elsewhere?”

“How about I just get to the desert and he and I will figure it out from there?”

Lamia didn’t realize how close Oriax was to her until she turned around to grab her small pile of possessions. She stopped short, just inches from him, and he placed his hands on her shoulders. “You deserve a male that will honor you,” he said, shaking her as if that would make his words settle into her mind. “You deserve more than this shitty situation Zagan

placed us all in. Make sure this guy treats you right, Lam.”

Oriax’s words warmed her. “You don’t have to worry about that with me. You know that if Zagan wasn’t our brother and king, I would have run him through for what he said to me. I’ll be just fine. And if you hate what Zagan’s doing, you can get out, too.”

Oriax shook his head. “Someone’s gotta keep tabs on the lovesick dog. I think you’ll understand him when Rile bites ya the same way.”

She laughed and shoved him away. “You’re so stupid. Now let me get a couple of things from my room.”

She excused herself from the living area and made her way to her bedroom, where she was greeted by the reef beyond the windows. She was grateful it was bright out, giving her a breathtaking final view of the plants, fish, and coral that surrounded and protected her home and eased her mind on so many days. She placed her hand on the glass and sighed. “One more time, tell me it’s all going to be okay.”

She stared out into the depths of the sea before her, inhaled deeply, and closed her eyes, focusing on the vibrations through the glass. No matter if she was in Hell or on Manusya, she would always have the sea—even if it was a desert away.

“I will continue my duties on Manusya,” she vowed. “Even though I am no longer a demon knight, I will make sure the manifestations and demons there are protected and thriving.” She opened her eyes to the sea before her again. “Thank you,” she said, then turned to the rest of her room to decide what else she needed to take.

Lamia emerged from her bedroom to the downtrodden face of her brother in arms. “I’ll be okay,” she said.

“I know.”

“Tell Putha all of this is hers, okay?”

Oriax placed a hand over his heart and stumbled backwards. “You mean I can’t have all your boring books?”

Lamia laughed. “Just open the dumb portal,” she said and shoved a sofa aside to make room on the living room floor.

Oriax sighed at the empty space on the ground. “You’re sure about this now?” Oriax asked one final time.

“I’m sure. Tell Zagan he’s an asshole for me.”

“No other gorgon can control water like you—no other demon can.”

Translation: Hell was losing a powerful weapon against the Heavens by losing her as a knight. She shrugged. “Zagan should have thought about that sooner, yeah?”

Oriax nodded at the ground. “I’m going to get you as close to Leaside as I can,” he said. “I’ve never been there before, so I can’t just pop you up in the center. But I think there’s a permanent portal just on the outskirts of town.”

Lamia nodded. “There is.”

He drew a pentagram and tossed a portal bead into it. They both watched its red glow for a while until Lamia cleared her throat.

“I can’t leave here without apologizing for being an asshole to you earlier.”

Oriax laughed. “You? An asshole? Never!” He turned to face her with a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, too—all the changes around here, I don’t think any of us are acting quite like ourselves.”

“Just make sure it doesn’t get worse, okay? I’ll do what I can against the angels on Manusya.”

He nodded, then extended his arms out for a hug. “We’re there whenever you need us. Love you, sis.”

She gladly accepted the embrace. “Love you, O.”

Oriax held onto her for a few heartbeats before finally letting up. She faced the portal, took one final breath of Hell’s air, and stepped through the illuminated red ring.

Onto her new life, to be the warrior Hell needed and Zagan denied her to be ... with Rile by her side.

She hoped he’d still be there to welcome her.

Chapter 12

If Oriax thought he'd portaled her "to the outskirts of town," she was eager to know what his definition of "outskirts" was. If he meant "surrounded by mountains of sand as far as the eye could see in all directions while the sun beat down on your head," he was right.

"Why does this portal even exist here?" she asked herself, turning to look at the circle of hardened sand on the side of yet another mountain-like dune. It was by far the least helpful portal location she'd ever seen.

She pulled the hood up on the red top Rile had given her, which offered some necessary shade. As her eyes adjusted to the bright light of the beaming sun, she slowly turned and took in what she could among the hills. Southwest, in the far, far distance, she could barely make out the small shacks that made up Leaside. It gave her hope to see them, but they were a painfully far distance away.

"H'okay," she breathed, bracing herself for the long journey ahead. It would do her no good to wait until nightfall; it may take longer than those few precious hours of darkness for her to reach town. She slithered forward, already uncomfortably hot, but tried to focus on how the sand massaged her tail as she moved. "Feels good," she tried to tell herself. "Just remember: at the end of this road is Rile." She imagined him with his arms open and netsilana in hand. She smiled and pushed on.

Time crawled as Lamia inched her way through the desert. Was time even moving at all? Was she? She looked back at the

trail her tail made in the sand. She'd dragged herself for miles already! But the sun had gotten no lower in the sky, and the town looked no closer than when she'd started.

Thirsty. She was so thirsty. Gorgons sweat on their skin but not on their scales, so they were left dry and peeling. There were few plants this far out in the dunes, but only a few slithers away, Lamia spotted a small netsi cactus. Rile had said something about the core absorbing the water from the leaves ... Did they have any to offer her?

In a burst of speed, Lamia propelled herself slightly off her trajectory and over to the spiky plant. A greedy reach toward the cactus punished her with a sharp slice along her skin. She gasped. "You stupid thing," she said, bringing her palm up to her mouth. The wound ran perpendicular to the scar Rile gave her. Her tongue had no saliva to help ease the burn, and using her power to heal the wound would take too much of her energy.

Lamia growled and looked up at the sky. Her situation could turn dire soon. The sun wasn't setting as quickly as she'd predicted, and without water or shade to cool off, she would begin to shut down. With her hand still pressed against her mouth, she extended the fingers on her other hand into claws, then, more carefully, reached into the plant. Using the sharp edges of her nails, she pinched off a spike and yanked, nearly falling on her ass as it pulled free. She steadied herself and anxiously inspected the purple spike. The inside looked fleshy and smelled sweet.

"This is either totally fine or deadly poisonous." Her head

was already screaming in pain, so what was the difference? Rile never mentioned to exercise caution around the plant when they talked about it, so she hoped the former was true. She looked toward Rile's town in the distance, brought the spike to her lips, and tilted her head back.

One drop—one small, wet, delicious drop—slid from the meat of the spike, onto her tongue, and down her throat. It was surprisingly cold and would have been delightfully refreshing, if only she had more. She shot her tongue into the spike, eagerly probing for more moisture. She was granted two more drops, each one better than the last, and found herself whimpering when it offered no more.

Lamia threw the spike to the ground and went in for another. She pinched the spine off and brought it to her mouth in one fell swoop, but was met with the same minimal amount of water as the first spike. She tried a third. A fourth. The fifth was more difficult to get off the plant, as was the sixth and seventh.

Despite her need for water, she realized she was expelling more energy trying to get the stuff than she was gaining by drinking it.

“Shit.” This desert was about to bring a former demon knight to tears. *Don't waste them.* One good cry's worth of tears was equal to five whole plants' worth of liquid. *Stupid netsi cacti.*

Lamia hunched over, breathing quickly, staring in disbelief at the scraps of netsi leaves before her. “I can't believe I'm going to die out here.” Focusing on any one piece of the spikes

made her vision blur, so she turned her attention to the town in the distance instead.

“RILE!” Lamia called out. She wondered how loudly—or not—she was shouting. Her brain jostled painfully inside her head with every movement. “RILE!” White-hot pain split her skull, and her eyes snapped shut. She suddenly found her ear burning against the hot sand. *Did I just fall over? That’s okay ... Maybe I should rest.*

The town was sideways now and still an impossible distance away. She watched it from her bed in the sand, spotting a white bird sailing over the dunes close to Rile’s home, before she closed her eyes.

“Lady Knight? Lady? Lamia!”

Lamia’s eyes flew open when she heard her name.

She tried to shake her head, but it would not move. Instead, her eyes caught a glimpse of a large white wing stretching outward for balance as its owner groaned. She was being lifted, up, higher still ...

I’m in the air? The small breeze felt so good against her skin.

“Gods, what happened to you?” the male voice said. It sounded so familiar.

The breeze was now blowing hard enough to move her hair. She sighed in blissful relief.

“Water ... we need to get you some water,” her savior

mumbled.

Her whole body melted at the thought. *Yes, water.* It had never beckoned to her more strongly. Her throat reverberated with a longing groan.

“Just hold on, Lamia. We’ll get you better in no time.”

There was a blackness inside that called to her mind. Like the refreshing coolness of water, the blackness offered relief from the heat trapped inside of her. When she reached for it, it drew closer. Her hands disappeared into it first, then her arms, then her shoulders.

“Stay with me,” pleaded that familiar male voice from outside her mind. But outside of the blackness was so far away. Outside of the blackness was so hot ...

When she could no longer see anything around her, she felt nothing. Heard nothing. She closed her eyes and surrendered fully to the dark.

Lamia gasped as she was dropped into water that chilled her to the bone. Her eyes and gills shot open, and her hands flew up to grip the sides of the container she was in.

“Gods, I thought you were gone for good,” Alex breathed. He stood outside the tub, leaning over her with his white wings spread wide. “What were you doing out in the middle of the desert, anyway?”

“Trying to get back here,” Lamia replied. Her throat was sandpaper. She drank some of the water from the tub to ease it.

Alex crossed the room to get a glass off the kitchen counter. “Here. This is cleaner.”

Like she cared about how clean the water was. As long as it quenched her, she was fine. “Thanks,” she said, taking and downing the contents nonetheless. “How did you find me out there?”

“I was looking for Rile, honestly,” he said, peeking into his roommate’s empty room and sighing. “If you weren’t dressed in bright red, I never would have found you.”

She looked down at herself. Alex had dropped her into the tub with all of her clothes on. “Where’s Rile, then?”

“Good question. I saw him this morning, and it’s not unusual that he’s gone during the day, but I got a terrible feeling before. It went away pretty quickly, but I still wanted to check and make sure he wasn’t in danger.”

“And he’s still missing now? You’re his guardian angel. Isn’t finding him more important than dumping me into a tub?”

Alex rolled his eyes. “I don’t think they’re mutually exclusive, actually. If you died out there—and you were close to it, trust me—he would have been destroyed.”

She smiled at that. “You always feel what he’s feeling?”

“When his emotions are extreme enough, yes. I’m sure he’s fine; it was more of a wellness check than me thinking I needed to come to his rescue.” He closed up his wings, and they disappeared against his back.

“No offense, but since I was the one who rescued him from

a ship while he was in your charge, I'm not sure how much I trust your protective instincts." She stood up in the tub and swung her tail over the side, but he caught her by where her knees would be.

"Are you crazy? You almost died of heat stroke out there! Sit down. You need to regulate your body temperature."

Lamia glared at him. "It's regulated." She pushed his hand away and heaved her tail out of the tub. She slithered into Rile's room and shut the door, leaving pools of water in her wake.

Alex sighed. "What a mess!" he said, then grumbled to himself from the floor behind the door. She watched the shadow of a towel scrubbing furiously back and forth. "Why did you come back?"

It was Lamia's turn to sigh as she took the liberty of changing into some of the clothes Rile had left on his desk. *What to tell him ...* "I've been tasked with finding the Soul Chalice as well. I'm not to return to Hell until I have it. I needed a home base here."

"And you chose the middle of the desert? Why didn't you portal closer to the house, then?"

Insufferable angel. She split her tail into legs. As her scales retreated, they exposed her dry pants and shoes beneath. "I thought the portal I took dropped me in town. Obviously, that was wrong."

"So why didn't you portal back to Hell and then use one of the beads to get closer?"

“Because I just didn’t, okay?” Realizing that wouldn’t cover her forever, she added, “Once I got here, I realized I didn’t have any, and the trip didn’t look that far.”

“Well, I’m glad I found you. An hour later and I would have been presenting your dead ass to Rile or Zagan, and you know how upset either of them would have been.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Rile’s shirt was big on her, but lightweight and comfortable. She chose a white cotton top that smelled just like him: sunny and breezy. She replaced her pants with his baggy black ones. Even though her own pants were dry, she felt closer to Rile with his clothing on. She held her boots between her fingers and padded back out into the living room to find Alex still cleaning up her mess. She smiled, settling comfortably onto their small sofa, and waved her hand. He watched in awe as the rest of the water lifted cleanly off the concrete floor and collected back into the metal tub.

“You couldn’t have done that before, huh?”

“So where should we go to look for Rile first?”

“He’s fine,” Alex said, pushing off the ground to his feet. “What else have you found out about the Soul Chalice?”

“What else have *you* found out about the Soul Chalice?” Lamia tossed her boots to the ground and slid her feet inside them. “Anything that might help us find where Rile is now?”

“Take your damn shoes off and *rest*. I promise you, he’s fine!” He settled onto the sofa beside her, their hips touching before he resettled a few inches away. “I know nothing else I

didn't already tell you, so it's your turn."

Lamia shrugged. She was going to be protecting demons and manifestations on Manusya, and that meant keeping the chalice from Alex's kind. But that didn't mean she couldn't play ball. If he did end up finding out more information, she wanted it. "There's talk that the chalice may not just cleanse souls—that it may be able to make a soul light *or* dark."

Alex nodded. "I knew that already. What else you got?"

Lamia quirked an eyebrow. "But you said it cleanses souls?"

"I didn't say anything about the other way, though. I didn't think to mention it, honestly. That's not what the Heavens plans on using it for."

She supposed that made sense. "They also suspect it may be at the bottom of that trench. Zagan was upset that I couldn't manipulate enough water to get down there safely."

Alex shook his head, staring at the tub of water before them. "It's an ingenious hiding place—too far down for the gods, not far down enough for the demons."

So the creatures of the Heavens were no closer to getting to the bottom of the trench than she was. Good. "Yeah, the pressure is just too great. I wonder how it got down there in the first place? I asked Coryn this, but she wasn't sure ... Do you know what kind of demon your supreme god fell in love with?"

"Unfortunately, no. I was hoping gorgon, and that you would have the same capability of reaching the chalice as she must have had to place it there."

“I can’t think of any demon species that could reach down there, and to not have a record of her in our own lore is strange.” Lamia looked around and grabbed her bag off the floor at the base of the sofa. She pulled it up and rummaged through, extracting a book and showing him the cover. “These are demon folktales,” she said, fanning through the worn pages of circles and harsh lines. She paused on a page with an illustration of gorgons, water dragons, sirens, and nymphs worshipping an immense bony creature with a serpent tail and bat-like wings. “This is Agalia, an ancient demon from which all of us were created”—she hovered her finger over the different types of water demons—“but she was beheaded. There is no story of her ever leaving the depths of Hell, let alone traveling to the Heavens as the lover of a god.”

Alex leaned closer, studying the illustration. “No offense, but she’s pretty ugly. I don’t see the supreme god falling in love with her anyway.” He pointed to the nymph. “One of these? Sure, but not that thing.”

“Hey now,” Lamia said, laughing. “That thing is basically *my* supreme god, so lay off.”

They both jumped as the front doorknob turned. Alex sprang away from Lamia and rose to his feet.

The door opened, flooding the living room with sunlight that silhouetted Rile. Every hair on Lamia’s head stood at the sight of him as Rile’s beaming blue eyes locked on her. She wished she could say her reaction was because of his powers trying to attack her again, but he was at a safe distance. It was his parted lips and the concerned way his eyebrows fell that sent

goosebumps rippling across her skin.

Chapter 13

Lamia ... in his home again so soon?

“Is everything okay?” Rile asked.

Lamia tilted her head to the side and gave a small shrug of one shoulder. “As okay as they can be, I guess. I’m fine.”

He nodded and let out a big sigh of relief. The tub had a few streaks of water running down it, Lamia’s hair was wet, and ... was she dressed in *his* clothes? He smiled. “Those look good on you.”

Lamia bit her lip. “Thanks. I hope you don’t mind I borrowed them.”

“Not at all. You’re welcome to anything of mine, always.”

They locked eyes again, and Alex shifted uncomfortably in his periphery.

The staring was likely awkward for Lamia, too. Rile shook his head, forcing himself to look away from her. Netsi spikes rattled inside his bag as he set it down on the kitchen counter. “I collected more horn,” he told Alex. “Ready to be sold when you’re ready to sell.”

“Thanks,” Alex said as his shoulders relaxed. He slapped his thighs and stood. “Maybe I’ll do that now and let you two chat.” He picked the bag up, slipped his shoes on, and shouldered the door open, escaping out into the sunset.

Rile watched the door click shut, then caught the sight of Lamia over his shoulder again. She looked down at the open book in her lap and chewed on her lip while picking at the

corner of the pages. The silence perpetuated the awkwardness in the air, but he wasn't sure what to say.

She closed her book and slipped it back into the bag beside her. "Can I still stay here for a while?"

How was that even a question? He was thrilled. "Of course you can." He grabbed a glass and poured water into it, taking long, deep swallows as he sorted through his thoughts. "I'll be honest, I never thought I would see you again after what happened ... especially not this quickly. This is a pleasant surprise."

He lifted his eyes to regard her from the kitchenette. As it was, the electricity inside of him was behaving itself—but he was too afraid to cross the room and get closer to Lamia at the risk of it lashing out at her again.

Lamia nodded. "I'm sorry about how I left things before."

"Don't be. Please don't be. I think we both needed a little space to figure out what the hell was happening. I admit, I still haven't figured it out, but I'm glad you're here so we can figure it out together instead." He was rewarded with a smile that made his heart warm and gave him the confidence to ask, "What brought you back?"

Lamia's lip fell, and his stomach tightened. He braced himself for terrible news as her gaze grew distant. "I'll be honest, too ... I'm no longer a demon knight. I'm on Manusya for good now."

He braced himself on the counter as his legs nearly gave out. "What?"

“But it’s okay!” Lamia continued. “I’m going to protect my kind, your kind, all the demons and half-breeds here in the human realm. This is where I belong, in a realm I can protect. I can do what’s right here.”

She’d concealed the pain in her voice, but not in her eyes. Steadying himself, he crossed the room, saying, “I’m so sorry—” before the electricity inside of him lurched toward her. His voice caught in his throat, and he stopped dead.

Lamia dropped her head in her hands. “Still?”

He backed up a few steps, and the electric pull subsided with the growing distance. “I told you I’m still not sure what’s going on.” Oh, how he longed to touch her. She sat there, head in her hands, having just lost her home, her realm—and he couldn’t go near her. He growled in frustration. “You’ve awakened something inside of me that I can’t control. My powers have become their own being within me ever since I tried to kiss you. Are mephis demons and gorgons mortal enemies or something? Maybe it’s some kind of natural defense?”

“There’s no such thing,” she said. “Demons attack and kill each other all the time, but there are no factions. No specific species target others. It’s just whoever pisses them off that day, no matter the type. And on the same token, demons are allowed to have relations with whatever other kind of demon they choose. And with humans, even.” He was both human and demon, so the problem was his alone. Great.

She added, “And, I guess, demons are free to love angels, if you’re stupid enough to fall for one.”

One painful subject after another. “What exactly happened with Zagan?”

“A little he kicked me out, a little I couldn’t leave fast enough.”

“He kicked you out?” Who would want to rid their realm of such a perfect creature? The storm he was trying to suppress within himself kicked up, flying around him like a tornado inside. A bolt of lightning licked out from his shoulder, whipping at the air beside his head. “I’ll storm that castle right now and make Zagan pay for what he’s done.”

“Easy, tiger. I’m fine, and even if I wasn’t, *I* would be the one storming that castle.”

Okay, fine. She was a lot stronger than he was, but he could help. “*We* would storm the castle. Literally. Rain and lightning, razing Hell.” His skin prickled as he imagined them as one, a true force to be reckoned with, blowing away anyone—angel, human, or demon—that got in their way. He imagined Zagan to be a hulking shadow, larger than life, with bright red eyes and rows of spiky horns. They would blow into his throne room together, and the demon king would be no match for their combined power.

“Yeah, sure, except you and I can’t get anywhere near one another.”

Images of them fighting Zagan together changed to Lamia’s version, the more realistic one: They would be fighting on opposite sides of the space, the enormous king between them, and as they avoided his attacks and rotated around him, Rile and Lamia would unknowingly pass too close to one another.

FLASH! His powers would change target, descending upon her instead. Tendrils of electricity would lash at her, suctioning to her like an octopus's tentacles. She would shake with the power of his electricity as it fried her from the inside out until her corpse fell to the ground with Rile screaming above her.

Rile let out a slow exhale before he imagined Zagan descending on him while he agonized over Lamia's body. He brought his hands up to his heart. "I never want to hurt you like that," he said, realizing he spoke as if she saw the same scene that played out in his mind.

But she had her own visions and dreams, and he was sure none of them involved him holding her like he wanted to. She was a fearsome warrior who believed so strongly in protecting others that she'd sacrificed her knighthood to do it. And her number one issue with Zagan? He was loving and protecting his lover over all else. No way was Lamia entertaining the thought of being in a relationship or snuggling up against anyone, let alone a lost half-breed like him. He was stupid to be hopeful about why she'd returned to him.

But even if she wasn't interested in him that way, he still wanted to comfort her. He balled his hands into fists and pressed them tightly to his sides to keep from reaching out to her. Before he'd lost control, he'd brushed his fingers over her soft patches of scales a few times, and he rubbed his fingertips together at the memory.

He groaned, punching himself in the side of the leg. "I hate this, Lamia. I would do anything to stop whatever the fuck is happening with me so I wouldn't be a danger to you again.

Are you sure you want to stay here?"

"Are your powers really still that amped?" She rose from the couch.

He backed up a few steps. "Yes."

"Well, I want to test them. Figure out what's happening. What does it feel like when I come closer?"

He took a deep breath. "The electricity is starting to react."

She took another step toward him.

"It's like there are a bunch of arrows inside of me, spinning in all directions, and as you get closer, they all start to point in your direction."

Five arms' lengths now separated them, and the arrows pushed at the front of his sternum. He twisted at the waist, now pointing his shoulder at her. The electricity followed suit, traveling from his ribs into his bicep. "They're pointing at you no matter which way I turn."

Her next step made him move one step back.

"Stop," she commanded. "Don't budge. I want to see what happens."

"It's not arrows anymore," he said. He wiped sweat from his forehead. "It's more like a beast now, and it's growling." He hoped the description didn't make him sound crazy.

"Breathe," she whispered, and she brought one foot in front of the other again.

"I am," he said, exhaling the slow intake of air he'd just taken in. It helped calm him somewhat, but not enough.

“Wait,” he urged, stopping her as she was about to lift her foot once more. “It’s pressed back up against my chest, tingling.” They were about four arms’ lengths apart. “I think the lightning will hit you in two more steps or so.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said, then finished taking the step she’d started.

“I don’t like this, Lamia.” *Don’t hurt her*, he urged the storm inside. Another deep breath in, out. His legs were shaking from the myriad of intense sensations flowing through him. *Do not lash out at her.*

She took another step.

“Lamia ...” he pleaded, trembling. If they each extended an arm, their fingers would brush. “I think that’s eno—”

SNAP!

Lamia spun through the air before she heard the cracking sound of the lightning that hit her.

It slapped her across the face like an angry lover, whipping her neck around and pulling the rest of her body with it. She was suddenly facedown on the concrete floor, staring in shock at the individual pebbles embedded within it.

Rile’s heels skidded against the ground as he backed away. “Fuck!” he shouted. “Lamia, are you okay? Lamia!”

“I’m okay,” she said. A river of thick black blood inched its way toward a larger pebble pressed against the bottom of her nose.

“You’re bleeding. Fuck, I’m so sorry ...” He stood on his tiptoes and leaned over to study her face.

She tentatively brought her hand to her throbbing cheek. Blood coated her fingers before she could pull them away. The injury wasn’t deep, but ran from the corner of her eye, down her cheek, to the side of her chin.

Chaotic sounds of drawers opening and furniture sliding across the floor came from Rile’s bedroom, where he was mumbling angrily to himself, though Lamia couldn’t make out what he was saying. He emerged moments later with a small white box in hand.

“Bandages,” he offered, “and first aid supplies.”

She was going to tell him they were unnecessary, until she remembered she couldn’t heal the wounds he gave her. “Thanks,” she murmured, pushing to her knees while holding her hand against the length of the injury. She watched him as he paced along the invisible line that separated them, box in hand.

“Just throw it,” she snapped.

The box skidded to a halt in front of her, the corner nudging into the pool of blood before her knees. She opened it and began to rummage through. “I don’t know what the hell to do with any of this,” she said, exasperated, as she studied the glass bottles and wraps inside.

“The green bottle is rubbing alcohol. Take some water from the tub, rinse off as much blood as you can, then wipe it off with some alcohol poured onto one of the pads there.”

She did as instructed, leaning over the metal tub to wash away the blood, tainting the clear water with streams of black.

“I’ve never seen demon blood before,” Rile said. “I expected it to be more like mine.”

It was a strange subject to be discussing while she was tending to her wounds, but she found it to be a welcome distraction from the throbbing at her temple. “I noticed yours was thin like a human’s when you took that arrow to the arm,” she said as she caught the towel he tossed to her.

He nodded. “Mine looks like a shiny gray mixed into the red blood humans usually have. I guess I didn’t expect yours to be so dark.”

She shrugged, pulling the cork off of the rubbing alcohol bottle with her teeth. “I didn’t expect yours to be so light.” She pressed an alcohol-soaked pad to her cheek, hissing in a breath as its sting surprised her.

“I’m so sorry, Lamia. I shouldn’t have let you get that close. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to control my power, but I wanted to fight through it so badly that I took that chance. I broke my promise to you.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It’s fine,” she lied. It hurt to have been rejected for the second time in so many days—first exiled from her realm, and now barred from getting closer to the only support she had on Manusya.

Getting closer? She shook her head. She needed to get her feelings under control.

“It’s not fine,” he insisted. “My whole life I’ve been

shunned by humans, and now I'm pushing away the one person—sorry, demon—I want to get close to.”

Her head spun, and it wasn't from the blood loss. She couldn't entertain Rile's attraction any longer, because she found herself wanting to get closer, too.

A relationship will make you weak.

She had to push him away, while still staying by his side, to protect him and find the Soul Chalice. She had to deflect.

“I'm not the only otherrealmer you're close to, you know.”

Rile hesitated. “What do you mean?”

Part of her regretted letting that statement fall from her lips. She was letting her emotions get the better of her; she knew she shouldn't be taking her circumstances out on Rile, but she couldn't stop herself. She needed what she came here for and then had to leave.

Blood trickled from her cheek into her mouth, and she spat it into the water. “Alex isn't what you think he is.”

Rile's eyebrows knit together.

“He's a gods-damned guardian angel, Rai. He was sent from the Heavens to keep watch over you until it's time for them to use you to get to this thing called the Soul Chalice.”

Her words were met with more confusion and hurt in his eyes. It wasn't just her face that stung now. Her chest was awfully tight.

“He used to be a mannie, too, close with Zagan. And now he's been put in charge of protecting you by his new god.”

Rile blinked, his gaze no longer focusing on anything as he brought his hand to his chest. “He used to be close to Zagan?” he asked. “Then it’s a good thing you’re still packed. We need to leave.”

She’d just told him he was being watched by the Heavens, and he was concerned about her and Zagan? “Huh?”

“I don’t want anyone with a connection to Zagan anywhere near you. If we leave, can Alex track me?”

Well, aren’t you an asshole, she thought to herself. His deep frown told her he was hurt by the truth about Alex, yet he still sought to make sure she was protected first. She, who’d just sought to intentionally upset him so she could protect her own feelings.

“Can he track you?” she repeated, giving her mind a chance to catch up to what he’d asked. “I’m not sure ... It sounds like he can, but only if you’re showing strong emotions.”

“I can control them. Can you open a portal and take us somewhere far away?”

“If it’s Zagan you’re worried about, don’t be. He and Alex definitely aren’t working together.”

Rile began pacing along that invisible line between them again. “It doesn’t matter. If there’s even a sliver of a chance they’ll talk, Zagan shouldn’t know where you are or what you’re doing. He doesn’t deserve to know.”

She was touched. “Rile, that’s not why I told you about Alex.”

He stopped pacing and looked at her. Were his eyes dimmer

since she'd blurted out his roommate's secret, or was her guilt making everything appear darker?

"If you think I know something about the Soul Chalice, I don't. I've never even heard of it before."

"I know." Deep down, she'd always known. "But the angels must know something we don't about how you can get it."

"All the more reason for us to leave, then." He started walking around again, grabbing a few random items from different areas around the common room. "Can you portal us somewhere far away?"

Lamia frowned. "Unfortunately, no. Leaving Hell meant leaving portals behind, too. But it's almost nighttime; the desert is a lot cooler. If we leave now, do you think we could get to Westport before sunrise?"

Rile shook his head. "Probably halfway. But we could pitch a tent—er, two tents—then camp out until nightfall again. Sound good?"

"If Alex doesn't find you here, isn't the path to the next town the first place he would look?"

"I can leave a note saying I went to Briarbeck for a few days. I used to live there; it's not out of the ordinary for me to go back. As far as I know, he's never followed me there." Rile frowned. "Man, now I feel like I've been stalked for the past few months ..."

He looked just as sad as Alex predicted he'd be. "I'm sorry, Rile. I broke that news to you in the worst way."

"No matter how you told me, I'm glad you did."

Lamia hadn't had proper rest in over a day, but if they were going to leave, now was the time to do it. She wasn't keen on staying in the dry desert forever, anyway, and Alex losing his charge would be one more blow to the Heavens. Stealing away the half-demon the Heavens needed made sense, and their inability to touch would make sure she kept her feelings in check.

"What are you doing?" she asked as Rile packed hulking glass bottles of water in his bag. "You should pack lighter than that."

He shook his head. "I don't have anything else to put water in, but you need as much of it as possible. I want you to be safe."

"Leave some of those on the counter. I'll put them in my pack, too."

"Nonsense. You are the knight—don't give me that look, you're still a knight to me—and I am your squire." He picked up his bag and tilted as it strained under the weight of the bottles.

She chuckled. "It's a good thing this isn't a stealth mission. Listen to those things rattle. Please put some down and let me carry them."

They argued until Rile finally realized she would fight with him until Alex came back or the sun rose, whichever came first. He set some of the glass bottles down on the counter as instructed, then moved into his room to collect a few more things. Once he was a safe distance away, she made her way to the kitchen, picked up the two bottles he'd left, and put them

into her bag.

He emerged from his room with his bag of clinking glass, a rolled-up tent on his shoulders, and a note in his hand.

“Sorry to get you right back out there,” he said, placing the note on the kitchen counter.

She shrugged. “It’s okay. Ready?”

He nodded and motioned toward the door.

Chapter 14

Every muscle in Rile's back burned from the weight of his pack by the time they got to the outskirts of town. The sound of glass clinking against glass was going to be a fun thing to listen to while they journeyed to Westport. Not at all an annoying noise. Really.

But Lamia was by his side—as close to his side as she could be, anyway—and that was all that mattered.

She laughed under her breath, and for a moment, he thought he may have spoken his thoughts out loud.

“What's up?” he asked.

“There's a road here.” The moonlight lit the wide trail of hard sand leading all the way to the horizon.

“Yeah ... ?”

“There was no trail anywhere near the portal I came out of. That would have been helpful.”

“This is the only road in and out of Leaside. I don't know if you noticed, but there's not much going for that town aside from its trippy cactus plants.”

He could tell by her laugh that she agreed. “How did you even find that place to settle into?”

“I used to live in Briarbeck, like I mentioned. The people there were decent enough to me until this kid came up to me one time, curious about why my eyes were so bright and asking a ton of questions ... He was genuinely interested in learning about someone different than him. Before I knew it,

all the kids were talking to me, but that freaked out all of their parents. The adults hurled threats and yanked their kids away from me, which made them afraid of me, too. I was preparing to leave when I met Alex, who was in town selling Demon's Horn to a contact. Or so he said, anyway ... If he really was sent to watch me, I guess it could have been a ruse to get me to leave with him. He promised a cheap place to live and good money in a small town full of people who didn't care what I was. All of that was true, but thinking about it now, luring me to a town in the middle of nowhere ... it was the perfect spot to hold me where I was none the wiser."

Lamia dropped her head to her chest.

He'd thought Alex was one of the good ones, a human willing to overlook his blinding eyes and strange powers and give him a chance. Those humans were far and few between. Seven Hells, even his mother acted strangely around him. She'd kept him around and provided for him, but he would never forget that look he caught in her eyes sometimes that told him, "Why did you have to happen?"

"So how long have you known?" he asked. "About Alex being my guardian angel, I mean."

"Since I first saw him. I recognized him immediately."

A buzzing sound accompanied the electric bolt that snapped off his shoulder. "And is my involvement with the Soul Chalice the reason you're walking with me now?"

Rile quickly jumped off the side of the road to increase the distance between them as Lamia took a few more steps before realizing he'd halted in front of her. Having to keep away from

her was exhausting. He set his pack down, studying her face in the moonlight.

She sighed, and her own bag clinked as it settled onto the road as well. "I'm going to be honest with you," she said. "The gods don't assign guardian angels to just anyone ... so yes, I'm *partially* here because they know something about you and the chalice that we don't. But I'm here for so many other reasons, too. I've decided that even though I'm no longer a knight, I can still protect demons up here. Demons like you."

Rile looked down at his bag and gave it a small kick. "I didn't want a protector ... I wanted a friend." He looked up at her. "And if we're being honest ... maybe I was hoping for more than that, down the line." Heat rushed to his cheeks as soon as the words left his mouth, and they grew hotter when she didn't respond. "That was before I knew we couldn't touch, of course. So, protector it is, then, I guess. Maybe we can protect each other ... I mean, I know you're capable of protecting yourself ... but I'd like to help, even if I can't protect you from me."

Smooth.

He stared at the long bandage stuck to the right side of her face as she reached up to touch it.

"It doesn't hurt, you know," she said.

He was disappointed that her wound was the only part of his monologue she decided to address. "Well, it hurts me, knowing I hurt you. So we're even." Would it form another raised, angry scar like the ones he'd left on her palms?

“If we hadn’t tried to get close again, we would never have known if it was possible. I wanted to know why your powers reacted that way, and where the boundaries were.”

“I guess.” Knowing they still couldn’t touch left him feeling hopeless. It was time to move on, both from this conversation and where they stood in the desert.

I shouldn’t have put the pack down, he thought, staring at it and trying to hype himself into picking the heavy load up again. The clinking sounds were still ringing in his ears, and he wasn’t looking forward to their continuous echoes. Grunting, he heaved the thing over his shoulder and resumed their walk.

Silence fell between them for a long while. He hoped Lamia was contemplating his words, but who was he kidding? She didn’t care about making a lasting friendship with him—let alone anything more. She was too beautiful. Too powerful.

He should have always known she needed him for something else.

“The sun’s rising. We should set up camp,” Lamia said, looking out at the horizon beyond Rile. The sun was beginning to peak out over the dunes, illuminating the skyline in bright pinks and oranges.

Rile’s silhouette looked otherworldly in the glow as he turned to look at her over his shoulder. He nodded, then grunted. The glasses clanked and rattled as he set his pack down. It settled in the sand as he rolled his shoulders and

massaged his neck. “Are you thirsty?”

“Not yet. Throw me one of the tents, I’ll set mine up over here.”

“I got it. You relax.”

“What? Why?” She was perfectly capable of setting up her own tent, thank you very much. As he leaned down and pulled his bag open, she wanted to shove him into the ground, pull hers out, and set to work. But as she began moving toward him, his shoulders rose, and he looked at her in alarm.

“Seven Hells, it’s like my powers are growing even more sensitive to you. I’d bet I could feel you heading in my direction from a mile away.”

She frowned, then backed up. “Sorry. Just toss me my tent. You worry about yours, I’ll worry about mine.”

He flashed her a sheepish grin as he fell to his knees before the bag. “What if there’s only one tent to worry about, anyway?”

“Rile!”

“I’m sorry! I was more concerned about bringing enough water and your own safety. Sun isn’t an issue for me.” He chuckled. “Also, why would I own two tents, anyway?”

“I don’t know, maybe one was Alex’s?”

He laughed again as he heaved a long roll of cloth out of this pack. “Yeah, he and I go on romantic camping trips all the time.”

She nodded. “Silly me. That definitely explains the one

tent.”

Rile snorted as he pulled the tent out and laid the pieces in the sand. By the time he finished building it, the sun was fully visible over the horizon, and the temperature was quickly rising. A tickle in the back of Lamia’s throat gave way to full-blown thirst, and as Rile stocked the tent with his bottles of water, she sipped at one of hers.

Rile pulled back one flap of the tent’s entrance and draped it over the side, then motioned toward the opening with a bow. “My lady,” he said, continuing to present the door with his arms as he backed away from it, giving her the distance she needed in order to approach.

Lamia hated to admit it, but Rile was right. She needed the shade much more than he did. She made her way inside with a thank you, then sighed at the immediate relief the tent offered her. The sand was cooler on the underside of her tail, and the heat of the sun was no longer cooking her scales.

Lamia peeked outside to find Rile sitting cross-legged a dozen feet away beside his bag and one bottle of water. He unfolded a linen blanket and swung it over his head.

“Are you sure you’re okay out there?” she called.

Rile smiled at her. “I’m absolutely fine. How about you?”

She nodded. “I’m great. Thank you, Rile.”

“Anything for you.”

Despite the heat, his words made chills run down her arms. Before she could think of anything else to say in response, she pulled the tent flap closed and hid behind the cloth. She bit her

lip, coiled herself up, and lay down.

It was difficult to sleep. Even after they'd trekked through the desert all night, and her body was screaming at her to shut down and conserve her energy, thoughts of Rile and all that he'd done for her made her chest constrict. After all she'd said with the intention to hurt him—just because his powers got out of control and he couldn't touch her!—he still followed her, sweating under the hot sun while lugging heavy bottles of water to make sure she was safe.

Water.

When it wasn't her thoughts keeping her awake, it was her thirst, and before she knew it, half of her water supply was gone.

Lamia gasped for air after a particularly large gulp, then drew back the fabric of the tent. The sun was directly above them, and Rile was still beneath his blanket, taking a small sip from his full bottle.

"How are you doing?" Lamia asked.

"Fine. Do you need anything?"

To not be in this oven anymore. How she missed portals.
"No, you?"

"No. But I can tell the tent isn't offering much comfort for you. You look run-down ... dried out, almost."

Lamia rolled her eyes. "Thanks," she said through a forced smile. She could handle this, damn it all. Hopefully.

He must have seen right through her attempt at reassurance,

because she'd never seen him study her like he did now.

He shook his head as he stared into his lap. "You know, if this is how the demon king treats his subjects ... especially one that was so close to him ... I'm not sure I care to learn any more about my mephis side. How could he leave you without portals? Without support?"

She was disappointed to hear that. She wanted him to love his demon side and embrace it. "I didn't want his support because I knew I would have yours. As soon as Zagan told me to leave, I wanted nothing to do with him. That doesn't mean I won't stop fighting for the demons who hail from his realm, and that includes you. Never be ashamed to be a demon. We're proud, we kick ass, and we steal souls from the light. It's how we survive."

"If you say so," he said with a shrug. "But I don't hail from your realm—I was born here, on Manusya, where humans rule and mannies are shunned ... until our powers are needed for something, apparently."

Lamia frowned. "You're more than your powers ... so much more."

He dropped one side of the blanket, concealing his face as he drew with one finger in the sand. "Sure," he said.

How she wished he knew how she saw him ... but she wasn't ready yet to admit just how much she was growing to care for this male she couldn't touch. "You're wonderful, Rile. There's no one I would rather be stuck out in the desert with than you."

They exchanged rueful smiles before she retreated back into the tent and dropped the flap, sighing as she stared up at the outline of the sun through the ceiling.

“Lamia.”

The male voice startled her. She jolted as her eyes shot open. How long had she been asleep for? Minutes? Hours? Maybe it was close to dark and she could cool off again.

She frowned when she spotted the outline of the sun still high in the sky, then noticed a red light glowing off the linen wall. She inhaled as she sat up and extended her claws.

A silver-haired, curly-horned head stuck out from an active portal before her, teal eyes glittering at her with bemusement.

“Jinn. Seven Hells, get out of there,” she scolded in a whisper so Rile wouldn’t hear. “You know it scares me when you do that. Something happens, and that portal closes, and your head no longer has a body.”

“I live life on the edge,” he said, but fully rose from the portal anyway. It closed behind him, and he sat cross-legged on the floor beside her. “I came to see how you were doing.”

“With shocking portal accuracy,” she said, bewildered. “You’ve been to this desert before?”

“Oh, many a time,” he said with a wink. “Imagine my surprise when you strolled into my club in garb from my favorite part of Manusya. We incubi thrive in hot, arid areas such as this—but gorgons do not.”

“How did you find me in this exact spot?” she asked.

“I didn’t. I originally portaled a few dunes away from here, but saw this tent and a blanket in the sand. I figured it had to be you.”

“We’re that noticeable, even that far away?”

Jinn shrugged. “It’s the desert. There’s not much else to see.”

She chugged more water as he spoke, and he shook his head and frowned.

“What are you doing here, Lam? Could that guy out there really mean this much to you? He’s your ‘arile’?”

“Rile,” she corrected, unable to stop the smile that played across her lips. “And he’s sweet. I guess Oriax told you?”

Jinn nodded. “Are you surprised? You know that demon can’t keep a secret.”

“It’s not really much of a secret, anyway.”

“You like him?”

Lamia bit her lip. “Ugh, I do. I really do, Jinn. He’s fiercely protective, cares about my decisions, and is incredibly sweet.”

“So why isn’t he in here with you now?”

She sighed. “He can’t control his mephis side. He claims it’s only around me, but I think that’s because he’s ... *excited* ... around me. He shocks me whenever we get too close.”

Jinn laughed. As an incubus demon, sex was his specialty. Control was his game. “So he takes one look at you and has to

nut? Damn, girl. Maybe *you* can teach *me* a thing or two.”

Lamia swatted him. “Shut up. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

She scooted forward on her tail to the tent’s entrance and threw back the fabric. Much to her confusion, Rile’s blanket was crumpled on the sand behind him, and he was looking up.

“Good, you’re awake,” he said, not taking his eyes off the sky. “I, uh, think we have company.”

“What?”

Rile pointed upward, and she followed his finger toward a dozen golden-winged angels falling their way.

“What the hell?” she mumbled, but excitement flooded her. Despite her overheating and fatigue, she looked forward to striking down a few angels.

“I think they’re heading right for us,” Rile said.

They were indeed. Lamia rose up on her tail and drew her knife from her belt.

“But we weren’t doing anything wrong?” Rile added, nervousness creeping into his tone.

“Sometimes being a demon is reason enough. I welcome it. And by the way, Rile? Meet Demon Knight Jinn. Jinn, meet Rile.”

“Pleasure,” Jinn said, emerging from the tent behind her. “Looks like I came at the perfect time for a drink.”

Oooh. Angel blood would be an excellent treat right about now. She pictured herself slurping it right out of an angel’s writhing body, letting the stuff run down her throat until she’d

had her fill. Then she would luxuriate in her high until nightfall.

“Ready to have your first taste of bliss, Rai?” she asked, unable to stop smiling.

“You there!” an angel called, close enough now that their voice carried to the ground.

Lamia’s claws grew, and her mouth salivated—until she spotted one familiar white-winged angel among the golden-winged erelim.

Alex led all these angels here?

Lamia hissed, but the group of winged monstrosities paid her and Jinn no mind. As they landed, all of them stared expectantly at Rile. She, too, turned toward him. She would need to be fast if they attacked him first, cutting them off before they got too close and she could no longer protect him without his powers striking her. She wanted to attack now, but her curiosity toward this strange encounter made her pause. Had they discovered how he could help retrieve the Soul Chalice?

The angels stood in a triangular shape, the lead and his second-in-command in front, followed by a row of four more angels, then a final row of six. Alex stood on the far end, in the place of lowest rank. All twenty-four of their eyes stared intently at Rile.

“We have come to take you to the Heavens, halfling,” the lead erelim announced.

Why were all the angels looking at him?

The one closest to Rile was moving his lips. Saying something, perhaps.

If he was, Rile couldn't hear them.

He'd never seen a golden-winged angel before. They were majestic, if he was being honest. Their plumage was really something. They were all of similar, impressive builds, though the females were an inch or two shorter than the males.

But their wings ... they took his breath away.

"RILE!" Lamia shouted, and with a jolt, everything came back into focus.

"Gods, I was beginning to think he was mute," the angel said. "Boy, you'll come with us now. Alexandrael will escort you."

Did he mean Alex? Rile's eyes scanned the crowd of angels before he finally found his roommate's face. His wings looked slightly larger than the angels with the golden ones, but his were white and just like he'd imagined an angel's wings to look. Alex was having a hard time meeting Rile's eyes, but he finally did.

"I guess you got my note," Rile said. It appeared his guardian angel didn't like him leaving with his demoness and had brought friends to put an end to it.

"A demon has never been brought to the Heavens before," Lamia said, rising taller on her tail. "And I won't let Rile become the first."

“That’s not entirely true,” the leader replied, though his gaze never left Rile. “The demon who ensnared our Supreme God was brought up to, then lived and died in, the Heavens.”

“Allegedly. And that was millennia ago,” Lamia argued through gritted teeth. She screeched and splayed her clawed fingers.

The lead angel shrugged. “Regardless, we have no plans to bring a horner to our realm.” He turned to Alex and motioned him forward. “Collect the male, guardian.”

“Yes, Erelim Landrathel,” Alex said, bowing his head before starting forward.

He took two steps before Lamia shouted, “You move any closer, Alex, and I’ll send your soul back to the Lake before you can take another breath. If you’re not taking him to the Heavens, where is he going?”

Landrathel’s lips quirked. “Who said we weren’t taking him to the Heavens?”

Lamia sank back onto her tail with her head cocked to the side. “But you just said you didn’t plan on taking him, the horner, to the Heavens.”

“Careful what you fish for, gorgon.” Landrathel’s shit-eating grin widened at his own joke. “You may not receive the answer you’re looking for.”

“Try me, winger.”

With a creepy grin still plastered on his face, Landrathel finally took his eyes off Rile to settle on Lamia. “We aren’t bringing a demon back to the Heavens, you simple creature.

We're bringing back the son of our god.”

Rile rocked back on his heels as his vision blurred.

Chapter 15

“That’s it,” Lamia bit. “Fuck you and your insane lies. We know you want him for the Soul Chalice, and to take him, you’re going to have to go through us.”

“Fine,” Landrathel said, and the angels behind him unsheathed swords from thin air—an impressive feat that Rile would have to learn more about another time.

“Wait!” Rile shouted. As he closed the distance to Landrathel, Lamia was forced to back away.

Just as a piece of him awoke when he recognized his feelings for Lamia, another piece clicked into place as soon as Landrathel blurted out his claim. Being something other than half-demon ... that made sense to him, somehow. He never knew, never even suspected he could be anything other than half mephis, but his mind, body, and soul fully embraced the idea. Even the electricity storming inside calmed, as if breathing out, *Finally*.

But to really be half god?

The demon knight, Jinn—how had he gotten into Lamia’s tent, by the way?—asked the question Rile was about to. “There aren’t even half-angels in these realms. How can he be half god?”

“We are done answering your questions,” Landrathel said. “The rest of this conversation is between this male and our god now.”

“Like hell it is,” Lamia said.

“Wait!” Rile shouted again. He held his open palms toward Lamia, hoping that she would stay where she was.

She sank back onto her tail and gritted her teeth.

He turned to Landrathel. “I will meet your god, but only if you allow me to return here when I’m through and Lamia and Jinn remain unharmed.” He wasn’t sure it was his place to be making these demands, but as the alleged son of the god who led them, what did he have to lose?

Landrathel and the angel beside him exchanged displeased glances, but much to his relief, Landrathel said, “Done. Alexandrael, please escort the demigod to the Heavens.”

Demigod. That was going to take some getting used to.

Rile forced himself to look at Lamia, who stared back at him with wide eyes and an open mouth.

“Let me figure out what’s going on, and we’ll talk,” Rile said as Alex made his way next to him. “I’ll find you.”

Alex placed his hands on either side of Rile’s arms, and they were airborne before she could reply. Rile thought of Stotter and how he’d described getting kidnapped this way. They traveled up, up, and he tried to think of something else to say to Lamia while they were still in earshot, but wasn’t sure what that could be. He was in love with a Heavens-loathing demoness, and he was a demigod. *Seven Hells*, he thought, then suspected he should probably get out of the habit of using that phrase.

Or should he?

The rest of the angels followed after Alex, wings flapping as

they effortlessly cut through the air. But as the final group left the ground, their eyes widened, and then they were suddenly parallel to the ground, slamming into it.

Lamia and Jinn had grabbed three by their feet and brought them back to Manusya, following up the surprise attack by stabbing their claws into the angels' chests. They screamed in agony, and their wings flapped helplessly as they fought for their lives, but it was futile.

“Heavens everlasting,” Landrathel shouted. “Continue Heavensward!”

All Rile could do was laugh.

Lamia ripped at the angel she'd pinned, taking satisfaction in the way his muscles and tendons shredded beneath his skin. She peeled her victim like an onion, watching mindlessly as coveted silver blood spilled out of the angel's body and into the sand, which drank it eagerly.

“Lamia.” Jinn stood behind her, his shadow casting a welcomed respite from the blazing-hot sun over her hunched form.

She ignored him and kept rending.

“Lamia,” Jinn said again, more forcefully this time. He was trying to get her attention just as Lamia did when Rile tuned everyone out.

When the angels told him he wasn't mine.

Just like Coryn, Rile was a ruse from the Heavens. How

easily she'd been duped.

She tossed skin and muscle to the side on the way to the angel's stomach, squishing the organ in her hands.

"That's enough," Jinn said sharply, and her body jerked back with his hands on either side of her shoulders.

Lamia tried to wriggle free, shimmying her shoulders and pushing forward with all of her weight.

"Let go of me!"

Her voice held the same mix of emotions she was feeling inside. Maybe Jinn could help her make sense of them all.

"You're like a stubborn fledgling who isn't getting her way," he said.

She sought purchase in the sand with her tail as he held her up in the air.

"Stop. Let's talk about this, preferably in a place where you won't shrivel up like a prune."

Screw the sun. She felt no ill effects amid her rage. Her disappointment.

"Come on," Jinn insisted, setting her down and reaching into his pocket to toss a portal bead into the sand. He drew a perfect circle around it, followed by a familiar series of crossing lines.

"I don't want to go there," Lamia said.

"You do, and we will." The portal exploded in light, and though she couldn't see it yet, the water beyond was beckoning to her.

“Get in,” Jinn urged. “I’m right behind you. I’ll get your stuff.”

She didn’t jump in so much as Jinn shoved her through.

The thundering roar of Lamia’s favorite waterfall on Manusya filled her ears before it came into view. She would know that sound anywhere; for a small waterfall, it was loud—deafeningly so when one was just inside the cave behind it. It had a certain rhythm to its flow, a harmony of powerful downpours and slow trickles. If Lamia closed her eyes and focused on the power behind its sound, she imagined the water working out every knot and pain point in her body, even when she wasn’t standing beneath it.

The cave behind the waterfall was the closest she’d ever gotten to having a home on Manusya, and she’d marked it to show that significance. Demons of a certain rank each had their own mark, a symbol with various lines and curves wrapped in a circle. The mark told other demons to stay away from those areas. Lamia had carved her mark into only two spots: the home she’d abandoned in Hell, and this one on Manusya—the only one she had now.

The portal had long closed, and Jinn stood beside her with her and Rile’s bags. The sun was much less powerful than in the desert; the lush greenery around them absorbed its otherwise oppressive rays. Water fell into a crystal-clear pool where shadows of fish swam around boulders of every shape and size.

She inhaled the damp air, and her head spun, intoxicated by

just how sweet it was. Her scales were already beginning to shimmer again, and her skin prickled at the thought of diving in.

Lamia slithered forward and didn't slow down when she reached the water. It went past the base of her tail, up to her stomach, over her breasts, and up her neck before she completely submerged herself. As she continued, her tail let up from the sand, and she was suspended, her scales and skin eagerly drinking up the moisture and luxuriating in the coldness of the pool. She extended her neck, awakening her gills, which separated wide and began greedily filtering oxygen through her body.

As she floated, she focused on the sunlight slicing through the clear water and dancing over the rocks and sand. Fish swam slowly back and forth, occasionally kissing the rocks in search of a morsel of plant life to eat or dashing after other fish to keep them out of their territory.

Lamia's body echoed the same thundering rush of the waterfall pounding at the rocks beneath the surface. The water felt so good, the weightlessness and isolation so comforting, but it all made her lower her defenses. Without that dam, emotions she wasn't ready to face broke through.

She let out an unbidden, gargled cry that made her body convulse forward. It happened in slow motion, the force of the water pushing against her as her torso folded, making her head and stomach nearly touch. Her gills opened wide, prepping for another, harder expulsion of air as her sadness threatened to overtake her.

Bubbles exploded from her mouth as Lamia curled into a ball, head coming to rest against where her knees would be. The end of her tail came midway down her back, and she floated with the current, letting it—and her emotions—take her where they would.

She cried for her knighthood. For Hell. For her homesickness, knowing that even if she wanted to return, Zagan wouldn't allow her to. She cried for Rile and their inability to grow closer physically. She cried for the demon she thought he was and the god he could turn out to be, but most of all, she mourned allowing herself to fall in love with him.

She floated through the water for a long while, sometimes getting caught on a boulder or against the bottom of the pool. She got tossed around underneath the waterfall for a time, slamming against the sand and rocks while staying tucked into her little ball. Eventually, she looked up toward the sky. Jinn waited patiently by the water's edge above the surface, with a bag slung over each of his shoulders.

He and the other knights meant so much to her.

She sank to the bottom of the pool and coiled her tail in the sand. Slowly, she put her hands out, palms up, and pushed them to either side. The waterfall separated like a curtain, revealing the cave behind it.

Jinn walked down the aisle she made, brushing past her. He tossed the bags into the cavern, then climbed up into the mouth. “Ah shit, I think I broke something.”

“Probably a bottle of water,” Lamia said, climbing up

behind him as she relinquished her control over the pool. Sloshing water and the thundering waterfall resumed behind her as she pressed the back of her hand to her cheekbone. Her face was swollen from crying. Jinn knew what had happened down there, and he knew that she would behead him if he acknowledged it. The broken bottle was a welcome distraction from the more serious matters at hand.

Rile's dark gray bag had a damp stain on the bottom, and it was growing quickly. Jinn reached down for it, but Lamia put her hand on his arm to stop him.

"I got it," she said, taking the shoulder strap.

Jinn nodded and walked farther inside the cave.

The cavern itself was difficult to get to without wings or water abilities. But even if others did ever come across the hidden spot, they would know that it was a gorgon's dwelling. Lanterns of ever-burning hellfire lined the walls and illuminated the space in a warm glow. Lamia had once volunteered Oriax to go shopping and use his shadow abilities to bring her selection of couches, tables, and other fine furniture to their rightful spots. With a heavy sigh, Jinn collapsed onto the large couch in the center of the room while Lamia knelt down and opened Rile's pack.

Lamia realized she was holding her breath as she looked into the bag. Would she find something that would show he knew he hailed from the Heavens and was hiding it from her?

Wishful thinking. Then she'd be able to let her feelings go.

His clothing sat at the top of the pack, crumpled up and

tucked between glass bottles. She took each item and smoothed it out, refolding them and adding it to a pile beside her.

After the clothes and bottles were cleared, she began to extract the broken pieces of glass. “There wasn’t much water left in this one,” she said. “Nothing’s too wet.”

As she set them down, the clanking of the pieces reminded her of Rile walking and the glass bottles hitting one another in rhythm to his gait. He’d lugged the heavy bottles across the desert just to make sure she was safe.

Would his god—his father—stop him from seeing her again?

She removed the next item from his bag: a small book entitled *Navigating Gare*, which featured a collection of maps of the entire continent, including Leaside, the Sanlow Desert, and Westport. Its pages were soaked through on the bottom right corner, and she fanned through them to see how far up the pages the water went. Tucked away in the center of the book was an old piece of parchment, fragile from being opened and refolded many times over. She carefully unfolded it along its worn seams, finding a simple note in a female’s handwriting: *Never forget your strength, my son. Thank you for showing me mine.*

Lamia smiled softly. What would it have been like to have known her mother?

Jinn cleared his throat, and she quickly folded the paper back up.

“I’m glad this didn’t get ruined,” she said, realizing she’d been lingering on it for too long.

Jinn smirked. “You also didn’t have to go through his bag to make sure everything was safe. We both know you could have pulled the water out and added it to the pool outside with the wave of a hand.”

She lifted her chin. “I could have removed the water, but I wouldn’t have been able to fix the running ink on the parchment. I’m glad this was still dry.”

There wasn’t much left inside the bag but a few lingering pieces of broken glass and a wet string attached to something heavy and smooth.

She palmed the item and took it from the bag, revealing a silver chained necklace with an ornate pendant. A silver frame snaked around a brilliant blue stone that reminded her of the pool outside.

“It’s beautiful.” Lamia gasped. Was this his mother’s as well? She scooted toward Jinn and held it up to him. “I don’t recognize the symbols on the side of this, do you?”

Jinn took the necklace and examined it closely. “They’re certainly not of Hell,” he said. “But they don’t look Heavensly, either. The style of the festoon in general is interesting.”

“The ... festoon?” she asked.

“The ornate piece that holds the stone in place,” Jinn answered.

She laughed, shaking her head as she grabbed the pendant back from him. “You never cease to amaze me with your

knowledge of all things fashion and jewelry. For someone who comes to Manusya less than any of us, you certainly have a handle on styles and terms.”

Jinn shrugged. “Own a popular club, have demons populate said club that spend their days stealing from humans. Get them to offer you things for VIP access, flip those items for quick coin—or don’t, and keep the nicer stuff for yourself. It works out nicely.” He tapped his chin. “But even I don’t know the origins of that thing.”

Lamia gazed at the pendant for a few moments longer until setting it down gently on top of Rile’s book. “What am I going to do?” she asked on a sigh.

“I’ll admit, I don’t envy you,” Jinn replied. “But know that O and I will support you if you want to run away with the guy or destroy him. *Especially* if you want to destroy him. I wonder what a god’s blood tastes like?”

She couldn’t help but smile as she rolled her eyes and shook her head. “His blood is grayish red, which I thought meant it was a cross between the black of a demon’s and the red of a human’s. But perhaps the gray comes from silver instead.”

Jinn gazed up at the ceiling, contemplating something dreamy based on the smile across his lips. “If you decide to tap into him and use him like a keg, give me a call. We could make proper arile cocktails, right from the source. Zagan never said anything about banning gods’ blood, after all.” He grinned. “I’m liking the idea of destroying him more and more. What’s your vote?”

There was no way she could continue to foster her feelings

for Rile, knowing that he was from the Heavens.

Right?

She smiled ruefully at Jinn. “Ask me when we see him again. *If* we see him again ...”

Chapter 16

“I guess Lamia filled you in about me,” Alex said as they continued to rise away from Manusya and into the clouds.

With everything he’d just learned, and where they were now, *that’s* what Alex wanted to talk about?

At least Rile had the ability to talk during this journey. Unlike the descent into Hell, rising to the Heavens was rather pleasant. Alex provided a smooth ride, and the cool fresh air felt good on his sweaty face after spending so long in the desert.

There was a lot to unpack, but for now, he welcomed the simple conversation.

“She did. She told me you’re my guardian angel.”

He wanted to expand on what he thought about that, and was sure Alex was curious, too, but he wasn’t going to volunteer that information quite so easily.

“I really didn’t know, you know—about my god being your father. I really thought you were a mannie.”

“Okay.”

Alex sighed.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were an angel, then? You knew that, obviously,” Rile said.

“Kind of a strange thing to bring up, wouldn’t you say? You’re a good guy, Rai. I wasn’t sure how to tell you without freaking you out.”

“I’m a mannie ... or I thought I was, anyway. Telling me you weren’t human either would have been welcome news.”

He sighed again. “We’ll talk more after the rain.”

“The what?”

A droplet of water the size of Rile’s fist struck him square on the forehead, but instead of being cold on his skin, it warmed him from the inside out.

“What is this?” he asked, touching the center of his forehead, but it suddenly didn’t matter anymore. His adrenaline calmed, and he didn’t feel scared anymore. Another drop struck him, then another, and an overwhelming feeling of calm emanated from inside his chest. Even his lightning purred.

“This is the holy rain,” Alex said. “It cleanses your body, mind, and spirit. The bodies of the angels Lamia and Jinn took down are now dissolving into the earth, and the area around them is being purified. We’ll break through to the Heavens soon. Watch your eyes.”

Mist surrounded them and temporarily blinded Rile. That’s what he thought Alex was talking about, until his vision was assaulted by a sun that could not possibly be the same one that lit the sky on Manusya.

Rile let out a grunt, closing his eyes tightly and tucking his face into his shoulder. It wasn’t every day the sun glowed brighter than his own eyes.

“That is the eternal sun,” Alex said. “You’ll adjust in a minute.”

Rile's feet touched plush ground, and Alex let go of his arms. The entourage of other angels landed around them with swoops and the clicking of boots.

When his eyes adjusted and he was finally able to make out his surroundings, Landrathel beckoned.

"Come," the angel said, pointing at a towering dome on the other side of the square. "Our lord is anxious to see his offspring."

Alex gently nudged Rile forward. "Landrathel is just as anxious to reveal you to Him," he mumbled. "I can feel his anticipation."

Rile fell into step behind the other angels, and they all marched quietly toward the dome. "Do gods feel each other's emotions like angels can?"

"No. All angels can feel others in their vicinity, and I can feel you because I'm your guardian. If you were a full god, I would not be able to be your guardian or read your emotions. Even now, I can only read them if they're extreme enough." He paused. "After the holy rain, all I feel from you is ... that you're lost."

How else was he supposed to feel? "I think anyone could tell that right about now."

"God Orko is a right and just god," Alex said. "I think he will welcome you with open arms."

"Great. Why didn't he for the past three decades of my life?"

"Quiet now," Landrathel commanded, and Rile noted he'd

been sure to direct his assertion toward Alex and not the son of his boss. “We are entering a most sacred temple.”

Rile looked up at the marble stairs before him, following them to their top. There must have been a hundred steps or more. Why build higher when they were already this high in the Heavens? He supposed it was easy for angels to get around. With a couple flaps of their wings, they could scale these heights without touching a foot on a single stair. Rile, however, had no wings.

“Gods typically travel on small patches of cloud,” Alex explained, “but you will need to learn that skill from your father. Until then ...” He placed his hands on either side of Rile and lifted, following Landrathel and his second while the remaining angels took up the rear.

When they landed on top of the large marble staircase, Rile stood beside columns just as tall as the stairs. He strained his neck to follow them upward, barely making out the finely carved wings at the top that supported the roof of the dome. There were no doors; one could walk between the towering columns right inside, but as soon as they entered, Rile was blinded again. The contrast between the extreme brightness of the sun and the shadows inside the structure would take some getting used to.

Rile felt at the air before him while his eyes adjusted. Alex took him gently by the elbow, but Rile pulled back. “No, let me get used to this.”

He could feel all the angels’ eyes on him before they came into view a few moments later. What was with this realm and

everything being impossibly high? The top of the dome was no less than ten stories above them, a large, transparent blue round that he thought was to be reminiscent of the sky, but that only reminded him of Lamia and the sea.

What was she doing now?

What did it matter? He'd seen whatever warmth she'd felt for him evaporate when they learned that not only was he not a demon, he was a Heavenly creation instead. Not even an angel—a god. He wrapped his arms around himself.

“Can you see now, Rai?” Alex asked.

“That’s Demigod Rile to you now, Alexandrael,” Landrathel corrected quickly, eyes darting around the temple.

“Apologies, Erelim Landrathel,” Alex mumbled with a shallow bow.

Landrathel’s nostrils flared, but Rile put up his hand before the angel could say anything more. “I can see now.”

Landrathel eyed Alex for a moment, then bowed to Rile. “Very well,” he said, spinning on his heels and leading them further inside.

Alex gave Rile a quick grin before motioning for him to follow. As they walked beneath the dome, Rile tried to channel calm from its ocean-blue color.

Everything before them was open and empty, with angels of all shapes, sizes, and colors calmly flying or walking around. They were surrounded by more tall marble columns, and around them, towering open doors led to more illuminated rooms.

“Do all the gods live here?” Rile whispered.

“No, this temple is only for God Orko,” Alex replied as lightning flashed above and streaked across the dome. A fissure of white looked like it cracked across the ceiling before the bright streak faded slowly away.

Rile never knew another being that could control lightning like he could. The feeling of camaraderie with this unknown god was as instant as that strike.

Were the hairs on his arms standing up from the static electricity in the air or because the anticipation to meet Orko was piquing?

Rile studied the other angels coming and going inside the temple. They’d passed ten or so already, each one hurriedly ducking into a room or dashing out of the side exits with objects in hand. One particular angel caught his eye: a taller male with golden wings like Landrathel and his entourage, but his were even more stunning; they looked like they had immense diamonds embedded at the base of each feather.

Alex followed Rile’s gaze. “That’s High Archangel Zaphkiel. He leads the seraphim, who assist with the creation of new angels.”

A silver-winged angel spoke quietly beside Zaphkiel and a flash of annoyance crossed over the archangel’s face. “He looks pleased,” Rile said sarcastically.

Yet, just seconds later, Zaphkiel looked like nothing bothered him. Did the overwhelming sense of calm the Heavens exuded tamp down his anger, too? That was

unnerving.

As they crossed paths, Landrathel and his entourage all bowed low to the archangel and said his full name in greeting. Unsure of what to do, Rile leaned down to do the same until Alex stopped him with a touch to the arm.

“You are the son of God Orko,” Alex said with his forehead almost against the ground. Once the archangel passed, they all stood back up and continued on. “A god—even a demigod—bows to no angel.”

“Oh.” It was hard to believe that he was higher up on the chain of command than that hulking angel with gorgeous diamond wings, but sure. He could get used to that.

“The high archangel came from God Orko’s chamber. I wonder why he looked so mad,” Alex whispered even softer, which made Rile assume he wasn’t supposed to be gossiping about the archangel. Another streak of lightning flashed above them, and Alex grimaced. “Well, hopefully you’ll be able to lift his spirits.”

“Um. Yeah,” Rile said. He was beginning to thank whatever weird drug they pumped into the air around here that made him feel so calm.

“We should bottle this stuff instead of Demon’s Horn,” Rile said, gesturing at the air. “We’d be swimming in money.”

Alex gave him a questioning look. “He’s just through here,” he said and motioned to the door behind the columns from where the archangel had emerged. “Just be yourself, and you’ll be fine.”

The cluster of angels fell into one line with Landrathel at the front. Alex grabbed Rile by the elbow and guided him behind the others, then placed himself last. He clapped Rile on both shoulders and gave them a squeeze before letting his arms fall to his sides. “The erelim will present you, and our God will take it from there.”

“Okay.” Rile took a deep breath and followed the line inside.

The narrow hallway between the columns opened up into an expansive and dimly lit room. It was bare around the perimeter, but from its center grew a mountain of stone and gold. Symbols Rile couldn’t read were etched into the stone, whose polished surface reflected the soft white glow from the ceiling as if a lightning bolt had once struck there and never quite faded away. Sitting cross-legged at the base of the mountain was a small, gaunt figure sitting quietly with his hands on his knees and his eyes closed.

“We have brought him, Lord,” Landrathel said proudly. “We present to You Your son, Demigod Rile.”

The angels before him parted, fanning out on either side of Rile before walking backward. They disappeared from his periphery, leaving him to see nothing but his father before his golden mountain. He’d expected a god to be massive in size or have more flourish than the golden-winged angels that served him, but he cocked his head to the side, surprised to find that Orko looked like any other human he’d find on Manusya.

It was the god’s voice that made him larger than life.

“My son,” Orko said. His eyes flew open and illuminated

the entire space, and the lightning inside of Rile hummed as if finally satiated. The beast was home.

Light streaked from Orko's eyes and through the air, pivoting randomly in different directions as if the light they emitted was lightning itself. Rile saw what his ire looked like outside on the ceiling of the dome, bolts quick and angry and thick, but these bolts and the ones that matched on the ceiling of this room were thin, slow, and calm—completely opposite of how Rile's heart felt as it became lodged in his throat.

He would need to *drink* calming holy rain to get through this.

“H- hello,” Rile stuttered. The connection was there; he wished he could explain it, but somehow, there was no doubt that this god was truly his father.

So many questions. Where should he start?

“It is good to see you in the flesh, my son,” Orko said. His voice was like thunder in the distance, slowly rolling along. “I'm sure you have many questions for me.”

All Rile could do was nod, still transfixed on the simple man before him, spare his brilliant eyes and commanding voice.

“I will start by saying this ... As far as I know, you are the only human blessed with Heavenly blood. There are no other half-breeds—angel or god—like you.”

Orko made it sound like he'd done Rile a favor by siring him, making him knit his brows together.

“Landrathel and my other trustworthy angels here are the only ones who know of your existence ... for now. I would

like to change that, but we must first discuss what that would mean for me, for us, and for the Heavens.”

Translation: Rile was a shameful secret who would continue to remain hidden until the time was right.

“Okay ...” Rile replied.

Orko’s gaze shifted from Rile to something over his shoulder. Though Rile kept his eyes trained on the god, the clicking of the angels’ footsteps behind him faded until it was clear they’d left the room. He heard a door slide and hit the ground, drowning out the murmurs of the chamber outside.

Lazy lightning streaked across the ceiling again, this time striking the peak of the mountain. It caused the entire mound to glow, spare the gold that filled in the cracks. Those cracks also looked like lightning and surrounded symbols carved inside.

“What does your altar say?” Rile asked.

“The first three symbols say ‘friend of mankind.’ The second two groups stand for ‘storms’ and ‘war.’ I ensure the protection and prosperity of the humans on Manusya with rainstorms and intervention with my angelic army.”

“I see.”

Orko nodded. “Your eyes light differently than mine.”

He was right. His eyes glowed more like Lamia’s—constant and bright. “I’m glad for that,” he admitted. “Humans shun me enough with eyes that glow at all, let alone if they sparked and shot lightning like yours.”

“They shunned you because you believed yourself a demon. When we reveal the truth, you will be revered. Worshiped among men.”

Rile balled his hands into fists. “Oh yeah? Why now? Why after three decades of my life are you revealing yourself to me? Why did you tell Mom you were a demon?” All the ways their lives would have been different had they known he was a god flashed in his mind. The reverence he promised—why couldn’t they have had that all along?

Orko’s eyelids sagged. “My son. Gods are not supposed to walk the human realm, but I was searching for a god who was missing. Your mother found me in the woods outside of her town. She was a curious little creature ... and I was enamored by her right away. But gods aren’t to be with humans. It’s bad enough we fraternize with angels. I couldn’t tell her I was a god, nor could I pretend I was an angel because I had no wings to show, so I told her I was a demon. It was only supposed to be one night. But then one night turned to two, two turned into four, until we ended up spending an entire month together.

“I’d stopped searching for our lost god, and knew I’d eventually have to return to the Heavens for good. I’d put it off as long as possible, but you were the catalyst. One day, I could feel your mother’s bright soul had become two, and I knew before she did that she was with child.” There was pain in those dimming, sparking eyes as he looked over Rile’s shoulder. “I didn’t think it was possible, or I would have taken precautions. That was the last day we saw each other.”

Rile closed his eyes, struggling to stay angry amid the

calming Heavens air. His emotions were so dampened, he felt claustrophobic inside, yet even that panic faded.

“I had angels check in on you both on a few occasions,” Orko said. “It sounded like Morgan made a wonderful mother. I am sorry she met such an untimely end.”

The god paused, and Rile realized he expected a comment on that. Instead, he asked, “You didn’t answer my other questions. Why am I here?”

Orko’s expression grew hard. “Though I posed as a demon and led your mother to believe you were a manifest, you are not. A change in the state of your electric energy tells me you have met a demon and harbor feelings for them. *Strong feelings.*”

Rile recoiled, arm hair standing straight, but not because of the static charge in the air. An overwhelming need to protect Lamia from this god blossomed inside of him. “You aren’t to harm her.”

Orko smirked. “Nor are you to see her again. But I wouldn’t be so concerned about my harming her. You’ve already seen your powers protecting you from her lecherous pursuit.”

Rile furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean by that?”

“When the Supreme God made us in his likeness, he made sure we would not fall into the same trap he did. As soon as your feelings for each other turned dangerously strong, your godly powers reacted. They will stop at nothing to keep you two apart ... even if that means killing her.”

“I don’t want their protection,” Rile said through gritted

teeth. “Turn my powers off, or do whatever you have to do to stop me from hurting her!”

Orko laughed, shoulders bouncing as if that was the most preposterous request from across the three realms. “I can’t ‘turn it off.’ No one can.”

Rile swayed. But why was he so concerned about this? Now that she and Rile both knew his true heritage, she was going to keep her distance anyway. Still, the idea of reconciling with her had given him hope. Knowing the electric beast inside of him would never calm shattered that.

“But that is not the reason why I called you here.”

It took Rile a few moments to regain his balance and raise his eyes toward Orko. “Right. Now you suddenly want to announce me as your son? Admit to everyone outside your inner circle that you had relations with a human?” His emotions were finally pushing through the Heavens’ dampening. There was a sting behind his eyes, and his voice wavered when he asked, “Why did your powers not strike *her* down?”

Lightning split the darkness above them, but Orko’s voice remained calm. “Humans are innately good. Demons are innately evil and must be extinguished. That is all I will say on the matter. As for announcing you as my son, the perfect time to do so will be after we secure the Soul Chalice.”

Rile let out a humorless laugh. “What makes you think I’m going to help you get the Soul Chalice after all of this? You’ve been hiding all my life, and now you tell me I can’t see the female I love, but you want me to do you a favor.” He scoffed,

and his own lightning struck above them, a blue streak sailing straight through Orko's white. "I'll be returning to Manusya now. Thanks for this grand waste of time, Dad."

Rile turned on his heels and quickly scanned for the closed door on the dark wall, worried he'd make an ass of himself by standing there too long while trying to make out its outline. He streaked lightning across the wall, relieved to find the door, and he took a few steps toward it.

"It will be worth your while," Orko said.

"I'm sure it won't be."

"Even if the Soul Chalice can bring you and your demoness together?"

Rile stopped, but refused to turn and face his father again. "She would never turn her soul to the light. Even if she wanted to, I would never allow it." Lamia was too proud to be a Hellion; he could never take that from her.

"She was exiled from her realm, was she not?"

Rile bit his bottom lip and grimaced. What else had Alex told this guy?

"You would be surprised what people will do for love, my son."

Rile shrugged. "You're right. I'll turn my soul instead. I thought I was demon anyway. What's the difference?"

A loud clap of thunder boomed above them, startling him. He had no idea his father could conjure thunder in addition to lightning—Rile sure couldn't.

“You will do nothing of the sort!” Orko shouted. “You have been blessed with the blood of a god, and the Supreme God would never have engineered the cup to darken our souls.”

“Hm. Maybe I’ll find it and put your theory to the test, then.”

Thunder reverberated above, this time low and menacing. “Find it and try it, then,” Orko growled.

Blinding light assaulted Rile’s vision again, followed by weightlessness and frigid air. When the world came back into view, he could see the entire Manusyan continent of Gare below.

He glided impossibly high above land and fell toward it at breakneck speed. Panic set in immediately; he was out of the Heavens now and plummeting toward the earth.

Well, shit.

Chapter 17

How the fuck was Rile going to survive this fall?

As he plummeted toward the ground, clouds whipped past him.

Clouds.

Alex had said gods traveled around on little patches of cloud.

He tried putting his arms out in front of him and scooping the vapor toward himself, but to no avail.

“Cloud!” he summoned, imagining a solid, cotton-like substance materializing beneath him.

Nothing happened.

Cursing, Rile spun so he was parallel to the ground, slowing his fall as much as he could. “This is a Demon’s Horn trip again,” he whispered to himself. No way his father just expelled him from the Heavens and sent him plummeting to his death, right? His one and only son?

“HELP!” Rile shouted. But who was he kidding? No one could hear him in the clouds! He was too high up for Manusyans and too far down for angels.

Panting, he squeezed his eyes shut. His chest felt tight and heavy, as if something pushed against his ribcage.

It was panic. Real, pure, and unencumbered.

He tried to scream, but a voice in his ear made the sound die in his throat.

“I got you.”

“Alex!”

Rile’s eyes flew open, and Alex grabbed for him, wrapping his arms tightly around his torso. Rile hugged him back, then wrapped his legs around his guardian angel’s.

Alex grunted and strained as they bounced in the air while he flapped his wings and fought to slow their fall.

“Seven Hells, I thought I was a goner,” Rile said into Alex’s neck.

“I don’t know if I was supposed to save you or not, so if we’re both struck from the sky in a blaze of thunder and lightning, I’m sorry.”

Rile would survive the lightning just fine, but not the fall. Alex could land them safely, but would be fried from the inside out before they could make it there. “If that happens, know that I’m not mad at you. You did what you had to do.”

“And know that you’re a true friend to me, not just someone I was tasked with guarding. It’s been fun.”

Once Alex straightened out and gained control of their descent, Rile turned his head to look at Manusya again. He spotted a desert in the far distance. Instead of heading there, Alex guided them toward a lush forest sandwiched between two oceans. “Where are we going?”

“Nowhere special. Let’s just land first and figure out our next move afterward, yeah?”

“Fair enough. Do you think Lamia and Jinn are still in the

Sanlow?”

“Aren’t you forbidden from seeing her now?”

Rile let out a dry laugh. “Orko just threw me out of the Heavens. You think it’s because I *agreed* to stay away?” He shook his head. “Did you really tell Him about Lamia leaving the demon knights?”

Alex hesitated. “I had to tell Him *something*.”

“Come on, man. I thought you just said you were really my friend.”

“I’m doing what I can to survive.”

Silence hung in the air as Alex lowered them through trees and onto the leaf-covered forest floor.

Once they were settled on their feet, Alex took a deep breath. “Listen. I’m doing what I can as your friend, and someone who used to be very close to Zagan but now serves the Heavens. I don’t know what God Orko’s plan is, but I probably shouldn’t have helped you just now. I could be punished for it, but at least I can tell Him my directive was to guard you, and that was what I was doing. But even though I was outside of the room, I knew the moment He told you to stay away from Lamia ... I felt His directive inside myself ... and then I felt your emotions.” Alex shivered. “I’m sorry for what He told you, Rai. I really am. But aiding you in finding her would be enough for Him to destroy me.”

“What do you mean, destroy?”

Alex shuddered. “Basically electrocute me to death until my body turns into smoke and blows away. I saw it happen once,

and I have no interest in seeing it again, let alone experience it for myself. I can still hear the awful screams in my head.”

Rile shivered. “I thought you said He was a right and just god?”

“I thought He would be, when He met you.”

Rile sighed. Weren't the Heavens supposed to be all that was good and right? “Obviously, after all you've done for me, I would never want to put you in a position that would get you killed.” But where would he go to find Lamia now? What could he do? There were no leads. Though he now knew he was a god, he was powerless. Having Alex by his side would bring him comfort, but imagining him suffering at the hands of Orko was enough to let him go. “I just wish I knew where to start.”

A small, sinister smile drew up one side of Alex's mouth. “Did you know that souls usually don't remember anything about their past lives?”

Rile shrugged, a bit confused by the change of subject. “I guess that makes sense. I don't know anything about mine.”

“I don't know why I am one of the lucky few who remember—especially since my soul transcended realms—but my memories as a manifestation are as clear to me as my memories of this life.” He looked up and to the side in thought. “Zagan spent a lot of time on Manusya before he became the demon king, and had a few favorite spots around the world. One was a cave up in the mountains. It was gorgeous. Even though it was dark inside, it had a stream of fresh water that collected at the mountain's summit and wound

its way through the inside. I think that's what created the caves in the first place. At the mouth of the cave, where the water spilled out, you could see the *Eastern Dellview Mountains* for miles around."

"... Okay?" Rile said, and Alex's eyes widened knowingly.

"There was another spot near the Wahein Peninsula in the middle of a forest similar to this one. It had a *waterfall* even more beautiful than the one that flowed from that cave. He visited that one more often a few years ago, but told me *another demon* had taken it over."

Was Alex suggesting he look in these places for Lamia? The knowing look in the angel's eye confirmed Rile's suspicion, and he gave Alex a nod in return. Two places to check out. He would try the waterfall first.

"And then there was this other story Zagan used to tell me."

Shit, how many more places was he going to suggest? If Lamia wasn't at the waterfall, the cave was a world away. Without Alex to fly him around, how was he going to get to get from one spot to another? And there was no guarantee she would stay put from one day to the next. He took solace in knowing that she, too, had limited ways of moving long distances, but the idea of them missing each other by a day made him sick.

"Before Zagan was known as the demon king, he was known as Godslaver. He captured and enslaved God Ouranos in the name of the previous demon king. He wasn't able to gather a ton of info about the Heavens from God Ouranos, but watched him try several times to summon his cloud to get back

to the Heavens.”

Rile’s ears perked up.

“Zagan was never able to utter the words because he was a demon, but I found out later what the prayer was ... *cissah dra hipac*.”

“*Cissah dra hipac?*” Rile repeated, then shouted as he launched a foot off the ground. He wobbled, arms flailing as he tried to regain his balance, but as he took a step forward, something soft caught him beneath his feet.

Rile and Alex grinned widely at one another.

“You’ll have to figure out the rest,” Alex said, expression growing more serious—and sad? “I don’t know what my directive will be going forward. I may be looking out for you, I may not—I’ve saved your ass quite a few times without you ever knowing. So stay safe, okay?”

Rile was curious about the other times, but those stories would have to wait. They would see each other again. “You, too. Thank you for everything, Alex.”

Alex nodded, then kicked off the ground and shot into the sky with a powerful flap of his wings. Rile watched him rise up until he was a speck among the clouds, then nothing at all.

With a sigh, Rile looked down at his feet. He was indeed standing on a small cloud hovering over the forest floor, and an arm’s length away, there was a small white feather. Alex’s down. A good luck charm.

Rile stood there, staring at the feather. He’d summoned the cloud, but how could he make it move? He took another step

forward, and the cloud caught his foot, but he was sure this thing wasn't meant to be walked on—it was made to soar and zoom around on.

“Forward,” Rile whispered, bracing himself for the cloud to jolt into motion. Nothing.

Rile bit the inside of his cheek as he thought. He willed the cloud forward in his head, and still nothing happened.

It wasn't until he imagined himself beside the feather that the jolt happened, nearly knocking him on his ass. When he recovered, he was exactly where he imagined the cloud to be, and he knelt down and picked up the feather.

It was softer and fluffier than a bird's as he ran his fingers over it. “Thank you again, friend,” Rile whispered. Now to get to Lamia. He was burning to see her, hoping she would give them a chance to talk.

He looked south, above the treetops. The cloud jolted forward and upward, and he let out a celebratory “Wahoo!”

This traveling by cloud thing was going to be fun! As long as he figured out a way to get off of it later ...

Lamia sat at the edge of the pool opposite the waterfall, lazily swishing her tail from side to side in the cool water. It was a beautiful day, just as it always seemed to be in this region of Manusya. The sun was shining, there were no clouds in the bright blue sky, and the air was delightfully balmy and warm.

She was in paradise, yet she felt so empty.

She told Jinn, “You don’t have to stay here. I’m sure you’re dying to return to Hell and the club.”

“For the millionth time, the club is fine. Making sure you’re okay is my highest priority right now.”

Lamia smirked. “Sure. That, and the delivery of the god keg.”

Jinn shrugged. “Rile the God Keg would be a bonus.” He licked his lips and smacked them, then looked up at the cloudless sky. “You think he’s still up there?”

“That’s all I’ve been thinking about. What if he’s not? Maybe we should go back to the desert. Otherwise, if he tries to find us, we are very small needles in the middle of a haystack that is an entire realm.”

“If he thinks a gorgon is still in the desert and not near water, he’s a moron. You’re already sleeping out here in the open, and not inside the room you have behind that waterfall—which I think is stupid, by the way—so if he comes here, you know he’ll find you.”

She sighed. “We should have come up with a meeting spot.”

“That would have been telling everyone in the Heavens where you were. No amount of curiosity over a male is worth that.” Jinn rested on his hands behind his back, bare feet sloshing around in the water. “You have to be more careful from now on, Lam. I know you’re strong, but you have no other realm to retreat to if the angels descend. You can no longer summon the lesser army if you find yourself outnumbered.”

With a quick flick of her wrist, water shot from the pool straight into Jinn's face.

"Fool. I can handle myself," she said over his coughing.

"I'm serious!" he countered, wiping off his forehead and making sure to splash her with the excess water. "Not only can you no longer use portals, but your heart is compromised." His hand shot up to cover his face as she moved to splash him again. "Just listen! I can tell you still care for Rile even after learning the truth. Demons get stupid when they listen to their heart. Trust me, I know."

Lamia rolled her eyes as annoyance bubbled up inside of her. "If you think I'm suddenly ignorant and blind like Zagan, you're sorely mistaken. Honestly, Jinn, I thought you knew me better than that. I sacrificed everything I had to stand against that kind of recklessness. You really think I'm stupid enough to fall into the same trap?"

"That's not what I—"

"I just need to be alone for a while, Jinn," she pleaded. "Please."

Jinn opened his mouth, then closed it and sighed. "Okay."

He threw a portal bead beside him, then drew a circle and instructions to return to the club around it. She frowned, knowing she'd never be able to follow.

He placed an arm on her shoulder, and said as if reading her thoughts, "You may not be able to travel to me, but I can always travel to you. I'll check in when I can. Take care of yourself, Lam."

Instead of getting up, he carelessly rolled into the portal, disappearing as soon as the light ignited.

Lamia sat there in the silence after the portal closed. The waterfall raged before her, and even the sound of it pounding away at the rocks below lent her no comfort.

She lay back against the stone, tail continuing to swish back and forth in the water as she looked up at the sky.

“I hope you’re okay up there,” she whispered.

Humans at the mercy of demons always looked up at the sky and pleaded for their gods to save them. The prayers grated at Lamia’s ears, and she was always quick to deliver their deaths. But now ... were her words considered a prayer, too?

Lamia groaned, slipping off her stone platform in a way that reminded her of how Jinn rolled into his hell portal. She began to slip beneath the surface of the water, but hesitated when it reached her neck. Rile wouldn’t be able to see her if she was underwater.

She scoffed, shaking her head before dunking beneath the waves.

That first breath her gills took when they opened always delivered such a rush, as if the oxygen they filtered through the water was more potent than what her lungs took in from the air. Plus, she could think more clearly when the water muffled her hearing.

But did she want to be able to think more clearly? She *needed* to hate Rile. She needed to continue fighting for what she believed in—that the demon races needed to be put above

all others, and that angels and gods were the enemy that belonged back in the Heavens or dead. She saw first-hand how loving the enemy made one stupid. She couldn't fall for the same trick Zagan had.

She sighed. But she *did* fall for the same trick.

Despite what she said to Jinn, she wasn't sure she could undo that.

She'd given up Hell, the place she'd devoted her life to, because she couldn't stand the thought of a Heavenly being taking priority in her realm. So why couldn't she give up Rile, a demigod she'd met just days ago?

She stared up at the sun through the shimmering water.

Just stay down here forever, and you won't have to think about this anymore.

Chapter 18

Rile arrived at the falls after spending quite some time figuring out how to dismount from his cloud in the trees. He didn't want his reunion with Lamia to start off with him flying in on his godly mode of transport, especially since she'd recently lost her portal beads, but by the time he'd finally figured out how to will the damn cloud away, he realized he should have made sure Lamia was even around before going through the trouble.

He sprinted through the trees, following the powerful sound of the plunging water. His first thought: *Gods, this place really does suit her.* His second: *So why isn't she here?*

Rile wasn't prepared for the overwhelming sense of loss that brought him. His entire trek over here, he'd thought of every possible thing to say to her, every possible response she may lob back. In his mind, he'd prevailed over a few of the potential talks, but lost others. He still didn't know how to feel about his true identity and what that meant to her.

Exhausted and discouraged, Rile sank onto a flat stone by the water's edge. The waterfall across from him roared, stirring up the cerulean waters of the pool with whitecaps. It looked just as tumultuous as he felt. The mist it blew back at him was ice cold, causing him to shiver despite the hot sun beating down on him. Lamia would have found it perfect.

He yelped as she exploded from the pool, hair whipping backward as she gasped for air. Her eyes were wide, as if she was spooked by something he couldn't see, but if she was

being pursued, she made no move to escape. Instead, he followed her gaze upward, toward the sky.

“I can’t keep thinking about you!” she shouted.

His lips parted. She couldn’t possibly be talking about him, right? She sounded too desperate. Too sad.

“Think about whom?” he called, unable to stop himself. He suppressed a smirk as she froze, albeit for just a heartbeat, before meeting his gaze.

On the ride over, he considered so many different ways of greeting her. From a simple hello to the more aggressive forgetting-they-couldn’t-touch-and-frying-her-to-death reunion, the last thing Rile considered was what appeared to be happening. “Are you drowning?”

Her wide eyes turned to confusion as her head tilted ever so slightly to the side. “What? No.” Her chest was still heaving, however. He appreciated how the red fabric of her top clung to her breasts, revealing pebbled nipples hardened from the frigid water. “I was just ... thinking.”

Rile’s smile widened. “That was a violent think.”

Lamia rolled her eyes. “Even *if* I was drowning—though that’s impossible—what could you have done to help me? You couldn’t come get me out, unless ...” Her eyes widened, and her voice raised an octave. “Did you figure out a way to control your powers?”

The hope in her voice surprised him, fueling his own dream that she might really reciprocate his feelings.

“I wish,” he said.

Lamia's shoulders slumped.

He pushed to his feet and motioned for her to come forward. "I have a lot to tell you, if you'll let me."

She waded backward into the water, sinking down to her shoulders. "I've never retreated from anything, yet I find myself too afraid of what I'm about to learn to follow you."

While he longed to extend his arm out to her, he had no choice but to take a few steps backward instead. "It's not bad. I hope, anyway. The fact that you haven't killed me yet is encouraging."

"So is it true, then?"

"What?"

"What the angels said. About what you are."

"... Yes."

She retreated further.

"But good news! You and I are going to get the Soul Chalice," Rile said.

Lamia raised an eyebrow. "For your father?"

"In a way—but more so we can ensure that it doesn't fall into his hands."

Lamia made her way onto the rocks beside the pool and sank onto the thick base of her tail. She kept the tip swirling in the cool water behind her, anchoring herself. She noticed Rile kept a farther distance from her than usual.

“So ... how’d it go up there?” she asked.

“Weird.”

“I’m sure.”

He’d been staring at some middle distance over her shoulder, but when his gaze found hers, he let out a shaky sigh. “Lamia ... I like you. Like, really like you.”

She blinked, not liking what that confession did to her insides. Her heart skipped a few beats too quickly, and heat rushed to her cheeks and stomach, tying it in knots. She was glad he continued speaking before she had to.

“I know you probably had an idea of that already, but I finally learned what was happening to me up there. Gods aren’t supposed to care for demons. My feelings for you grew too strong, and my powers have been trying to push you away so we don’t get closer. Now that I know that, I think they’ve gotten even more aggressive.” Biting his lip, he took one tentative step toward her, then frowned. “Yep, it’s worse. But I have an idea.”

“... Okay.”

“The Soul Chalice ... If it can turn my soul, I’ll no longer be a god. If I’m not a god, I won’t have powers, and they’ll stop attacking you. Then I can get closer to you. You know ... if you even want that.”

She knew what it was like to lose one’s identity. Could she really allow Rile to give up a part of himself for her? “But wouldn’t you feel lost without your powers?”

He shook his head. “Not in the least. I’ve spent my whole

life wanting to be a regular, normal, powerless human—until I met you, anyway. Then I was proud to be a manifestation because that’s what brought us together. My half-demon side was finally doing me some good. And then I found out I wasn’t half-demon at all, and my powers are hellbent on harming you. I couldn’t care any less about being a god, and what good are my powers if I can’t be near you?”

Lamia looked down at the shimmering rock she was sitting on. She took a slow breath, then admitted, “I really like you, too, Rile ... but I don’t want you to give up such a large piece of yourself for me.”

“If it means we can be together, I will give up anything.”

She extended her hand toward him, palm out, and he did the same.

How she longed to bring their palms together.

“I think you and me together can get the chalice, Lamia. Especially now that I know it can bring me closer to you.”

“I won’t be useful. I can’t get to those depths without being crushed to death.”

“No, no—I would never ask you to risk your life like that! But if anyone knows the water, it’s you. When we get there, maybe you’ll see something no one else has.”

She smiled. “Come to think of it, there’s sure to be some chalice hunters in the area, and I’m sure many of them will be angels. Would you like to help me fend them off?”

“Oh, hell yes,” Rile said, and his smile beamed just as brightly as his eyes did.

“I’ll get my stuff. Jinn’s gone, so we can’t use his portal beads. Getting to the trench is going to be a two-day trek from here. Do you have supplies?”

Rile’s smile widened even more. “I have better. *Cissah dra hipac!*”

Lamia gasped as Rile flew off the ground and landed on a cloud that materialized beneath him. He surfed on it left and right, then waggled his eyebrows at her. “I got here from the Saranan Woods in under an hour.”

“No way.” Even though it was magic from the Heavens, she couldn’t hate on its usefulness. “I’m not sure what good that’s going to do me, though. That cloud looks too small for us to share it and still keep our distance. Meet me there?”

“You really think I would race away from you? Lamia ...” He surfed back and forth again, cupping his chin between his fingers. “It’s just a cloud, right? I bet I can split it.”

“You don’t think your cloud will try to kill me like your powers do?”

“We’ll approach this ... cautiously. But the cloud does whatever I want it to do. It’s not communicating with me like my electricity does.”

“That’s how you said your powers worked before I awakened them.” But it was worth a shot. She wasn’t enthusiastic about using something from the Heavens, but if it worked to their advantage, it was worth trying. “I have something that may help.”

Lamia dove back into the water and propelled her way into

the cave behind the waterfall to gather their bags and a couple of weapons. She placed Rile's book into his pack and placed the heavy glass bottles neatly on the table, all too happy they wouldn't need to cart them around anymore. As she left, she patted the symbol she'd carved into the stone outside of the cave before parting the water to make sure their supplies didn't get wet.

"What is that thing?" Rile asked, motioning with his chin back toward the stone.

"Hm? Oh, that's my mark. It signifies that this area belongs to me."

Rile smiled. "I can see you in it. How those lines look like waves, and the ones coming out of the circle reminds me of the brightness of your eyes."

"That's exactly right. It means a great deal for a demon to mark something. The symbol's design carries a lot of weight and tells you a lot about its owner." She smiled over at him. "Demons mark individuals who are important to them as well."

She saw Rile tense, even from the distance they were at. "Have you ever marked anyone?"

"What?" Lamia laughed. "No, never. To leave a mark on someone is essentially the same as a human matrimony."

He smiled awkwardly as his face grew red. "I see."

She laughed, but her cheeks were heating, too. Could he be thinking about her branding him? Why was she even thinking about it? Even if she wanted to, she wouldn't be able to get

close enough ...

But marking him would be so hot.

Shaking her head, she cleared her throat and changed the subject. “Jinn brought this back for you,” she said as she set the pack down a few arms’ lengths from where he floated on his cloud. She then held up a long rapier with an ornate black hand guard, one of her favorites from her Manusyan collection. “And try this.” She turned and slithered away to allow him to approach the items while she turned her tail into legs. If she was going to surf on a cloud like he was, legs would be better for balance.

He surfed over to the bag and picked up the sword, then bounced it in his hand. “This is gorgeous ... lightweight and sharp. Looks like it’d be good for cloud slicing.”

“Only one way to find out. But be careful. I can’t heal you if you slice your foot off.” The cloud didn’t have a lot of room around where his feet were planted, but did expand outward if he spread his legs apart.

“Underestimating me once again,” he mumbled with a smile. He took a few deep, slow breaths, then pushed off his foot, pulled his leg back, and sliced at the cloud before it could shrink. Vapor billowed into the air, but after it cleared, Rile winked and surfed away, leaving a small piece behind.

“Yes! Now, let’s see if you can get on it and if it will move with you. If you feel like it’s going to attack, back away.”

She was going to approach a seemingly innocuous fluffy white puffball like it could be a raging bull demon. Not at all

stupid.

She took a few steps toward the cloud, eyes bouncing between it and Rile a short distance away. She looked for changes in his expression, if he looked concerned or nervous, but encouragement plastered his face more and more as she neared it. When she was close enough, she poked at it, finding that just beneath the layer of white vapor, it was as hard as wood. “This isn’t like Manusyan clouds that are formed from water.”

“No. This is a lot like what the ground of the Heavens feels like.”

So she was traveling on a little piece of the Heavens itself. Great. Just what she’d always wanted to do.

She gave it another few pokes, found it to be harmless enough, and climbed on.

Rile’s cloud hadn’t lost its ability to grow as wide as his stance. He stood with his legs as far apart as they would go, arms crossed. “Nice! Okay. Try to stand like me.”

She slid her feet apart, along the hard surface of the cloud. It expanded with her, and he whooped. She laughed at his excitement before leaning down and picking up her own bag and sword, throwing both over her shoulder. She was amazed that the cloud felt and acted just like solid ground; leaning down felt like she was picking something up off a bottom stair.

“Great! Now look at where you want the cloud to go next, and it will bring you there.”

Lamia looked over her shoulder at the pool beneath her

waterfall. She imagined hovering above the surface in the pool's center, and while she stood still, wind blew through her hair. It took her a moment to realize that wind was her moving, and she looked around her cloud at the surface of the water beneath her.

“You’re a natural! You don’t have to travel along the ground, either. Picture yourself above those trees there.”

She turned her gaze upward, where lush green branches dancing in the wind beckoned for her to join them. Zagan and Jinn had wings and took to the sky often, leaving Lamia to wonder how feeling weightless in the skies compared to being suspended in the water. Now was her chance to find out.

The ground drew away from her, and she rose up past the tops of the shorter trees and continued upwards. With nothing but a small circle of Heavenly cloud to support her, she should have felt lightheaded or scared. Instead, she was enthralled. “This is amazing!” she called down to Rile as she cleared the tallest tree she could find.

He emerged from the canopy a few trees away. “I thought you might like it. Ready to go?”

These clouds were something Rile would lose if they used the Soul Chalice, and he was okay with that? Enthusiastic to get going, even—all so they could stand closer than half a forest apart. “Ready,” she said. The word caught in her throat as she smiled at him. She turned and willed the cloud in the direction of the Tristah Sea.

Chapter 19

The island nearest to the Tristah Trench was just as perfect as Rile imagined it'd be. Crystal blue waves crashed onto white sand beaches that faded into the lush greenery of the trees. A volcano sat in the middle of the island, also covered in bright trees.

Water so blue it blended into the sky exploded out from the island in all directions—save the southeast side, where the transition went from bright blue, to nearly black, then back to blue. It looked like a fissure in the earth, and Rile could only assume that marked where the deepest part of Manusya lay.

Rile hadn't expected Lamia to take to flying so comfortably. He was having a harder time adjusting to the heights than she was. But as he looked over at her gazing down at the island from the clouds, he had to smile. If gorgons imagined a place like humans imagined the Heavens, Rile was sure this island was that place.

“Do you know the name of it?” he called out to her, a short distance to his right.

“Ostia Island,” she said, continuing to stare down at it with bewilderment. “I never realized just how gorgeous it looks from above. The angels shouldn't be able to have views like these to themselves.”

“Well, now they don't. We have officially laid eyes on everything between the Wahein Peninsula and Ostia Island.”

Lamia smiled. “Do you see anyone down there?”

“No, but the forest is thick, and we’re very high up here. There has to be *someone* down there if the Soul Chalice is as big a deal as everyone’s saying.”

“Wait, look—a ship, in the inlet north, to the right of the volcano. Is that ...?”

He scanned the area she described and floated forward. “The same kind of ship you rescued me from? Yes, it looks like it.”

Lamia frowned, then searched the sky. “If they’re north, let’s go south. We’re not safe up here.”

She led the way down, skimming her cloud across a shallow lagoon and leaning down to cut her hand through the water. They crossed the lagoon, over the beach, and into the tropical forest. Huge ferns caught the bright sunlight that filtered through the trees, and when she turned to face him, that same sunlight caught her beautiful smile.

“Had I known this place existed, I would have suggested we come here instead of the desert. You look so much more relaxed and happy.”

“These waters have been claimed by the sirens and mermen. I try not to compete for territory that manifestations like them should enjoy instead of a visitor like me. But now I’m a resident of Manusya as well, so perhaps it’s time to negotiate with them.”

“So sirens do exist. There’s so much I have to learn. Are they half-gorgon?”

“They’re half-nommo. Gorgons don’t have sharp teeth and silver eyes like they do. The colonies here have all bred

together; a nommo demon hasn't been on Manusya in over a hundred years. They're why I thought all manifestations have groups or colonies they belonged to."

"I don't know if that would have been better or worse for me. I guess I would have found out what I really was a long time ago." And then he would never have met Lamia, or perhaps would have met her on the battlefield as enemies. In some ways, his secret heritage worked out. He was happy he hadn't subjected to the brainwashing of the Heavens at a young age and was old enough now to make decisions for himself. "Anyway, ready to get off your cloud? I'm assuming that if I dismiss mine, yours will disappear, too."

She pouted. "I have to admit, that was fun. But yes, I'm ready."

How much he wanted to kiss those full, pouty lips. Shaking his head, he murmured the same phrase that summoned the cloud to make it disappear, and they both bent their knees as they landed on the ground.

"Let's take a look around, make sure we're really alone over here, and set up camp," Lamia said.

Rile insisted that Lamia take his tent again. She sat inside of it and watched Rile take the branches and sticks they'd collected and fashion them into a lean-to across a low, thick branch of a nearby tree. She wanted to help him, but the most help she could be was to keep her distance and not aggravate the powers inside of him.

Rile was beautiful in the twilight. His silver hair had a soft glow to it as the sun sank lower in the sky and a pink hue filtered through the trees. His tanned skin accentuated the curves and dips of his muscles as he worked, and Lamia relished that she had nothing better to do than to sit, watch, and appreciate.

“So tell me something, Rile,” she said as she slid to her stomach on the canvas floor of the tent and propped her head on her hands.

“About what?” He was breathless from heaving the large branches and tying them together, yet sounded willing to humor her. She quite liked his breathy tone.

“Tell me about the necklace in your bag.”

He turned to face her, and she was surprised to see his bright eyes warm and a smile on his face instead of surprise. “You went through my bag?”

“One of the bottles leaked, and I dried your book and the necklace.”

“I see. Thank you.” With one foot on the base of a tree, he tugged hard on a vine that acted as rope for his shelter. “That necklace was my mother’s. My father gave it to her.”

“Do you know what the symbols say? Jinn and I didn’t recognize them.”

“You don’t? She always told me it was written in mephis, but I guess that wasn’t true, considering my dad wasn’t actually a demon.”

“As far as I know, the mephis don’t have their own

language, anyway. And even if they did, all demon languages share the same writing system.”

“Huh. Yet another mystery about my heritage, I guess. I can’t ask Orko its origin now; that bridge is burned.”

Lamia debated whether or not she should tell him that she’d found his mother’s note among his maps. *Never forget your strength, my son. Thank you for showing me mine.* Rile had a knack for that, it seemed. Despite going through so much himself, he was always there for Lamia when she needed him. Or as close as he could get to “there,” anyway.

“What happened to your mother?” she found herself asking, then sucked air through her teeth. “I’m sorry. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, it’s okay.” Rile pulled on his completed lean-to, testing its durability and finding it didn’t budge. With a satisfied nod, he picked up the unused wood and piled it into a small mound between them. “She died when I was a teenager. Like I’ve said before, she had a hard time being a single mom raising a half-demon. We faced a lot of opposition no matter where we moved to, but we chose wrong when we decided to move to the city. Mom got into an argument with a neighbor, and all of a sudden they were claiming she’d tried to rob them and they’d acted in self-defense. I was on my way home from school when I came upon the scene.” He held his open palm over the pile of wood, and a crackle rang out as a bolt of lightning flew from his hand and ignited it. He leaned down to stoke the flames with a few good blows of air, then retreated back to his shelter. “How different would our lives have been

if we knew I wasn't a demon, but a god?"

She frowned and nodded. "It would have been a lot different. Instead of shacks and shelters, you probably would have been living in lavish temples and gifted with offerings. But I wonder if that's a life you would have enjoyed more. You could have been confined to one of those temples, forced to do the bidding of the people. Your life would not have been your own. The human priests and the gods above would have controlled you for the good of the war."

"They're still trying to, so my mother and I could have at least had a more comfortable life with the same amount of control around us."

"If you say so." She could only imagine what life was like growing up as an outcast in this realm, where people were innately good, but only to their own kind. Manifestations helped turn a soul dark because of the evil they could awaken in people, whether they were stoking that evil consciously or not. It was always easy to dream of the good things in a life you wished for yourself, but it was much harder to imagine the harsh realities of what that life could have been. "I never imagined being anything else but a demon knight. Now that I'm not one anymore ..." Lamia looked up at the sky, searching for words that matched her thoughts. But she needed to figure out what her thoughts actually *were* in order to articulate them. "It's strange, yet freeing. It scares me that I'm starting all over, and that I have to figure out how to live here permanently, but I'm finding a purpose of my own."

"Before I met you, I'd never considered what life as a half-

breed amongst humans would be like. People mostly run and hide or plead for their lives when they see me, but a few of the darker souls are drawn to me. They ask if I could do the honor of taking their lives so they can be reborn among demons, or come to us in worship. But a manifestation isn't enough demon to please those dark souls, and too much demon to make full humans feel comfortable. I want to make sure no other manifestation has the same hardships you did. I want to be their knight now."

Rile smiled. "I think that is a very noble cause, and I want to help in every way I can."

"Even though you should be fighting for the other side?"

"Should I?" Rile shrugged. "I have no affinity for the gods. The only people who've cared for me are my mother, you, and Alex—and even Alex was under obligation."

"I really do think that Alex cares for you, obligation or not. I'm still so sorry I told you who he really was when I did ... It wasn't my place."

"Of course it was. You're a part of that world and the war. I would have been disappointed if you didn't tell me."

"But I didn't tell you for the right reasons. I thought it was your fault that we couldn't get close, and I wanted to take that out on you. I'm sorry."

"You still have nothing to apologize for. It *is* my fault. Repelling you is in my makeup." Rile sighed. The sun had long set, and the moonlight filtered through the trees, but the darker environment allowed Lamia to better see the anguish

surrounding Rile's glowing eyes. "Of all the things that have pained me, being unable to touch you hurts most of all."

Lamia looked down at the scars running across her palms. She searched for a response aside from "that hurts me, too," and when she didn't offer one, he let out a small laugh.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm just thinking about how badly I want to kiss you. When we *could* touch, I never took advantage of finding out what your lips felt like."

She ran her tongue over them. "I hope you would find them soft," she said, then embarrassment flooded her. She let out an awkward laugh.

But Rile didn't chuckle along with her. He gazed down at her lips from over the fire and said, "They'd be perfect."

His tone sent a wave of goosebumps down her skin and caused her scales to spread apart. She stared right back at his own lips, nibbling on her bottom one as she imagined how tender and passionate his kiss would be. There was so much pent-up chemistry and attraction between them, and not being able to give into it made her dizzy.

"Lamia, if I could, I would wrap my arms around you, run my hands over your sides, and lean down and kiss you so hard."

There was no embarrassment in his tone, but she wondered if his cheeks felt as hot as hers did. She couldn't tell if he was blushing in the firelight. "Then what would you do?"

"Would you kiss me back?"

“Of course I would.”

He took a deep, shaky breath. “I would deepen the kiss and put my hands on your hips to pull you toward me so you could feel how much I want you.”

The ember she always had for him deep in her belly grew hotter. She shifted, repositioning herself on her knees to stifle the heat. “Would you be hard?”

“Ugh, Lamia—I’m so hard for you *now*.”

Her vision tilted as she bit back a moan of pleasure. The idea that he was hard for her while she was out of reach was incredibly erotic.

“Are you wet?” he asked.

She’d never spoken like this with someone else before, but her need for him was quickly extinguishing any self-consciousness she had. “Yes.”

“Do you like me telling you what I would do to you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to continue?”

More than anything. “Yes.”

Her breasts ached as she watched him shift, sagging back against the tree and pushing his hips forward. She realized she was holding her breath as the shape of his erection beneath his pants came into view.

“After you felt how hard I was, I would kiss down your neck and over your collarbone. I’d run my hands up your stomach and cup your breasts, and I’d lick across your skin.”

She shuddered, and she found herself mimicking the action with her own hands. Her body temperature rose a degree when she stopped herself midway up her torso.

Rile groaned. “No, please continue,” he urged, and she could not deny him. She wouldn’t deny *herself* this pleasure. She slid her hands up, catching the underside of her breasts and pushing upward, gasping as she filled her hands with them.

“As you squeeze my breasts,” she said breathlessly, then moaned as she kneaded them with her own hands, “I would grab your shirt and tear it off your body.” To her delight, he did so, and she watched the firelight dance over the grooves of his smooth chest and abdomen as he settled back against the tree. “And when our bodies came back together, I would trail my hand down that incredible stomach of yours and put my palm against your erection.”

She was mesmerized as his hands became her own, doing exactly as she’d described. His hand pressed against his hard cock through his pants, and he thrust up against it, wriggling his hips as he sucked in air through his teeth.

“I would grip it and give it a good, long stroke, up and down.”

He did so—more than once.

“Take your shirt off,” he groaned, continuing to stroke himself through his clothing.

She couldn’t get the garment off fast enough and didn’t bother to wait until he instructed her to lose her bra. He’d

already seen her naked, but with the way he worshiped her with his eyes, it was like he was seeing her for the first time.

“I know you know this, but you’re beautiful.”

“The same could be said for you,” she said, biting her lip again. “Now slide those pants off.”

She was rewarded with the sight of his bare, muscled thighs and thick erection. “Seven Hells.” She wanted to crawl over to him, straddle his lap, and sheathe him deep inside her body.

“Hands back at your breasts,” he commanded.

“Hand back on your cock.”

Her sex tightened as she watched his hand fly back to the base of his now-bare erection. As she pinched her nipples and rolled her breasts in her hands, he gripped his length, sliding up to the head and back down to the base, with his eyes fixated on her.

“Take off the rest of your clothes, Lam. Show me all of you.”

She thought he would never ask. She shimmied out of her pants and panties, tossing them to the side in a heap. Her legs fell open wide, and Rile moaned, squirming beneath his own hold as his strokes became faster. “Keep one hand at your breast, and rub your clit with the other.”

She let her breast go and slid her hand down her body until her fingers pressed against her swollen clit, rubbing it in small circles. “Hells, Rile.”

“Hells, Lamia, *yes*,” he groaned. He slowed his stroking

while she picked up her pace. “Ngh, I can see how wet you are from here.” She watched his stomach and chest muscles swell and strain against his taut skin with each labored breath he took, and as she dipped her fingers into her wet folds for more lubrication, he began to stroke faster again. “This was a dangerous idea. I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold myself back from filling you.”

Lamia moaned as she sank further back and pushed her hips up. She bit her lip as she hesitantly moved her fingers away from her clitoris and positioned them at her entrance, then paused—she wanted him to give her permission to finger herself in his stead.

Rile hissed his approval. “Do it, Lamia. One finger, then another.” He whimpered as she followed his instructions, and though her fingers offered some relief, they were nowhere near the girth his length would have satisfied her with.

“I want you, Rile. I *need* you,” she whined.

“Hells, I need you, too. It’s driving me insane to stay away from you. Now other hand on your clit and show me what it would look like to bring you to climax.”

She knew there was nothing she could do to experience his touch tonight unless she wanted to fry in the process, but she whimpered in both disappointment and pleasure as she lost her own hand from her breast and brought it down between her legs. As two fingers moved in and out of herself, the other worked her clit, and she closed her eyes and imagined him over her. Claiming her. Pressing his body into hers...

“Fuck, Lamia, yes,” he moaned. She opened her eyes so she

wouldn't miss another moment of his pleasure. He was stroking himself quickly now between a tight fist. "I'm close. Are you?"

"Yes." That was *her* voice that sounded so desperate?

"Make yourself come, Lam. I want to see it."

Rile watching her in such a state as he furiously stroked himself was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen, and it didn't take too long for her to cry out into the night as her entire body tightened, then gave into a powerful release. She trembled under her own touch, removing her fingers from her sensitive clitoris while her fingers continued moving in and out of her as she rode out her pleasure.

Rile answered her calls with his own, craning his head back to groan into the sky as his hips bucked wildly and he released stream after powerful stream of seed into the air. "Want this to be inside of you," he said through gritted teeth, pumping all the seed he could from himself. They stared at each other as they panted and caught their breaths, slowly removing their hands from themselves and coming back up to sitting positions.

"Lust is a powerful thing," Rile said with a small chuckle, the bashfulness she'd expected before now creeping into his tone.

She was relieved as he turned away from her to wipe himself off, because that meant she could do the same. Now that her orgasm had dulled the raging hormones inside of her, she was shocked by what they had done.

“It sure is,” she said with a similar laugh.

“But that was incredible,” he said. They turned to face each other again, he with his boxers on and her in her bra and panties. “I want to make you feel that good myself.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a long while, coming down off their high. Lamia listened to the low hum of frogs and crickets chirping, the breeze rustling the trees, and the waves crashing onshore in the distance.

It was zen.

“We’ll be together, Rai. We have to be,” Lamia said. She would go insane if they weren’t ever able to physically act on their connection together. She lay down on her side, curling up in the tent and hugging her pillow to her chest. “Soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Rile replied. The firelight illuminated his beautiful, wide smile. “I want you *now*.”

“Sleep for now, and that will bring us closer to the moment we can be together.”

Every moment that passes gets us closer to getting the chalice. We have to get that damned cup.

Chapter 20

Lamia stared wide-eyed at the bright light of the moon shining through the ceiling of her tent as she thought about what she and Rile had just done together. She'd never been so vulnerable with another, and while her face flared when she replayed their words and what she'd shown him she could do to herself, Rile left her longing for more. Rile left her longing for *him*. As hot as that moment was, she would never be completely satisfied if they could only watch each other get off. She would always crave him, always long to feel what it would be like to have him hold her. Kiss her. Fill her.

Sighing, she sat up and peeked out of the tent. The campfire had long died out, and Rile was sound asleep with his arm beneath his head. The slow rise and fall of his chest was hypnotic, and she contemplated watching him sleep for a while longer, but she had more important things to do.

Through hell or high water, she was going to get that godsdamned Soul Chalice.

She knocked her legs together and pushed onto her knees as they fused into her tail, then she grabbed her pack and slithered out of her tent. *I can't last another day like this*, she thought. She was like an animal in heat, willing to do whatever it took for she and her mate to come together. But it was more than that. *I have to be able to touch the man I love*.

Love. It was the only possible way to explain what the thought of him did to her insides.

She had some diving to do. With the moon still high and

bright in the sky, she made her way to the beach. It was impossible to see where the sea floor dropped beneath the waves, but Lamia knew it wasn't too far a swim from where they'd made camp.

She lowered herself onto the sand by the waves, then set her pack down and dug through it. At the very bottom was a small sachet, tied off with a thin blue thread.

Lamia broke the thread and spread the sachet wide, revealing three pieces of dried-up leathery demon jerky. She'd saved the delicious gorgon delicacy for a special occasion, but tonight wasn't just a special occasion: the jerky would help her attempt to survive the trench.

She extracted one of the small, rough pieces of scaled esco skin, a now-extinct fish once found in the red seas of Hell. In the moonlight, the scales looked dull and gray, but in the sun, they would have been iridescent, shining with every color of the rainbow. She would have liked to have been able to enjoy its colors in the daytime, but there was no time for that. If Rile found her, he would put a stop to her spontaneous dive.

But was this really spontaneous? Ever since Lamia had learned about the Soul Chalice, she knew that she would be descending into the Tristah Trench to get it. Had Zagan known this jerky existed, he would have made her dive on the spot. But having never tried it before, she wasn't sure if she'd live long enough to bring it to the surface.

She'd never planned to dive for Zagan. Until tonight, she was going to dive exclusively for the betterment and survival of all the demons of Hell. But now that Rile knew the potential

of the chalice and what it could mean for them, and after what had transpired this evening, her desire for it multiplied tenfold. She was doing this for herself as much as she was doing it for all of demonkind—and if it meant they could all win, that was all the better.

This was for *her*. For her happiness. Keeping the chalice out of the hands of the angels was the icing on the cake.

Lamia popped the first esco jerky into her mouth and chewed. It had a smoky, salty flavor unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and she could see why it was so coveted by her kind. As soon as she bit through the leathery texture, it melted like butter in her mouth. It was savory and meaty, succulent and ... *divine*.

She cringed at the word.

Knowing time was of the essence and afraid Rile would wake and try to find her, she couldn't linger on the perfect flavors for much longer. She shoved the other two pieces of jerky into her mouth and rose back up onto her tail, slithering into the water as she chewed. She shivered as the cool water kissed the underside of her tail before submerging herself up to her waist. She swallowed, then dove in.

The endless sea welcomed her with a caress of her skin and a brush to her hair—things Rile wasn't able to do now, but would soon. She craned her neck and awakened her gills before undulating her body, running her hands over the fine sand of the sea floor.

The water in this sea was warmer than that of the sea she was swimming in the night when she'd first rescued Rile, but

it still had a bite to it. The temperatures in the Tristah Trench would be much colder, and she needed to brace herself now for that. She could already feel the jerky metabolizing inside of her, pushing an enzyme into her scales and skin that would help protect it from the cold and compression of the deep. How long or how well the effects would last were unknowns, so she had to move quickly.

She reached her hand out to grip more sand and found nothing but open ocean; she'd reached the end of the shelf. From here, there would be a steep decline into the depths, another leveling off, and then the trench.

No turning back now.

Lamia dove, undulating through the water at a relaxed but purposeful pace. She needed to save most of her energy for the descent into the trench itself. What moonlight she could see faded away, and the pressure began to close in around her as her path was lit only by the beams of light from her eyes.

When she was a young knight, Lamia would frequently dive deep down into these waters for training. When the pressure made her head feel like it was going to collapse in on itself, she would rise a little, wait for the pain to subside, and try again. She would dive and dive, trying to get farther and farther into the deep, until claustrophobia told her to get the hell back up to the surface. She pushed herself so far one time that she blew every blood vessel in her eyes. Had she not been able to heal herself, Putha said she could have gone blind.

When the pressure began to push on her head, Lamia knew she was getting to about that point again—and she hadn't yet

felt the second leveling-off of the seafloor before the trench. The jerky was helping. She wished she had a way to measure the depth, but based on how long she'd been swimming downward for, Lamia knew she'd broken all of her previous records—and the blood vessels in her eyes were still intact. Probably.

Relief flooded her when she finally scraped along the sea floor and leveled off. When she saw the second plunge, Lamia knew she was at the trench. She paused, gripping the edge to peek into the dark abyss.

Somewhere down there was the Soul Chalice. If it was everything the legend said it would be, it would be the object to clinch the war and win all the souls in the Lake. It would also let her finally be with Rile.

She gripped the ledge leading into the trench and pulled, using the momentum to force herself even farther into the deep. She was sure no other demon, angel, or human, except maybe the female demon of the legend, had ever been this far. No one knew how deep the trench actually went, only that no rope ever fashioned had yet touched the bottom. She could reach the bottom in another minute, twenty minutes, an hour—or never at all.

Push. Getting that cup is the only option.

It was getting cold enough that Lamia's body grew slower and more sluggish. She wiggled her fingers as she swam, trying to keep them from freezing. Every movement was an effort, like all of her was slowly turning to ice.

Bubbles tickled her numbing skin, confusing her. Bubbles at

this depth? And with them came heat! As if they were Rile's campfire, Lamia held out her extremities to catch the warm currents. Tiny, boneless fish that reminded her of wraiths rode up with the bubbles and swam back down again.

She was just as attracted to the heat as they were, and she swam down, feeling her body thaw ... then boil. The tiny fish, more abundant in number around the thermal vents in the seafloor, swam at her glowing eyes. She batted them away, finding herself blinded at the bottom of the Tristah Trench.

Seven Hells, she'd made it.

The chalice. Find the Soul Chalice!

What the hell did this thing look like? An actual cup, a stone? Would it be buried in the sand or fuzzy and camouflaged by what little sea life existed here? The pressure was squeezing her while the vents cooked her skin. Both sensations urged her to hurry the fuck up and get out of there. She screamed, sending more bubbles up with those from the vents as she let out her anger on the wraith fish that blinded her.

She closed her eyes, since they were of no use anyway, to disinterest the fish and get rid of one distraction. But with the loss of that distraction came another: though she was at the bottom of the trench and could descend no further, the pressure of the water around her was slowly starting to push against her. Her body was quickly metabolizing the jerky, and its effects were wearing off.

If she didn't find the chalice now, she never would. But how was she going to find it while blind, overheating, and ready to

implode at any minute?

In her panic, she thought of something to calm her: Rile. He once asked if she could control water at a molecular level, and he'd helped her discover she could.

She put her palms out, feeling the boiling water cook them as she used her powers to push the water out around her. Almost like echolocation, she felt for any disturbance and pushback.

And there it was.

Trembling as the pressure continued to push against her body, she sank down just low enough to grab at something she sensed on the sea floor. She hoped to whatever being would listen that she wasn't just imagining a goblet-shaped object in the currents. Her own skin was going to be made into jerky if she lingered near these vents any longer. Perhaps the wraith fish were hungry for gorgon meat.

She pushed through the pain, trying to stay lucid and conscious while blindly grabbing for the object. Her blindness allowed her only an approximation of its location.

Push. Push!

Her fingers sought purchase on something hard and thin. She gripped it, kicked off the seafloor, and then her mind clouded.

She was only able to get a few swimming strokes in before darkness overtook her.

Rile awoke to the warm sun on his face and smiled. Before he opened his eyes, he knew what he would find: bliss.

He decided his new priority was wake up and see Lamia every day for the rest of his life. It wouldn't be much longer until they would finally use the Soul Chalice to dispel the powers that kept them apart, and not only would he be able to see her, but he would be able to touch her. The excitement of that made his eyes fly open.

He sat up in confusion when he looked across the clearing and found Lamia's tent open and unoccupied. He stood and took careful steps forward, keeping tabs on the electricity inside of him in case she was somewhere close. "Lamia?"

There was no sign of her. No noise around him, no answer. He bent down and peeked inside the tent to find her bag was gone along with her.

"Lamia?"

He trudged out of the woods and onto the beach, and his eyebrows knit together in confusion. Lamia's pack and a satchel lay flat on the sand. Both were wide open, and the smaller bag was empty.

"Lamia?" Lightning licked across his skin. "If Orko did something to you ..." he ground out, searching the area around the pack for any clues.

He jumped back and suppressed a yelp as something exploded from the shallows a short distance away. He was glad for the extra distance between him and the water, because otherwise he would have hurt Lamia, who laid lifelessly in the

arms of a broad-shouldered male.

Two females flanked him, and as Rile moved to approach as closely as he could, they hissed as the male hugged Lamia closer to his chest. They all sat on thick tails—the male’s was red, while one female’s was light green and the other’s light blue. The females also had sharp, pointed teeth that glinted in the sunlight.

“Hey!” Rile called, throwing up his hands open-palmed at them. “Friend! I’m her friend!” Though he was playing nice, if these assholes had harmed his female, they would die. As they stared at each other in silence, Rile contemplated how to electrocute these creatures without harming Lamia at the same time. He noted their smooth, human-like skin that covered everything from their stomachs upward. They did not have patches of scales aside from their tails like Lamia did.

“Are you merfolk? What happened to her?”

They met him with more silence.

“Can you understand me, or—”

“Yes, we’re merfolk, and yes, we can understand you,” one of the females said.

The male lowered Lamia into the waves, keeping her head above water as the second female began blowing air into her mouth.

Rile was desperate to go to her, but any closer and he would do more harm than good. “What happened to her?” he demanded.

“We found her like this, floating up from the deep,” the

green-tailed female said.

His mouth hung open. *Did she try to reach the bottom of the trench by herself?*

“There’s no heartbeat,” the blue-tailed female said, with her ear pressed against Lamia’s chest. The male holding her gave her a gentle shake.

“What?” Rile stopped himself before he finished taking a step, roaring in frustration. “Damn this, do something!”

He watched helplessly on the shore as the merfolk tried to wake Lamia up without success. Rile jogged backwards as he shouted, “Put her in the sand and back away!”

“But are—”

“JUST DO IT!” he cried. He and the merman locked eyes, and whatever the merman saw in Rile’s gaze, it was enough to make him move. He brought Lamia where the small waves crested on the shore and set her down.

“Good, now back away. Please. Far away.”

The three retreated further into the water, concern on each one of their faces as they waited to see what Rile was going to do.

He wanted to press his head to her chest and check for himself, as what he was about to do might kill her otherwise.

One step closer. Two. He wanted to be cautious and gauge the power within himself, but time was of the essence. He was about eight arms’ lengths away from her when his power roared to life of its own accord. With a loud crack, a whip of

lightning exploded from Rile and struck Lamia in the chest.

The merfolk began to shout, but halted once Lamia's eyes flew open. Her back arched, and she gasped toward the sky, fear and pain clear on her expression.

“Get to her! Make sure she's okay!” Rile pleaded as he jumped further backward. The merman lunged forward, scooped Lamia up from the waterline, and retreated to the females. Rile wanted to be the one holding Lamia, but found solace in the merman doing exactly what he would have: checking her for further injury, making sure her breathing stayed consistent. The females hummed to her, a song that suddenly made Rile's eyes droop and his body feel fatigued as he listened.

“I'm okay,” Lamia said hoarsely, nodding but still looking around as if not quite sure where she was. As soon as her gaze settled on Rile in the distance, her slow, weak movements turned jerky and desperate.

“Where is it?” Her weak voice cracked as she tried to shout. She smacked at her hips as if she still had legs and pants with pockets. She reached around her back, eyes wide.

“Do you mean this?” the blue-tailed female asked and reached into her own pack to extract a lump of coral.

Wait, not coral—it had a handle. Rile couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Could that be ...?

Chapter 21

Lamia assured the merfolk that she was okay to stand on her own, especially with the aid of the surrounding water, and the merman gingerly set her down before they all took a few steps back to give her some space. She ran her hands over what she hoped was the Soul Chalice—but she had little faith in that. The legendary cup looked more like a lump of discarded trash, if Lamia was being honest. It was tiny, capable of holding only a small glass of wine, and made of porcelain—not gold and gemstones like she'd expected a grail made by a god to be. The rough texture welcomed the growth of barnacles and calcified coral. It was slick and fuzzy with whatever strange flora grew in the darkness of the trench.

No wonder the demoness didn't drink from it; surely she was worth more than the simplicity of this cup.

"You were clutching this like your life depended on it," one of the sirens said.

"That's because it does," Lamia replied, continuing to turn the cup in her hands. "Thank you for holding it for me."

"Is this what the humans and angels on the island have also been after?" the merman asked.

"I hope so, but after looking at it, I'm not so sure. How many are here, and what have they been doing?"

"They've been trying to reach the bottom of the sea floor before the trench as practice, testing out different combinations of diving techniques and abilities. We have been keeping scarce, as they have been ruthless in trying to capture

one of our own to assist. When we saw you, we thought they'd succeeded in capturing a water demon and had enslaved it to do their bidding. But then we recognized you, Lady Knight."

"Well, even if this is not what we've been looking for, I will certainly help make sure your people are safe. I am a knight no longer; you may call me Lamia. And how should I address all of you?"

The female who had handed her the cup bowed her head. "I am Telepea, Lady Lamia. This is Dallimae"—she gestured to the other siren with a long green tail—"and Nereus." The merman.

"Telepea, Dallimae, Nereus. It is a pleasure to meet you all. I am forever in your debt."

"If you can help us get rid of the camp on the north side of the island, that debt is forgiven," Telepea said. The siren looked over Lamia's shoulder at the shore. "And who is your silver-haired admirer?"

She turned to see Rile pacing, his face just as pale as the hair atop his head. When they locked eyes, he stopped and perked up, returning Lamia's wave with one that was as enthusiastic as it was relieved. Lamia laughed. "That's Rile. His electricity makes getting too close a challenge."

"So we see. Will you be all right?"

Lamia looked down to find a new mark on her body from Rile's lightning: a circle, right over her heart. She was amassing quite a collection. "Yes, I'll be all right."

"He's a manifestation as well?"

“He’s a half-breed, yes.” No need to tell them what his other half was, especially since the angels had been meddling and trying to harm their group. “I thank you for your help. I will see to it that the angels bother you no longer.”

“Thank you, Lady Lamia. At least some good came out of it. Had we not been in hiding, we likely would not have been that deep in the water so early in the morning and found you. Thank our enemies for that, and I wish you show them why Hellions are not to be messed with.” Telepea smiled and the two shook hands before the merfolk disappeared into the waves.

Clutching the cup tightly, Lamia made her way out of the waves and split her tail into legs. Rile watched her every step, then began taking his own steps backward as she got closer.

“Gods—Seven Hells—whatever, what were you thinking?” he said in a low voice. Disappointment and fear smothered his tone.

“I had to get it. I had to go down there and find this thing, and you would have tried to stop me.”

“Damn right I would have! We could have figured something out *together*. I could have at least stood watch on a cloud above the water for you, or something, to make sure you came back up. Maybe we could have met those merfolk beforehand, and they could have watched you for as far as they could dive.”

“What’s done is done, and it all worked out, didn’t it?” She set the cup down in the sand and backed up. “I just hope I got the right thing.”

Rile made his way toward the cup. “It does look pretty insignificant, doesn’t it?”

He bent down and touched the cup, but instead of standing with it, it was almost as if an invisible hand forced him to his knees. His bright eyes widened as he picked it up delicately by the handles and ran his fingers over one spot where sea life hadn’t grown and the bright white of the porcelain still poked through.

“You feel something?” Lamia asked.

He nodded. “I can’t explain it, but this is it. This is definitely it.”

Lamia breathed a sigh of relief. Her pounding headache was worth it. “Come on, then. We have to get it out of the open and to safety.”

It was still the early hours of the morning. If the angels and humans were going to study the trench again today, Rile and Lamia had just enough time to pack up and leave before the humans could discover them.

Rile summoned his cloud, which remained split in two, and sent one side over to her while he finished shoving the last of their supplies into their bags. The power that emanated from the chalice made him want to hold it forever, as if it could graft itself onto him, but he forced himself to wedge it between his book and clothing in his pack.

“What? We can’t leave yet, I just promised the merfolk that we would send the angels away,” Lamia said.

Rile smiled to himself. His ever-valiant knight. “I know, but we can do that later. We need to get this thing far away from this island. What’s a couple more days of them thinking it’s down there while we figure out how it works?” He refused to address the chalice by its proper name, lest someone was listening to them. For all he knew, Orko was watching his every move. But he doubted that—had the god known that Lamia recovered the Soul Chalice, angels of all shapes and sizes would have descended upon them by now. Still, he wanted to stay as safe as possible.

Lamia’s eyes went wide. “Because another couple of days could mean our enemies successfully capture one of the merfolk. They could torture them or kill them while trying to force them down into the trench. I had special equipment the merfolk don’t have access to; there’s no chance they would survive. Or the merfolk they capture could know the former ‘Knight of the Water’ already got the damn thing and tell them that. We chance our cover being blown then, too.”

He loved she wanted to protect the world’s manifestations, but they now held the world’s biggest detonator, which, if in the wrong hands, could do so much more damage than the capture of one or two of them.

But he’d been one of the captured not too long ago. He thought of those who cried on the boat, paralyzed by fear.

He shuddered at the memory. “You couldn’t wait for my help to get the thing, and now that we have it, you’re okay with waiting?”

Lamia shrugged. “I have to be. I’m their champion now.

Duty calls.”

Rile half-smiled, then waved his arm to send the clouds away. “And as squire to said champion, I am here to serve. What do you need?”

Lamia paced, tapping her finger to her chin as she considered the question. “I would enlist the help of the demon army if I wanted Zagan to know what we have, but I think it’s just as dangerous in his hands as it is in the Heavens’. If it would affect Coryn’s soul in some way that could hurt her, he may choose to destroy it instead. We could scout the angel camp and see what we’re up against, try to take them on ourselves ...”

Rile shook his head. “I don’t like that idea. I won’t risk hurting you again. I already promised you I wouldn’t, and then ...” He motioned to the new scar on her chest. “Plus, if we got overpowered and something happened to you, or they got to the chalice ... We’re so close to being together, Lam. Let’s not risk more than we have to.”

She rewarded him with a warm, sad smile. “Okay. Agreed.”

“But if you can’t get the demon army to help us, I have an idea for an alternative. It will require a day and my cloud. Will you stay here and guard the merfolk?”

Her sad smile turned into one of curious trepidation. “Yes, but what are you planning?”

“Your squire will not let you down, Lady Knight of the Half-Breeds. *Cissah dra hipac!*” His cloud pushed him into the air, and he checked to make sure his sword and pack were

securely strapped to his body. As he motioned for the two halves of his cloud to merge into one, he reached into his pocket and rummaged for the handle on the chalice.

Lamia shook her head. “Take it with you,” she said.

His eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

She hesitated, looking at his cloud for a moment before speaking. “I think it’s safest with you, away from this island, while I keep tabs on our enemies.” Her eyes snapped up to his. “I trust you.”

He swayed on his cloud, the weight of her words and the chalice in his pocket not lost on him. “I’ll keep it safe, and I’ll be back by morning.” The cloud fused together at his feet before he blew her a kiss. “I can’t wait until we can be together, Lam. I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

“You’d better! Be safe.”

“You, too.”

Hovering above her, he stared at her for a long moment. He wanted to do more than blow her a simple kiss. He wanted to connect his lips with hers, feel her warm body against his ...

Soon. He had to distance himself from her one more time to finally bring them together.

“Bye, Lamia,” he whispered before soaring skyward.

It was nearly dawn before the following day, and Lamia was tired.

She’d spent the previous day and night scouting the army of

angels and humans at the north shore of the island. Now, she hugged her legs to her chest as she sat in the sand, looking out over the dark water. She missed having Rile around. Even though they couldn't touch, knowing he was as near her was comforting.

The usual physical distance they usually shared made it more difficult to remember that he was no longer within earshot now. How many times had she'd tried to share her thoughts with him tonight?

“The waves sound so nice, don't th—”

“Once we activate the chalice, I—”

“You're sure you want to give up your—”

She laughed and shook her head each time. “When did I get so used to not being alone?” she asked herself.

When you realized you were in love with Rile.

A chill made her shimmy in place. “Rile is a god,” she whispered, “and I really *am* in love with him.”

She thought immediately of Zagan and everything she'd said to him, but stopped herself from feeling guilty. Her relationship with Rile differed greatly from what Zagan had with Coryn. She was an angel that'd been cast from the Heavens and made forsaken, only to be reascended later. She'd decided to stay a Heavenly being. Rile was very much the opposite—he was Heavenly, but had already decided he would divorce his soul from his godly status and become human. Zagan and Coryn were trying to change demonkind to fit an angel in among them. Lamia and Rile would never

dream of changing Hell to suit themselves.

As the morning sky began to glow in soft pinks and oranges, Lamia saw a swarm of specks flying around in the far distance. She watched the migratory birds and smiled, recalling what it'd felt like to fly. Freeing. Refreshing.

But as the birds drew closer, Lamia realized they weren't birds at all.

She quickly rose to her feet as she scanned the sky, counting at least three dozen figures on clouds hurdling toward her. Gods? Did they come for the Soul Chalice? Her heart lurched, and adrenaline began pumping through her. These were far too many gods to take on her own—she would need to run.

“Lamia!” the god at the head of the pack shouted. She would recognize that voice anywhere—Rile. He waved enthusiastically, then gestured wildly to the clouds around him. “They've come to help!”

She was losing her touch when it came to anticipating what was coming at her. Birds turned into gods, which turned into Rile, which became an entire army of manifestations riding toward her on clouds. So many lines were blurred.

As they got closer, she recognized the mannies coming toward them as many of the ones she had rescued on the burning boat, the same ones that had told her to scam once she'd accidentally given away their location to their captors.

She bristled, but they began cheering—and chanting her name?

“La-mi-a! La-mi-a!” chimed the chorus, and Lamia

motioned for them to quiet with her hands.

“Shh, we don’t know who else is around!” she said through a large smile.

Once they were all close enough to the sand, Rile dismissed the clouds, and everyone landed on the ground. Half-demons of all shapes and sizes smiled at her, some even bowing or kneeling. Included among those who knelt was the middle-aged mannie who’d acted as their leader that night on the island. “Lady Lamia,” he greeted toward the sand, “my name is Stotter. You rescued me and many of the others here a few weeks ago.”

“I remember.”

“Rile filled us in on what has happened since we saw you last. I’d hoped to cross paths with you again—I would like to apologize. That night, we were so panicked, and I know we mistrea—”

“Please, no need for an apology,” Lamia said, putting a hand up to silence Stotter. “I’ve thought about that night a lot, too. I would have reacted the same way if I was protecting demons I had been captured with and took responsibility for. I regret having acted as a beacon for that ship in the first place, and I’m glad you got away.”

“The demons you summoned certainly helped. But we all created a community together since then, just for half-demons like ourselves. Each day, we practice for the fight of our lives should we ever cross paths with those captors or other enemies again. So often, we thank you. Without you, we would not have been able to start this new life where we are all accepted

for who we are. We wouldn't have lived long enough to come together." He took a knee again. "On behalf of myself, those that you rescued, and some new recruits we picked up along the way, we apologize for the way we treated you that night and pledge ourselves to your cause."

Lamia swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thank you. And I pledge myself to yours. Perhaps Rile filled you in, but I have traded my knighthood with the demons to one for manifestations like all of you. You need a champion in this world ... and I would like to be that for you."

"We would be honored," Stotter said. The rest of the mannies behind him nodded enthusiastically, and a chorus of quiet cheers, whoops, and calls of "yeah!" rippled through the group.

Rile grinned from the side with his hands on his hips. "These mannies have all volunteered for the honor of being in your army, Lam. Whatever we need done, I think one or a few of them have the power among them to do it. Fire, wind, earth, telepathy ... you name it."

"Wow," Lamia said with a smile. "You have even more powers among you than the lesser army in Hell does." But lesser demons were somewhat dispensable; many didn't even give themselves names. This group of manifestations was different. Lamia would need to make sure each of these lives was protected to the fullest. She motioned toward the trees. "Come. Beyond the trees here is a small clearing with a fire pit. We'll have some cover there, and I'll tell you more."

Rile and Lamia hung back as the manifestations marched

into the woods and toward the campsite, smiling at each other.

“I can’t believe you got an army, just like that.”

“Not one mannie in their camp stayed behind. They all jumped up to help.”

“See? You’re more powerful than you know. And speaking of jumping ... I’m going to jump you so hard when we activate that cup,” she said, grinning.

“All the more motivation to annihilate the humans and angels on this island, then.” He blew her a kiss and winked. “Let’s get planning.”

Chapter 22

Rile stood behind the group of mannies, keeping his distance from Lamia as she tapped her finger to her chin before them.

“The group is about two dozen strong, with camps here and here,” she explained. She dragged a stick through a diagram of the island she’d drawn into the sand, then circled two points at the northernmost tip, one on either side of the mouth of a river. “That’s where they’re getting fresh water, and why they’re stationed up there instead of here, closer to the trench. It takes them around thirty minutes to reach the Tristah by boat, and it’s another five minutes from there to the merfolk colony.”

The crowd of manifestations surrounding the map all nodded.

“I’ll need a small group to go up to the top of the mountain here with Rile,” she continued. “There’s some source up there that supplies the fresh water they’re getting. See what kind of activity there is, and if we can use that elevation to get a better view of when they come and go from the channel without being noticed. That would give us the maximum amount of time to get to our stations and execute the plan.”

Lamia exuded knowledge, power, and strength while strategizing and explaining the plan to the group. Rile had never seen her look more comfortable. He couldn’t help but smile as she looked around at her newfound army, asking them questions and learning more about the capabilities of each one as they spoke. Stotter was half-incubus, as were most of the

other mannies. Second in command was Arryn, the half-asura demon who'd used his fire to burn their ship. Between the rest of the mannies, they had the abilities to control earth, inject poisons of various kinds, and induce hallucinations or projections. What some of the manifestations lacked in magic abilities, they made up for in strength. Rile gasped as one female, who was toned but not bulky, lifted a fallen tree without breaking a sweat.

Seeing everyone cheering each other on and fostering bonds was thrilling but upsetting. Did more of these mannies have the same troubled past as him? As they all quietly studied the map, he said, "We should have all settled together a long time ago ... a colony of mannies."

Arryn nodded. "We thought the same thing. Getting captured on that ship was one of the best things to happen to any of us, because it brought us together. Can you imagine mannies all over Manusya banding together like this?"

"I think it's no accident that we were kept apart," Stotter added. "We're powerful individually, but humans are no match for us when we're together."

"Even angels would have a challenge fighting you all," Lamia said. "I have no doubt they played a role in keeping you all apart, yet they're the ones who brought you all together in the end. How ironic. And now we will drive them away from here to protect our own."

"Mostly." A female mannie turned to Rile, and he braced himself. He knew what she was going to say before she uttered another word: "One of us is still not like the others."

She might as well have stabbed him with the knife at his side.

A familiar rush of adrenaline surged through him as goosebumps formed on his skin and he prepared to defend himself, like he'd done so many times in his life. It wasn't a feeling he'd expected to relive now, among his shipmates ... especially Stotter.

"Rile is one of us." The assertive, raised tone of Lamia's voice made many in the group jump. "He's the best of us. None of us would be here without him."

Rile crossed his arms and raised his chin. "So I brought you here on clouds. So what? I'm still the same me as I was on that ship. I go where Lamia goes and protect what she protects. She will be your champion, and I will aid her in that. She wants the angels gone, and I will do everything in my power to help make it so. After we rescue the merfolk, we'll activate the chalice the humans and angels captured us to get. That will darken my soul and make me fully human." He glared at the female. "Then you won't have to worry about me being half anything."

"But won't that mean you'll lose your powers?" Arryn asked.

"Yes."

"You would really do that to prove you're not one of them?"

Rile gave a small laugh. "You must not have been listening. I'm converting my soul for Lamia. Everything I do is for her. Everything we *all* do should be for her."

He and Lamia smiled warmly at each other—more than warmly. Wantonly. And those around them shifted on their feet during the silent exchange.

Stotter cleared his throat. “I apologize for her, Rile. You’re absolutely right. I hope you’ll excuse our ignorance. We have dealt with so much from the humans and Heavens, and I know those same worries don’t apply to you. I’m sorry.”

Rile nodded and relaxed. “Don’t worry about it. I can certainly relate. I still think of myself as a mannie. I think I always will.”

Stotter smiled. “We’re happy to have you. And, Lady Lamia, every single one of us is on board to also serve you as your soldiers. We protect our own, and that includes the merfolk.”

Lamia nodded. “Yes, let’s get back to that. The issue with the merfolk is that they can’t do much to protect themselves when their attackers are above the water—including in ships. The sirens need time to sing their song to stun their prey, and when a ship is armed with cannons and angels, they won’t have that time. We’ll need to get the humans off their boat and attack them on shore.

“You three incubi, the drude, and the hallucen will go with Rile up the volcano. Arryn, you take a team here”—she circled the beach northeast of them on the map in the sand—“and hide. This is just north of where the merfolk colony starts, about three hundred feet offshore. Those who do not come with you will head north with Stotter.

“Based on what I saw yesterday, here’s what I believe will

happen: A human and angel team patrol the waters around the island in a boat several times a day, each time trying to hunt for merfolk while also taking time to study the trench. They came south like this yesterday.” She drew a line from the northernmost peninsula, where the human camp was, to a section of land just northwest from where they were standing now. “As they move to reach this point, the merfolk and I will herd the boat closer to shore. The humans will be so distracted by the opportunity to catch one of them that they won’t see Arryn’s team ambush them from the beach. Arryn, I’d like for you to torch this ship just like you did the prisoner one, make them leave the boat and its cannons, then take out the passengers. The merfolk and I will assist, but your team will need to eradicate them if they get too far into the shallows or on the beach.”

“I understand, Lady Demon,” Arryn said. He turned and selected his team, who all nodded in understanding.

“Excellent. Rile, your team will be on your clouds. There were at least a handful of angels on that ship yesterday. If they take to the sky, you must pick them off. They flew from the boat a few times to scout, but they always returned to the ship. If you can help it, your team is not to attack until the merfolk and I surprise them.”

Rile nodded. “We’ll get ’em.”

“I know you will. Once the people on the ship are under control, the merfolk and I will move north to meet Stotter’s team. You will wait for us to get there before launching an ambush of your own, unless they are somehow alerted to

Rile's team taking out angels in the sky. I anticipate about twenty people will be at the camp, again, including angels. These guys will be able to attack a little harder since they won't be impeded by water, but the sirens should have enough time to finish their song to entrance them without being touched. They will get the settlers under their spell, and I will join your team to fight on shore. Rile, your team will be in charge of flying angels and then swooping down to help us take out the rest."

"What if the angels summon other angels from the Heavens to help take us out?" Stotter asked.

"The more the merrier," answered a deep, jovial voice from outside of the circle, and the manifestations in front of the voice parted to reveal a familiar silver-haired, smiling demon.

Lamia's eyes widened as she turned to face him. "Jinn?"

A smaller demon popped out from behind Jinn, a head shorter but with a grin just as wide. "And what am I, spoiled netsilana?"

"Oriax!" Lamia said. "What are you guys doing here?"

The manifestations around them exploded into a buzz of whispers, wide eyes, and dropped jaws. Around him, Rile heard their excitement.

"The demon knights!"

"I never thought I'd ever see them in the flesh!"

"They look just as powerful as Lamia!"

Oriax ran a hand through his long orange hair and winked at

two females beside Rile, who gasped and giggled together in a huddle.

“We just happened to be checking in on you and found that there’s an impending battle against angels. Why *wouldn’t* we be here?” Jinn asked.

“Because Zagan’s a prick?” Lamia asked with a shrug.

How long had Oriax and Jinn been watching them? Rile wondered if they knew she’d acquired the Soul Chalice, or that he had it now.

“What Zagan doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Oriax said. “Though because he doesn’t know we’re here, I can’t summon his army. You just have us two and this large group of very capable-looking mannies.”

As they gaped openly at him, he waved back, chest puffed and grin shit-eating.

“Hello, friends. I’m Demon Knight Oriax, this is my buddy, Jinn, and you know our beautiful sister, Lamia.” He scanned the group and looked directly at Rile. “You must be the keg,” he said with warm amusement in his tone. He strode over, hand extended.

“Uh, Rile,” he said, raising an eyebrow. He lifted his hand to shake Oriax’s, then hesitated. He was so used to keeping away from Lamia; it was strange to be this close to another demon, and about to touch, without his powers lashing out. He frowned as he connected with Oriax’s hand and shook it.

He looked over Oriax’s shoulder to find Lamia with the same frown. He smiled at her ruefully, mouthing the word,

“Soon.”

Soon. The quicker they got this attack underway, the sooner he and Lamia could figure out the chalice.

Stotter took a step forward and lowered his head, introducing himself to Jinn and Oriax. “I’m afraid I did not thank Lamia appropriately when our paths first crossed,” Stotter said, turning to look her in the eye, “but we dedicate ourselves to her and her cause now. We are eternally grateful to your sister.”

Lamia smiled at Stotter, then turned to the knights. “I have decided to fight for the demons that need a champion the most—these manifestations, here on Manusya. Now more than ever, we need to protect our own where we can.”

“And that’s why we’re here to support you,” Oriax said. “We only caught the last part of your plan. We’re here to get angels and humans off this island? Do the merfolk have the cup?”

“No, but they’re threatened until the cup is exposed. The angels want them captured to help dive for it.”

“So the cup is still in the trench?”

Rile studied Oriax’s face. Oriax already said that he and Jinn had only appeared during the last part of her speech, but had they checked in on her before that?

Lamia shrugged. “As far as we know.”

She lied so smoothly, even Rile believed her.

“Now, are you here to stay and chat or help out?” she

continued. “I need to get to the merfolk and explain the plan, and we need to take our positions. That boat will be coming around soon.”

Jinn nodded. “Tell us what we need to do.”

“Jinn, you’re with Stotter’s team. Oriax, you’re with Arryn. They will explain the full plan on the way.”

Rile suppressed a sigh of relief that one of them wasn’t assigned to his team. While having the additional protection of a demon knight would have been nice, he wondered how they would have reacted to riding on his cloud. Plus, he would have been too distracted thinking about whether or not they knew he had the chalice.

Lamia fist-pumped the air. “Good fighting, everyone. See you when we stand among a pile of the corpses of humans and angels and claim this island for ourselves and free the merfolk!”

She gave Jinn and Oriax hugs, and again, she and Rile’s eyes met. There was that familiar tug in his heart when he could do no more but look at her from a distance. His body called to hers, yet he continuously had to deny the drive to take her into his arms.

“Soon,” she mouthed.

“Soon,” he mouthed back.

“For the merfolk!” she cried as she transformed her legs into her tail and waded into the waves to the sound of her army cheering behind her.

Chapter 23

Rile floated on his cloud above the mountain in the middle of the island. He was below the treeline but still able to see the human camp to the north and Lamia's interception point to the west.

Through the trees to the northwest, he spotted something white moving through the water in the distance. "There it is!" he said in a loud whisper, pointing to the modest ship making its way to its doom. Goosebumps and electricity rippled over his skin, sending shivers down his spine. "Remember what these guys tried to do to us on that ship. Imagine what they would have forced us to do if Arryn and Lamia hadn't gotten us free. Let no angel escape."

"Yes, sir," they all said behind him. Through his periphery, he saw two of the half-incubi surfing back and forth on their clouds.

Rile patted the air slowly, trying to channel Lamia's authority into his voice. "Calm yourselves. At this height and with our speed, we'll have plenty of time to intercept the angels before they reach the Heavens."

He led them all closer to the edge of the trees for a better look. Just northwest of the ship, a patch of ocean looked as though it'd begun to simmer. As the small bubbles turned into a violent roll of the water, shimmering dots of blue, green, and silver breached the waves like a school of dolphins. The reflections of the sun off the tails of the sirens and mermen were nearly blinding.

From this distance, Rile couldn't tell where Lamia was amongst the crowd. He thought he could hear excited and panicked shouts from the ship, though, as it turned toward the deeper ocean.

“No, turn inward, idiots!” he whispered.

That was what Lamia's plan was based on—the ship getting close enough to shore that Arryn could take it out and drive the passengers to land. Rile held his breath, watching as two cannons on the starboard side fired at the school. The group of merfolk split into three, pushing closer to the boat despite more cannonballs being loaded. Rile heard the echo of someone shouting, “FIRE!”, then jumped as the two cannons went off once again.

He grew restless, desperate to call electricity down on the boat and keep Lamia and the rest of the army safe. But to do that would endanger her and the merfolk, and it suddenly struck him why Lamia sent him above the mountain and told him to keep to the skies: she couldn't be distracted by trying to keep herself far enough away from him while fighting.

After the third round of cannon fire, Rile sighed in relief when Lamia let herself be known. She created a waterspout that exploded from the sea, hurling the cannonballs into the air and back toward the boat. Rile laughed as humans scattered in all directions while the ammunition blew holes through the deck. That also scattered the angels, who now took to the skies. “Charge!” Rile called, and he and his team hurdled toward the action.

Lamia's attack made the boat change directions, and it now

headed toward the shore as it surely began to take on water. No more cannons fired on the starboard side, but the humans finally spotted Arryn's team. As Rile drew closer to the angels flying above the boat, he caught sight of them loading the port-side cannons to fire at their army on the shore.

"I got 'em," the hallucen manifestation, Chrisnan, said. He swooped down to hover above the fire team, then threw his arms up, projecting images of birds in the trees and an empty beach before them. He scattered the birds to create a distraction, but the damage was done: the angels and humans on the boat had already seen where the mannies stood on the beach before the projection. They fired through the image into the invisible crowd, missing most of the army as they dispersed on the beach but nailed Chrisnan and two others. Chrisnan flew off of Rile's cloud and into the trees.

Rile cursed under his breath as the projection blinked out of existence. Lamia had confidence in the group, but why? Rile himself was appointed as a leader, and this was his first ever fight. He'd already lost one of his team. Had he let Lamia down by giving her a false sense of security in himself and the manifestations?

Horrified by what he saw, he almost forgot his mission: getting the angels out of the sky. Up here, he could use his electricity without fear of striking Lamia. His powers, always eager to lash out at the gorgon, felt thick and slow to move as he pushed them out of his body toward the angels. "I hate you so gods-damned much," he growled to his lightning as it finally shot from his fingertips and fried an angel in the air. Stunned, it plummeted from the skies to the sandy beach

below where eager mannies would finish the job. “I can’t wait to get rid of you, you insolent beast.”

It took great effort, but Rile was able to get out enough electricity to keep most angels from ascending to the Heavens. Any that got past Rile were sent back to Manusya by his team. At some point, Arryn had successfully torched the ship, and it went down in flames while its passengers peppered the waves and shore. He took a moment to watch Oriax gracefully fighting his way through the humans while the mannies fell over each other and hacked at whatever they could find, further cementing his belief that they hadn’t been ready for this attack—but they’d been successful overall despite themselves.

“North!” Rile shouted to his team, who were all still airborne spare Chrisnan. Their next directive was to rendezvous with Stotter and Jinn’s team, and as he zoomed on his cloud in their direction, he nearly stopped and plummeted like an electrocuted angel when a thought struck him.

We were supposed to have been keeping eyes on angels ascending from the north already. The sound from the cannons must have reached the camp; the island wasn’t that big. He was so focused on protecting Lamia’s area that he’d forgotten about keeping tabs on the northern camp as well. Could angels have escaped already? *Gods, please, no, no, no...*

He was pleading to the gods now? With a curse, he willed his cloud to go faster. Stotter’s team was already engaged in battle among the camp, and Lamia was surfing on a self-made wave to reach the shore to help.

There were no angels to be seen among the human fighters.

“Does anyone have eyes on the north already?” Rile shouted to the others in his squad. They all admitted they were focused on the angels on the boat. *Please let them have been the only angels around.* If he’d forgotten to do something that caused Lamia’s plans to fail ... if any angels had escaped to the Heavens for reinforcements ...

A loud clap of thunder above his head answered his unspoken fear.

“Shit!” he barked, then looked Heavensward to find a dozen more angelic warriors plummeting toward the island.

Rile spread his fingers as he willed more of his viscous electricity to flow through to his hands. He would stun them all, one by one, and send them hurdling toward the earth, paralyzed, without being able to use their wings to slow their fall. That would help thin their numbers as they reached the ground.

“Get ready to attack!” he shouted to his squad.

But as soon as lightning finally sparked between his fingers, a sinking feeling hit the pit of his stomach and extinguished his powers once again. The first angel aiming right for him was one he couldn’t bring himself to harm.

Alex slammed into him and his cloud, ripping a loud groan from Rile as he was knocked horizontally. The cloud stayed glued to his feet, now vertical and unable to stop him and Alex from freefalling to the sandy beach below.

“I can’t let you go without suffering severe consequences

from Orko,” Alex said as their hair whipped around their faces. “Do what you have to stop me from getting you captured!”

Without Alex, Rile wouldn’t have lived to see this day. He would have splattered across the ground when Orko ejected him from the Heavens. Gods only knew the wrath Orko would subject Alex to if he aided his son.

“I can’t hurt you! Are you insane?”

“Do it, or angels are going to take you when we hit the ground!” Alex cried. “This is your only chance to escape.”

Better him be captured than Lamia or any of the manifestations. He had a connection to the Heavens, no matter how dysfunctional, that he could manipulate and save himself with. The others wouldn’t stand a chance. “Just focus the angels on me, and let Lamia and the others escape. That’s all I ask.”

“You’re an idiot, Rile ... but I’ll try.”

Alex’s wings flared to reveal beautiful silver down, an upgrade since last they’d seen each other. He slowed them down enough to keep Rile from dying, but the wind knocked out of him as he hit the ground.

As Rile gasped for air, Alex called, “Help me! All of you!” as he flipped Rile onto his stomach and began wrestling with his arms to pin them behind his back. Every muscle in Rile’s body burned with his lack of oxygen, but he tried his best to fight back and help make a big enough scene to summon the rest of the angels over.

Rile flailed and bucked like a fish out of water, sucking in air and grinding his skin into the sand. When he was able, he cried out, shouting obscenities as more and more angels piled atop him. Once Alex pushed his way out of the crowd, Rile willed electricity through his veins, and his cries were met by a chorus of screaming angels as he electrocuted any who made contact. When he extinguished his power, they collapsed around him, writhing in pain as more moved in to get him under control. They hesitated before making skin-to-skin contact with him again.

“Let me go!” a familiar voice screamed. “Don’t hurt him, no!”

He was about to summon bolts of lightning to reach out and whip at his surrounding attackers when his blood ran cold.

Lamia?

He whipped his head around to find even more angels, including Alex and Landrathel, apprehending her. Had his distraction caused her to stop and be captured, too?

“Lam, get away!” he cried. He tried to run to her, to wrench her from the captors who were overwhelming her, but had to stop in his tracks. He’d put her in more danger than they ever could, just by getting close.

Jinn raced for her, pushing through cells of battling manifestations and angels and humans, but it was too late. The angels managed to bind her and flew her into the air out of Jinn’s reach. Jinn’s wings snapped open, but he shouted and flew a few steps back. He turned and cupped a hand around an arrow piercing through the middle of his left wing that stopped

him from taking flight.

The manifestation army only totaled a few dozen. Half of them were still on the beach south of their location, tired and recovering from their own battle against those on the boat. They'd expected to outnumber the remaining settlers here, but Rile screwed up. Somewhere, an angel had escaped and summoned more of their kind. And now Lamia was going to pay for it.

“Landrathel, leave her. It's me you want!” he pleaded.

“She's as good as any other water demon to get down into that trench,” one told another. “Better, even.”

If I tell them I have the chalice, they'll have no use for her. Panic overtook him. Did he even still have the damn thing after all of the wrestling they'd done in the sand? Yes, he could feel it still bumping against his thigh in his pocket. Alex always made fun of his baggy pants, but he was the one laughing now.

He sucked in a breath. He had to tell them to save her. “I have the—”

“I will get the chalice!” Lamia shouted over him. “Let the rest of these fighters free, and I will get you the chalice.”

Chapter 24

Rile was about to surrender the Soul Chalice to the Heavens to save her. He was ready to sacrifice everything to let her go free.

Innocent Rile, don't you know that they never would have let me go? Though she wasn't a demon knight any longer, she was still a valuable prisoner.

How far she'd fallen for the half-god she gazed at now, as she hovered above him in the arms of angels. One erelim held a blade to her throat, and her chin rested uncomfortably atop the cold steel as they shifted her weight around.

She wasn't even mad at herself. Rile was worth the trouble.

He stared up at her, horror-stricken, just as much a prisoner as she was. She was trying to negotiate his release, but he wouldn't have it.

"Don't do this," he pleaded from the ground. "Landrathel, let her go."

The golden-winged angel to her right spoke beside her ear. "Hmph. I am not your angel, demigod. I could have been, if you'd listened to your father. But we are under no obligation to serve you anymore."

"You may not listen to him, but for the chalice, you will listen to me," Lamia said, her chin bouncing atop the sword as she spoke. "Let my fighters go, and I will give you what you want."

To anyone else, Rile stared up at her with nothing but hurt.

But to her, his eyes portrayed a confusion that said, *What are you planning?*

Trust me, she said in a brief stare back.

“What’s stopping us from killing all of them, right here on this island, *and* making you get the Soul Chalice?” Landrathel asked. He freed himself from holding her, leaving her to the rest of the angels in the air so he could fly around and look her in the eye.

“Stupid angel,” Lamia said with a laugh. “If their souls go back to the Lake, then I’ll make sure mine does, too. You want to wait a few more decades for another gorgon to come around as powerful and strong in the water as I am?”

“Stupid, hm?” His sinister grin gave her pause, even as he added, “Let them free. All but the gorgon and the demigod.”

The angels backed away from the others. For now, Jinn and the mannies were safe.

“Go to Oriax,” Lamia commanded before Jinn had a chance to protest. “Protect everyone and get to O.”

That sinister grin didn’t leave Landrathel’s face as he watched Jinn lead the mannies away without protest. After they were gone, the angel landed on the ground and motioned to Lamia and Rile. “Lock them up.” His grin widened as his glare met Rile’s own. “Together, as close as you can put them.”

Rile bucked wildly in the arms of the angels that held him. “No!” he cried. “You don’t want her dead. Putting her with me will kill her!”

Landrathel shrugged. “Best find a way to get the chalice faster, then.”

Lamia gasped as Landrathel grinned up at her as if asking, *Who’s the stupid one now?*

Realization hit her full-force.

Somehow, he’d known they already had the chalice. Letting the other demons go ensured no one else was around to help them.

“You heard what I said,” the angel sneered, and Lamia’s angels brought her down toward Rile.

Fear seized Rile’s body.

“NO!” he cried, throwing his shoulders forward to try and wrench himself free of the angels that smothered him. They forced him forward as the angels holding Lamia descended to the ground. The electricity inside, thick like molasses around angels, thinned and roared to life inside him as Lamia drew closer. Though he could stun the angels around him, it would do him and Lamia no good. If anything, he may not be able to convince them to let her go if he attacked. Instead, he pleaded, “No! Don’t bring her any closer!”

“And why not? Because you have feelings for this wretched creature and your godly powers will destroy her?” Landrathel said, shrugging his shoulders and grinning smugly. How dare that bastard laugh. “Then you’d better get that chalice soon!”

Time seemed to slow as Rile racked his brain for a way out of this while the electricity inside of him pushed at the

underside of his skin, anxious to reach Lamia. He whimpered as she leaned as far back as she could in the angels' hold, bracing for the inevitable.

We care so much for each other, yet can only lean away.

They needed time to sit and figure out the intricacies of the Soul Chalice to make sure they were confident in how they were handling such a powerful tool. But as Rile's skin crackled and lightning licked at the hair on his arms, he knew they were out of time.

Angels were sacrificing themselves for the sake of this moment, to hold Lamia and Rile together as streaks of lightning exploded from him. The wild streaks aimed right for her, attaching to her skin and scales. Her screams—oh, gods, Lamia's awful screams—pierced through his skull and dulled his senses.

Was he screaming with her? The rawness in his throat suggested so, but he could hear nothing. See nothing. His electricity was growing too bright for even his eyes to see through. Perhaps that was a blessing; Lamia's screams alone would haunt him for the rest of his life. Seeing her in such pain by his hand would surely kill him.

Somehow, by the grace of—Manusya, because it certainly was not by the grace of Zagan or the gods—he found that he'd managed to extract the Soul Chalice from his pocket. It was silhouetted against the bright neon glow of his lightning storm.

There was no time to contemplate what to do with this cup, so he did the only thing he could think of: though it was empty, he brought it to his lips and tilted his head back. It was

salty and slick from the ocean; they hadn't even had a chance to clean it yet.

Yes, he was definitely screaming—he could hear it reverberating off the hollow of the cup. But that scream was halted by an unseen, cold force that initially felt like liquid—but then it grabbed his tongue and yanked.

Then the world fell away.

Chapter 25

When Rile came to, he was falling again.

The electricity had stopped. There was no more crackle of lightning across his skin or blindness from the power of it. His body and mind were fatigued from expelling so much energy. Was Lamia okay? Where was she?

Where was *he*?

He was floating through a silent darkness, spare thousands of tiny bright white lights, like fireflies, sparkling below him. It was impossible to tell how far away he was from them or how big they actually were. Were they hovering above water? He thought he could see the fireflies' reflections below them, duller, warmer counterparts, a red light in stark contrast to the glowing white above the surface.

"Cissah dra hipac!" he shouted down at them, but his cloud did not come. Still, he was ... slowing? The fireflies drew closer, but at a much slower pace.

Down, down he glided, toward the water that reflected the fireflies. He looked for anything else—a coastline, a creature, some kind of plant—but there was nothing around, until he was a dozen feet above the water and a boat faded into view.

A gust blew his body horizontally, and his feet touched the bottom of the small wooden rowboat. A figure stood before him, paddle in hand, shrouded in a gray hooded robe that covered the creature from head to toe.

"Greetings, Node-VIII," the figure said. A female, based on

the silky, melodic tone of her voice.

“Um.” Rile looked around at the sea of fireflies as if he would see who she was referring to swimming around their boat. “Actually, my name is Rile.”

“That is the name of your *vessel*,” she said. “But the soul inside of you, the one I have cultivated and tended to for millennia, is Node-VIII.”

Rile blinked. “My soul?” He looked around again and this time, when he searched for others, saw the fireflies around them differently. “These are all ... souls?”

“They are.” She lifted her chin. “Welcome back to the Lake of Souls.”

Shock rocked him. He’d always understood the Lake of Souls as a realm no one could reach, yet here he was, and with another sentient being that appeared to be a permanent resident here. “Are there more ... vessels ... like you and me here?” he asked.

The hooded female shook her head. “You are my first corporeal visitor in a very long time. I am called the Gardener.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you—again, I guess,” he said.

The Gardener brought her hand to her mouth, and her shoulders shook with a silent chuckle.

Rile studied his surroundings. Every few moments, a white light would rise into the sky, or a red light would sink further into the depths of the lake, until they disappeared entirely. “Those souls have had their vessels conceived and are about to

start their new lives in their new realms. Those that are arriving have left their bodies in their old realms and await a new one.”

“So ... does that mean I’m dead?” he asked tentatively.

The Gardener laughed. “If you were dead, your vessel would not have come with you. You activated the Soul Chalice, did you not? You wish to be pollinated differently?”

“Pollinated?” He felt stupid. Was he going to go through this whole conversation by simply repeating her own words?

She didn’t seem to mind. Instead, a small giggle shook her tiny shoulders again. “When a vessel expires and a soul is sent back here to the lake, it is always in a different state than when it left. Some souls are brighter and belong to the angels”—she motioned toward the bright white fireflies in the air—“some come back darker and belong to the demons”—she pointed to the red ones below the surface of the water—“and some don’t quite know which way to turn and become humans or halflings.” There were many souls that threaded in and out of the water like fish, yellow or orange in color instead of white or red. “A vessel’s life determines how a soul is pollinated in that life. Normally, a vessel must die for a soul to be returned here and reborn, but you, Node-VIII, have traveled back here with your vessel. I can keep it, and your memories, intact while changing your makeup.”

“Will that allow Lamia and I to be together?” he asked. His breath caught in his lungs. “Her soul hasn’t returned here today, has it?”

That earned him yet another giggle from the Gardener. “No,

fear not. Barclaya-XXV is still in its vessel.”

Was that Lamia’s soul number? Rile let out a shaky sigh of relief.

“To answer your question,” she continued, “yes, dispersing your light energy into the lake will remove the power inside of it. Your soul will look more like that of a human, and you will lose your godly powers. The light in your eyes will fade, and electricity will no longer spark to life inside of you.”

“Then yes,” Rile said quickly. The confusion of being at the lake faded, and his purpose became clearer. “Yes, that’s what I want. And quickly, because I don’t know what they’re doing to her right now. I have to save her, before her soul arrives here.”

“But—”

“I don’t care what it changes inside of me. Just let me be with her. Please, I have to get to her!”

The beat of silence that hung between them felt like it lasted an eternity. Had he irritated her in some way? “If you do not care about the consequences, then all you need to do is jump.”

There was no time to waste. “Thank you,” he said, bowing low before peering down at the water. It was so still, it looked like glass, but it splashed around him as he dove in.

Hitting the water felt like someone took a mallet and hit a drum inside his chest, causing a blinding white light to reverberate outward and explode through every pore of his body. As the light faded, so did any sound.

Rile ...

The power and pain of the electricity around her was unbearable. Lamia shook violently along with the angels who held her. They ground their nails into her skin and scales as they were electrocuted with the same force as she was.

At least she would die taking more angels down with her.

But just as quickly as Rile's lightning began its assault, it was extinguished. The angels let go of her, and she collapsed to the ground, convulsing and gasping for air. When the stars in her eyes faded and her vision cleared, she found her captors twitching on the ground beside her—and Rile's body lying lifeless a few feet beyond them.

“RILE!” she screamed, shoving up on her tail. She staggered, still twitching, but the adrenaline coursing through her numbed her pain.

“RILE!” she cried again. She fell forward, flinging sand through the air as she propelled her way toward him.

He wasn't moving. His chest wasn't rising and falling.

“You idiots. You fucking idiots!” she screamed to the fallen angels as they slowly began to recover around her. She would slaughter every last one of them, starting with Landrathel. She would find Rile's cloud and invade the Heavens, making every single one of them pay, ending with Orko.

Rile shot to a sitting position and gasped, clutching his chest.

She fell back in shock, blinking to make sure it wasn't an illusion.

Rile twisted and turned, wide eyes searching until they landed on her. He breathed heavily, staring at her.

His eyes weren't glowing.

The rest of him looked the same—his silver hair, rich, sun-kissed skin, pointed ears—but she could see his irises, not just the light that beamed from them. His eyes were sky-blue like Coryn's, like many of those who hailed from the Heavens. His eyes matched those of the angels staring at him now, who were just as surprised as she was.

He slowly pushed his way to his feet and past the angels that had held him in the air. They let him pass. His gaze never left hers as he took one tentative step, then another. Closer ... and closer ...

She was used to the approximate distance that tripped the wire that would set his powers into a frenzy. She flinched as he hit that distance, preparing herself to get licked by lightning once again. When nothing happened, they each flashed a toothy grin, then he took another step. Still no lightning.

Much to her surprise, her angel captors let her move. She rose and closed the distance between them.

Was that a whimper she let out? Was she ... crying?

"Shhh," he cooed in her ear as her forehead met his shoulder. He was so warm, and his skin was so smooth. She shivered as his fingers ran through her hair as she shook with the force of her sudden sobbing.

"Oh, Lamia."

His voice was bliss against her ear.

She wanted to know where he'd gone for those few moments he was unresponsive. She should probably check on the wounds his gods-damned powers had inflicted on her skin. They were still surrounded by the angels.

But for now, all she wanted was to luxuriate in the feel of his body against hers.

Rile held her tightly for a long time, until he leaned away to study her. He bit his lip, and his eyebrows fell.

“Look what I did again ...”

She kept her hands flat against his chest. “It’s nothing. It will all heal. Everything will be better soon.”

She leaned up, slamming her mouth against Rile’s. He tasted so sweet. Their tongues collided, just as eager to touch as the rest of their body was, to caress, and give, and take. But more of that would have to wait. As the angels stupidly watched their passionate lip-lock, Lamia traced her hands up Rile’s chest, over his shoulders, and into his hair, twisting it.

At least, that’s what he and the angels would think she was doing. Instead, she was manipulating a huge amount of water—the most she’d ever attempted—without anyone else noticing. Her joy helped propel the water forward as it built on itself, starting farther out at sea before making its way inland. With her mouth still pressed against Rile’s, Lamia opened one eye and steered the wave toward them.

As the water receded and exposed the wet surf behind them, the angels kept their eyes trained on her and Rile. It was sweet, in a way, for them to grant a demon and a former half-god this

moment, but it was also foolish. Some of them had at least turned their attention back to the Soul Chalice, and one angel picked it up.

Rile whimpered when she released the kiss, and the wave grew larger.

“Hold me tighter,” Lamia said quickly, “and don’t let go.”

She swung her arms, and the tsunami crashed over the shore.

Now that he could touch her, Rile was never going to let Lamia go. Ever.

The wave hit them all with blunt force, sending him tumbling along the ocean floor until he had no idea which way was up. He felt sand and stone grinding into his skin, the biting chill of the salt water, and, most importantly, Lamia securely in his arms.

Lamia. He was touching her now and would never get enough.

He didn’t care about oxygen or the danger around them. He had to taste more of her, to make up for lost time. As the world spun around them and they rolled weightlessly in the water, Rile only saw the constant of Lamia’s beautiful face and her glowing eyes.

Though his lungs begged for him to seek the water’s surface, his heart led him to Lamia’s mouth once again, as if it was the only nourishment he needed. Perhaps it was. Salt water lingered with the warmth of her tongue as he plunged

his own into her mouth, grunting as pleasure washed through his body. She was his, and he could hold her. Take her. Cherish her.

She groaned right back, a siren's song to his ears, as she met his tongue thrust for thrust. But then she pulled back, regret in her eyes, before undulating her body against his to propel them through the water. He watched as merfolk all around them grabbed the angels that had been pulled under, dragging them further into the depths like waterlogged birds. He was particularly glad to see a beautiful siren towing Landrathel past them, and as he descended further into the water, the angel reached for Rile and shouted something in a flurry of bubbles. Rile reached out his hand, but only to give a small wave. Landrathel expelled more air as his expression turned sour, until he and the siren faded into the depths.

Good riddance. But at that thought, panic shot through the fog of lust and lack of oxygen. *Alex!* Eyes wide, he grunted, this time in distress.

Lamia grabbed his face in her hands and kissed him tenderly. Didn't she know? Alex would drown with the rest of them!

Rile inhaled sharply as they broke through the surface. "Alex!" he pleaded to her.

"Relax," she said calmly, and he remembered she didn't need to gasp for air like he did; she'd been breathing the entire time. She smiled gently. "Look behind you."

He spun in the water, relieved to find Nereus carrying Alex toward them.

He could have kissed them all. Kisses for everyone.

Instead, he threw his free arm around Alex and hugged him tightly while the merman kept him afloat.

Alex was stiff in his hold, but weakly returned the embrace with one arm. He looked around, as if surprised he wasn't below the water with the rest of the angels. "Well, I'm doomed," he said. "That was badass, Lamia, but I'm so screwed."

Rile clapped him on the shoulder before letting go. Lamia and Nereus guided them toward shore.

"I really should have let you die with them, Alex," Lamia said, "since you were one of the angels who helped capture me."

"Honestly? I thought Zagan would come to your rescue with the army."

They swam silently through the water for a few beats before Lamia replied, "Yeah, well, he didn't."

Rile tightened his hold on her. "But Jinn and Oriax were there."

She smiled against his cheek. "My brothers are the best," she said.

As Lamia swam them to shore and distanced themselves from Nereus and Alex, Rile couldn't help but press against her back, making sure she felt his erection against the base of her tail. She groaned softly, and he smirked, giving her ear a playful nip. "I can't believe I'm touching you," he whispered. "I want more."

“You’ll have it,” she replied, grinding her ass back against his lap.

He nearly threw his head back and growled his pleasure at the sky, but suppressed the urge with their friends still around. It was bad enough that they’d been surrounded by their enemies the first time they were able to kiss—they’d made out to an audience of twitchy angels. Now he was rubbing his erection against her while his roommate was a few feet away. He wanted to show her that he really *could* control himself when it came to her.

Though electricity no longer ran through his veins, anywhere his skin came into contact with hers felt like actual sparks still flew between them. He was so desperate to make up for lost time that he almost regretted not letting Alex drown in favor of taking Lamia right there in the waves.

He expected his body to feel hollow or incomplete without his electricity, but those cavities where the lightning used to roar within him were now occupied with love and warmth for Lamia. But without his powers, how was he going to keep her safe? He’d failed with them, and now that he was without them, he was even weaker ...

“Rile, you’re choking me,” Lamia said with a laugh, and he loosened his hold around her neck.

“Ah, sorry. Lost in thought.”

When his feet touched the shore, he peeled himself away from her, already missing the feel of her body against his while he sought out her hand. A quick scan of the beach before them showed no one else was around.

“Do you think the wave got them all?” Alex asked tentatively as he climbed out of the waves.

“I tried my best,” Lamia replied with a shrug. “Sorry?”

Alex shook his head. “No need to be.” He turned and nodded to Nereus, who was deeper in the water behind them. “Thanks for the ride and for sparing me.”

“It is all thanks to Lady Lamia,” the merman said, nodding in her direction. “She is the champion of us all.”

They all turned to smile and bow their heads at her.

“It was a joint effort ... but I am honored to protect you all,” she said.

Alex walked further inland and threw his silver wings wide to shake off the excess water.

“Nice upgrade, by the way,” Rile said.

“Yeah, but not for long, I’m sure. I’m the only one of God Orko’s angels returning to the Heavens, and also the only one that was a former manifestation. That doesn’t seem at all suspicious.”

“So stay with us,” Lamia offered. “Wherever we end up.”

“We offer you this island, Lady Lamia,” Nereus added. “It, and the waters surrounding it, are yours as thanks for your help and protection.”

Lamia’s eyes widened, and she looked over at Rile, who smiled and nodded back. “Thank you, Nereus. Please thank all the merfolk for their help, and for this incredible gift.” She turned to Alex again. “All of the humans and angels are gone,

and the island isn't inhabited by anyone else," Lamia offered. "Join us, or if you wanted to descend into Hell, I'm sure Zagan would love to have you."

Alex shook his head vehemently. "I wouldn't be able to survive down there as an angel."

"Then how does Queen Coryn?" Rile asked.

"Good question—now that she's a full angel once again, it must be very difficult for her."

Lamia looked down into the water, clearly thinking the same thing he was: Coryn really could be suffering down there, and if there was anything they'd learned together, it was that they were ready to do whatever it took to protect each other. Zagan's behavior was inexcusable toward Lamia, but Rile would likely have acted the same way if he knew Lamia was suffering.

"Can you survive on Manusya before ascending back to the Heavens? Can they compel you to return?" Rile asked.

Alex shrugged. "I don't know how long I can stay down here. They can't force me to return, but I may have to if I can't find a mana source on Manusya. That's what angels feed off of instead of food or water."

"We can get in touch with Coryn; she must need mana, too, and hasn't returned to the Heavens since becoming queen. She's fond of you and will try to help you out," Lamia said.

So maybe she was coming around to talking with Zagan and Coryn again. Rile smiled and gave Lamia's hand a squeeze.

"Then I'll stay," Alex said with a smile. "Thank you."

That was all well and fine, but Rile and Lamia had some celebrating to do. Some very private, much-needed celebrating. With Lamia standing slightly in front of him, he was able to give Alex a wordless, wide-eyed plea to figure out some way to leave them alone. He jerked his head toward Lamia, then motioned for Alex to take a hike.

“I should, uh, go get some supplies then. For the island,” Alex offered. He gave a few more powerful flaps of his wings, lifting into the air despite being heavy with water. “I’ll catch you guys later.”

“Bye, Alex!” Rile said a little too enthusiastically, pairing his happy tone with a jovial wave.

Lamia laughed and shook her head. She was no idiot; she knew exactly what was on Rile’s mind, and he hoped she wanted to celebrate the same way. She turned to Nereus, who was a few paces away on her other side.

“Thank you, Nereus. Without the help of your people, we would have been in much deeper trouble. There were more angels than we’d anticipated.”

“It was our honor to fight alongside you, Lady.” He lifted his hands from the water and extended the Soul Chalice out to her. “You wish to keep this?”

She and Rile gasped in unison. He thought it’d gotten lost in the waves.

“Yes, thank you.” She took it gingerly in her hands, and she and Rile examined it together. It had lost its luster from being at the bottom of the sea for so long, but now it looked even

more dulled and worn. “Perhaps it can never be used again, but we should make sure of that before hiding it anywhere else.”

Nereus bowed low, his forehead nearly touching the surface of the water. “If there is anything else you need assistance with, including hiding the cup once again, we would be happy to serve you. Thank you again for protecting our people.”

Lamia nodded, and Nereus bowed again before diving backward and disappearing beneath the surface.

“Finally,” Rile groaned, pulling Lamia close. He nuzzled his face into her hair, inhaling the salt water scent of her.

She laughed. “You weren’t at all obvious there.” She caught his bottom lip between her teeth and gave it a gentle tug.

He trembled, pulling her closer into him with one hand while the other ran through her hair. He kissed her deeply as she released his lip, taking the opportunity to swipe his tongue over hers. The smacking noises of their lips parting and joining over and over again was the sweetest symphony. Her lips were smooth but firm, her touches sensual, as she slipped her hands beneath his shirt and trailed her nails lightly over his back.

“What do you say we go back to our tent,” he said between kisses.

“We should check on the others first.” Her voice was breathy, and he caught sight of her biting her bottom lip as he pulled away, as if she couldn’t believe what she was saying, either. “And I need you to tell me what happened when you

activated the chalice. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine! I have you, don’t I? And the others are just fine, too.”

“What if they’re not? I need to check on them. They’re *our* army, Rai. We need to make sure they’re safe. I’d basically forgotten about the chalice until Nereus gave it to us. We need to re-group and make sure we’re all safe. I don’t want our first time together to be our last because we fell under attack by more angels and our people are too injured or tired to defend themselves.”

Rile sighed. “Always the champion.”

She leaned up and kissed him, pouring all the love she had into that kiss. “You can tell me what happened with the Soul Chalice on the way. Come on.”

Chapter 26

The southern beach was a far walk. Lamia was too tired to summon another large wave for them to ride, and Rile could no longer summon his cloud, so it was either enlist the help of the merfolk or make the long trudge back to the rendezvous point alone.

The choice was easy for both of them.

“How are you feeling?” Lamia asked, stroking his arm as they walked together in the wet sand.

“I feel fine,” Rile said with a shrug. He ran his fingers lightly up and down her other arm, swirling over the patches of scales that peppered her skin.

She was still reeling over the loss of his bright eyes, the ones that had matched hers. Ever since he’d woken back up, he sometimes had to squint as he caught her gaze. He used to be the only one who didn’t have to do that. It made her mourn the loss of his powers in a way that made her feel like she was taking his change harder than he was.

He picked up on her dismay and brought his light touches up to her jaw, where he gently pressed and coaxed her to look at him. Again, he looked just below her eyes instead of right at them because they were too bright for him now. “Does it bother you that I have no powers anymore? That I’m just a human soul in a half-god vessel?”

The way he described himself took her by surprise. He hadn’t known much about the Heavens or Hell when they’d first met, and now he was thinking of himself as two parts:

soul and vessel. She didn't even consider her own existence in that way.

“What happened at the Lake?” she asked.

She hadn't meant to ignore answering his important questions, but she was sure he read her concern as deflection. His shoulders slumped, and he quietly told her about his travels to the untouchable realm. About the Gardener and her collection of souls, their soul identification numbers, and that as soon as he learned he could give up the light in his soul to drain it of his powers, he did it without question, all to get back to Lamia and save her, because he wasn't sure if his body was still electrocuting her to death.

The Gardener. As far as she knew, no record of a sentient being was ever mentioned in texts about the Lake. Something about that comforted her, knowing that her soul, which she'd learned was named Barclaya-XXV, was tended to after her body expired.

“How was the light in your soul taken out?” she asked, wondering if they could extract the light from even more souls in that realm.

“I'm not sure. She had me jump into the lake, and the light just exploded out of me. Then I woke back up here.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“I didn't really give her a chance. I was desperate to get back to you, no matter what happened to me and my soul.”

“What? You didn't make sure the transformation of your soul wouldn't make you sick or something?”

He patted his cheeks, chest, and hips. “So far I feel fine.”

She pressed her hand against his forehead to check his temperature. “I was fine,” she said. “You should have learned more about the lake and what you were getting into while you had the chance.”

His expression hardened, and she knew she’d hurt him. “I didn’t know you were fine at the time, and I panicked, okay? I wasn’t thinking about how impossible it was to get to the Lake of Souls, or how I might be the only one to have ever seen it before or the only one to have ever met the Gardener. All I was focused on was how she could help me get back here to make sure you were okay.” He stared directly into her eyes. “I love you, Lamia. Plus, you can probably heal this plain ol’ body of mine from now on. No matter what happens, I’ll be fine ... as long as you still want me. I know I screwed up during the battle and made things spiral out of control, and now I have no powers to use to help you fight against angels. But will you still have me?”

How he could ever think otherwise made her hurt. “Of course I’ll still have you. I love you, too, Rile.” They stopped walking, and she leaned up to kiss him, trying to portray just how much she loved him. “Whatever may happen now, we’ll take it as it comes. We’ll figure it out. Plus, we still have the chalice. Perhaps we can get back to the lake to ask the Gardener whatever we want later. You changed yourself to be with me—I will never forget that.”

Rile smiled. “I was inspired by your own passion for doing what’s right for the people you care about. I learned from the

best.”

But he'd given up so much more than she had. Lamia gave up her demon knighthood, but could still heal people and control water. She was a knight on Manusya now. He sacrificed more than she would ever be able to.

“We're coming up on the beach now,” she said, pointing ahead. She squinted, spying someone taller and spikier than the other manifestations standing on the shore.

That silhouette couldn't possibly be who she thought he was. But as they walked closer, she knew that there was no mistaking those wings for anyone else's. “What the fuck? Why is Zagan here?”

“What?” Rile said, snapping out of whatever he was thinking about. He stared, wide-eyed, at the crowd in the distance, scanning until his gaze settled on the taller figure, too.

Zagan's back was turned to them, but Jinn's was not. The knight shot her an apologetic look before the demon king turned around.

“There you are,” he growled. He shoved through the group of manifestations around him, sending them spinning.

Lamia put up a hand to tell him to stop being so rough with the mannies, but Zagan's finger flew up and was in her face before she realized he'd flown over to her.

“How dare you use *my* knights and the Soul Chalice for *your* cause!” Zagan growled. His blood-red eyes snapped to Rile, and he glared at him while he spoke at her. “*This* is the

rat you chose to give the chalice to, instead of to your own kind?”

“He *is* my kind ... a resident of Manusya. You’ll recall you exiled me. And I don’t appreciate you shoving your way through the rest of *my* kind to chastise me.”

“I don’t appreciate you getting *my* kind captured. *Your* brother.”

“What?” she looked around Zagan and spotted Jinn again. Oriax was shorter than the rest of the knights, but he would have stood out to her among the crowd if he was still there.

Her blood ran cold. “Who took him?”

“Your actions must have caused quite a stir in the Heavens for them to send down a god. He descended, grabbed Oriax and a few of your manifestations, and left. We can only assume he is up in the Heavens now, and only the gods know what is happening to them all.”

Guilt rocked Lamia, and Rile placed a hand on her forearm to steady her.

“All of this, just so this man could place his hand on you,” Zagan spat.

“I’ll bet you that god was Orko,” Rile said quietly to her.

Zagan snarled, glared at Rile, then turned back to Lamia. “I sensed the moment Oriax got captured,” he said. “The world felt like it tilted, and I knew I had to come topside to see what had happened. Imagine my surprise when I discovered it was one of *my* knights who had been acting on your behalf.”

Lamia took in a slow, measured breath to keep herself from exploding. “You’ve been hanging around your angel too much. Demons can’t feel other demons like that.”

Zagan shrugged. “Perhaps a king can feel his knights—and therefore why I couldn’t feel *you* getting electrocuted alive by your lover boy here. Jinn filled me in.”

That would have stung more if she still cared about what Zagan thought of her. She pretended not to care about his words, anyway.

Rile, however, was experiencing the King of the Assholes for the first time. He was trembling like a kettle ready to boil over, face red and steam all but leaking out of his ears. “How can you talk to someone you used to love like this?” he asked, taking a step forward and raising his chin.

“Because her devotion to you cost us the chalice,” Zagan replied, also taking a step forward to tower over him.

“Zagan ...” Lamia began.

“You have no right to question her devotion to *anyone*,” Rile snapped. “Is an angel not your queen? I may have had the Heavens in my soul, but I gladly gave it up to be with Lamia. Every choice she’s made has been for the betterment of *everyone* around her, not just for who she loves. Can you say the same?”

Rile’s words gave Lamia clarity. She wanted to agree with him, but in her heart, she knew that the chalice would be better used for demonkind. She didn’t act on the betterment of everyone—she’d acted on her desire for Rile. She wanted him

for herself.

Did she screw the rest of Hell as a result?

“I fail to see how you all are worth bettering,” Zagan said flatly. He was a head taller than Rile, and even taller if one counted his horns. Yet Rile stood firm and unwavering, ready to defend her against Hell’s most feared demon.

At one point he was the most feared. Now he’s just the most despised.

As if reading Lamia’s mind, Rile asked, “How’s banning angel blood in Hell going, by the way? Oriax and Jinn came to Lamia’s aid because they love her and wanted to stand for the half-demons you should also be guarding. But you choose to guard your lover instead. That’s working out for you?”

Lamia was flattered by Rile’s defense, but he was pushing to a point that was more hurtful than helpful. It was simply getting Zagan fired up.

“Watch your tongue, human,” Zagan growled. “You dare speak to the king of Hell this way?”

“I don’t care if you’re the king of the creator. You will not disrespect Lamia anymore.”

“Rile, that’s enough,” she urged.

Rile stood with his chest puffed and chin high, glaring at Zagan. She feared he may say something more, something that may finally make Zagan attack, but he backed up a few paces to stand beside her.

“I honestly could not care any less about what you think of

me,” she said to Zagan, “but know that Oriax and Jinn came to me of their own volition because they respect me and what I’m doing on Manusya. Oriax’s capture is on me. I will ensure his safe return.”

“Oriax’s capture is *not* on you,” Jinn interrupted. Lamia was watching him over Zagan’s shoulder, shaking with the need to interject, but he’d held off until now.

Lamia sighed. Did the men in her life not think she could stand up for herself?

“Based on the reports from the mannies that fought with him,” Jinn continued, “the angels descended immediately upon him, ripped him and a few mannies off the ground, and reascended. Oriax managed to kick one away from him, which the mannies on the ground finished off. But they were unable to prevent him and the others from getting taken away.”

“Regardless, if Oriax hadn’t been here to ‘respect Lamia,’ he wouldn’t have been captured,” Zagan growled.

“Yes, well, there are a lot of ifs we could go through right now to trace the blame right back to your asinine reign and ridiculous decision making, but we’ve been through most of that already,” Lamia spat. “What’s happened has happened, and I take full responsibility for Oriax and those other manifestations getting captured. I don’t know what else you want to hear other than I will do everything I can to get them back. This timeline is based on our collective decisions, and now we must all face the consequences.”

Zagan glared at her for a long time before crossing his arms over his chest and slowly shaking his head. “Oriax is my

charge. Hell will ensure his return—not you.”

Her nails bit into the scars on her palms as she imagined punching his face clear off his head. “If that’s what will get you away from here, then fine.”

“That, and I will have the Soul Chalice.” Zagan held out his clawed hand expectantly.

“It’s useless now.” Lamia’s words only brought her pleasure out of spite for the demon king. “It’s used and may not ever be functional again. The Soul Chalice is *my* charge. I will ensure its protection—not you.”

“Insolent gorgon,” Zagan snarled, but did not press for possession of the useless cup. He carved a deep circle into the ground behind him with his tail, filled it in with a few lines, and blindly spiked a portal bead into the middle of it as he continued to glare at her. “Come, Jinn,” he said, then backed into the glowing red circle and sank into the ground.

Jinn looked back at the portal, then to Lamia with a helpless expression.

“Go,” she said, shooing him with her hands. “I want to be alone, anyway.”

The incubus looked relieved to be dismissed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.” Then he also backed into the portal to descend after his king.

Yes, he did. And he knew how much it hurt.

Lamia sighed as she watched the portal slowly fade and its light dim.

“Um,” Rile said softly beside her, “when you said you wanted to be alone ... do you want to be *alone* alone?”

With Lamia’s soured mood, the biggest smile she could muster was a tiny quirk of the right side of her mouth. “Being alone will always include being with you,” she said, then grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “Come on.”

The gentle hum of frogs and crickets emanating through the darkness usually brought Lamia peace, but now, all she could think of was how those sounds signified she and Rile were finally alone for the night.

Alone, but together—they were finally able to touch, and love, and enjoy.

Their army had decided to settle far from their tent, likely because they knew the couple would want their privacy now that they could be together. Amid the chaos and confusion of the day, the new sparks that flew between them were undeniable. A light touch or the ability to stare into Rile’s blue eyes from just a foot away was enough to make Lamia’s skin tingle.

But now, as they sat together in their tent with Lamia’s back against Rile’s chest, and Rile lightly stroking her leg, she felt exhausted and all out of sorts.

This was the moment they’d looked forward to. So much had happened to build up to this. Why couldn’t she enjoy it?

Rile also felt rigid and stiff beneath her—and not in the way they were both excited about just hours before.

“I hope Oriax is okay,” he finally whispered, nuzzling her and pressing a small kiss against her temple.

Lamia leaned her head back to look up at the underside of Rile’s chin. “He’s fine. If he can’t charm his captors, he’ll take them down. By this time tomorrow, he will have razed the Heavens, and Hell will make him their new king.”

“Hmm. He’d be better at it than Zagan, for sure. Angel blood for all.”

“Oriax would bring it home by the barrel,” Lamia said. She laughed and drank in the feelings of happiness and love as Rile tightened his arms around her, but she still felt odd.

Today was a mixed day. Put the bad in the back of your mind and enjoy what you can now.

So much bad happened, but so much good did, too—look where she was right now, after all. She scooted to sit up a bit more and face Rile, craning her head and tilting it to give him a firm, full kiss, which he eagerly returned. His hands trailed down to her waist, and he pulled her closer, spreading his hand as he moved it to her back and pressed her into him.

“Your lips are more incredible than I ever imagined they’d be,” he said between kisses, then flicked his tongue across them. “So soft and sweet.”

“Yours are nice, too,” she said, chuckling against them when she considered how cheesy that sounded. *Stay in the moment. Enjoy this.* She’d fought too hard to get here to be too in her own head about it.

But as she tried to push out the thoughts about what went

wrong that day, Zagan's words were like a bug she couldn't ignore. Her devotion to Rile had cost Hell the chalice.

"Lamia?" Rile asked, taking her chin between his thumb and index finger.

When had she pulled away from his lips? She stared at them, twisted with concern for her.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head to pull away from his hold and her thoughts.

"No, don't be," he said, leaning forward and parting his lips to invite her in for another kiss.

She accepted, this time being the one to seek out his tongue with her own. Lamia shifted to her knees, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her breasts into his chest, moaning gently. It was a forced moan, but she hoped it would help get her get in the mood.

Rile moaned back, but to her surprise, his sounded even more forced than hers. She should have been offended, but if anything, that made her feel relieved.

He was the one to pull back this time. He stared at the gap they allowed between their bodies once the kiss broke.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just—if I say something, do you promise you won't get upset?"

Hope and love swelled from low in her belly for this man. "You regret that we used the chalice for our own gain at the expense of the demons, too?"

"Yes." He breathed a sigh of relief and wrapped his arms

back around her to pull her into a tight hug, drawing comfort from her as she did the same from him.

“I had to save you,” he continued, speaking into her hair. “I would have electrocuted you to death if I didn’t do something ... but I know that protecting the demons was important to you. I was hoping we would have enough time to explore the chalice and figure out how to use it for us, and for them. For everything you needed it to do.”

He traced his hand over the fissure that ran along the back of her arm—yet another scar left on her from his former powers.

“Please don’t think I blame you for that,” Lamia said. “I just keep thinking ... even if the angels hadn’t forced our hand, we would have used the chalice for ourselves anyway.”

She gently pushed against his chest, and he released her. She backed up until she couldn’t feel the warmth emanating from his body anymore, then folded her hands in her lap.

“I promised those people I would be their champion, and used their greatest weapon for myself,” she said.

“*I* used the chalice. This isn’t on you.”

“If you hadn’t used it then, we would have used it together tonight. And the same guilt would have settled in, and we would be sitting here talking about this the same way we are now.”

“So what I’m telling you now is the same thing I would have said then, and exactly what you told Zagan earlier: what’s done is done, and there is nothing we can do to fix that but to enjoy each other. Maybe the chalice would have bettered the

demons' chances in this war, maybe it wouldn't. Who's to say Zagan wouldn't have used it to make another stupid decision for the benefit of his queen, or if a manifestation decided they would rather be human than demon? We could have stalled putting more dark souls in the Lake, or helped. This is the timeline we're in, and we will deal with the consequences of that ... but they aren't all bad." He flashed a sweet smile. "We will do whatever it takes to help manifestations. This could be the best scenario of all for the chalice—we don't know. Now come here."

They lay down together, Lamia with her hands against his bare chest. One of his arms cradled his head, and the other was draped over her side.

"I should be enjoying this more—not that I'm not enjoying you!" Lamia said.

Rile laughed. "I know what you mean. We're putting too much pressure on ourselves. What do you say we just get some rest and see where tomorrow takes us?"

"You, Rile, are far too perfect for your own good," Lamia said. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Sweet dreams ... and try not to worry anymore. Whatever comes, we'll conquer it together."

Lamia nodded. "Together."

Chapter 27

Once again, Rile dreamed of falling from some unknown place toward another unknown place. This one reminded him of the Lake of Souls, with lights twinkling on the ground before him, but much more numerous. It was difficult to see anything, even when squinting, because they were all so bright.

He could make out one shadow below amid the glow: a triangular shape, moving slowly through the lights that pushed around it as it made its way through them.

I must be dreaming about the Lake, he thought and aimed for the triangle-shaped row boat as his fall slowed just like it had when he'd gone to the actual Lake.

“Greetings, Node-VIII,” said the familiar gray-hooded figure before him. “I’m happy to see you again.”

“Hi, Gardener.” He shielded his eyes to try and focus on her, but was still having trouble adjusting to the brightness. This wouldn’t have been a problem if his eyes still glowed. Was this his mind’s way of coping with the loss of his powers?

He realized it was so bright that he could see the Gardener’s face beneath her hood. She was a thin, pale little thing, with white eyes and sharp features.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” she said, tilting her head to the side to regard him. “You expected you’d come back?”

Rile shrugged. “I’m dreaming, so ...”

The Gardener curled her fingers into a loose fist and brought the back of her hand to her mouth, laughing. “This is no dream. I am happy to see you in your vessel when its mind is at rest. I’ve looked forward to seeing you since you left. Your soul has learned the way back, and you will visit here each time you sleep.”

Rile blinked, this time not from the bright lights around him. “You didn’t mention that before.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to.”

“So I’m ... *not* dreaming?” He gave his face a hard slap, and his skin burned. When she’d said as much, it felt right. This dream Lake was a little too similar to the real thing, with the exception of ... “Why is it so bright in here?”

His dream mind wouldn’t have been able to replicate her simple-answer-to-a-preposterous-question tone so well.

“Why, because you gave the Lake your light, of course,” she said.

His stomach clenched. “What?”

She tilted her head the other way and looked at him with sympathy. “Look around you, Node-VIII. You gave your light to the Lake, and it pollinated all those around it.”

The first time he was here, just hours before, there were thousands of lights around them. But beneath the water, there were just as many red orbs. Now it was almost impossible to see beneath the surface of the water, like a veil of light made a cover over it. There were no red, orange, or yellow orbs to be seen.

Rile swallowed, trying to give moisture to his dry throat. “So you mean to say,” he croaked, “that every soul in this lake is now in favor of the light? They’re all angelic souls now?”

“The energy in a god’s soul is very powerful,” she said, as if that would explain everything.

Rile could hear the panic in his own voice as he began to speak faster, rattling off the thoughts that flooded his mind. “But I never embraced the light! I was on the side of the demons. Wouldn’t that have made it darker? And I was only a half a god anyway. Didn’t another god recently pass? What happened to him?”

She brought that damned hand up to her mouth again to laugh. “Normally a god’s soul is so powerful that it will only ever be reborn as a god. You, however, did not simply send your soul back here ... you dispersed it. All of that light energy had to go somewhere, and it was distributed among the rest of the souls here. It is normally contained. Anther-II, formerly possessing the vessel of the god Ouranos, had some darkness on it after spending so much time in Hell, but it was still contained.” She gestured toward an orb of light to his left, where he saw a couple of small black spots among an otherwise bright light. “That was what I wanted to explain to you about the chalice, but you wouldn’t hear me. The chalice allows a soul to *change*, not to be reborn. That requires the souls around it to change, but in your case, it was so powerful that it changed all the souls in the Lake.”

He could only stare, wide-eyed, at the brightness around him. Whether the pain of the bright lights or the magnitude of

what he'd done was making his eyes sting most, he wasn't sure—but his cheeks were now wet with hot tears.

“How do I undo this?” he whispered. Lamia would kill him. She would reject him, and all of this would be for naught. If he could reset the souls, he could still love her from afar, and they could still protect the demon souls she cared so much about.

“You are able to travel back here because your soul is no longer like the others. It has dispelled the energy, and it cannot be put back in.”

“But what about Lamia?” his voice broke on her name. “What about the demons?”

“There are still dark souls out there, already living inside demon vessels. They will travel back here when they pass.”

“Will they absorb my light, too?”

“All of your light was dispersed into the souls that were already here when you came. That energy is contained inside of them now and cannot be transferred. The only way those dark souls can be given light is the same as always: they need to be struck down by angels or be otherwise influenced to do good. Look, here comes one now.”

The Gardener held out her hand to welcome a red orb that descended to the Lake in the same way he did. It floated above her palm, and Rile stared at it. Among all of the light, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. “The next time a demon conceives, she will receive this soul to begin growing a new vessel.”

“So ... unless more dark souls are given back to the Lake,

no more demons will be born?”

“That is correct.”

“What about manifestations?”

“The rest of these souls are too bright. Their light will need to be dimmed before a demon can create a new vessel.”

“And the same goes for half-gods like me?”

“There has never been another half-god like you,” the Gardener said with a smile. “You are one of a kind.”

“Lovely,” he said flatly. “But can a god conceive a new vessel with a human right now?”

“Just like demons, no humans at all will be able to conceive until dimmer souls return to the Lake.”

So every new being to be created, spare for that one dark soul that the Gardener cradled above her palm, was going to be reborn as an angel in the Heavens. There were countless souls here. The angelic army was now limitless. He reached out shaky hands, and the Gardener placed that one red soul above his palms.

He watched it float there, so dark and out of place among the brightness of the realm, and sobbed.

He thought it might somehow be sentient and scared of his reaction toward it, because as he cried, it began to soar back upward.

“No!” he shouted, reaching for it like it was a precious pet bird that had just taken off.

The Gardener put a hand on his arm and shook her head. “It

is going to a new vessel now. Another demon will be born in a few months.”

A few months. Rile swayed on his feet, making the boat rock back and forth. That wasn't a piece he'd considered yet: even if demons started corrupting souls and sending them back to the Lake now, their efforts would only be seen months from now once demon fetuses came to term. And those demons would be babies. Angels were created as adults.

While the Heavens would be busy creating endless populations of warrior angels, demons would continue to dwindle in number.

“How do I continue coming back here?” he asked. He needed to keep tabs on how many souls were in this Lake.

“You sleep,” she said.

The way she spoke always made him feel so stupid. To have gotten the realms to this point ... maybe he was.

Every sleep would be a nightmare until the realm grew dimmer. He took in a deep breath and nodded.

“You have started on quite a journey this night,” the Gardener said. “Come. I will give you one tool that will help.”

He allowed her to place an icy hand against his forehead, and for the first time, he was able to see some of her skin was scaled like Lamia's. He opened his mouth to say something, but those words transformed into a gasp as it felt like his brain vibrated inside his skull. He cried out, stumbling back and squeezing his eyes shut. When he opened them again, he saw a light that glowed differently than the others inside the

Gardener's chest. Looking down at himself, it matched his own—blue, like the shallow waters by the beach.

The scales. The ability to exist in the Lake. A soul that matched his after he drank from the Soul Chalice.

For once, the truth clicked inside of him without him having to be told.

“You're the demon that fell in love with the Supreme God all those years ago.”

She smiled weakly and nodded. “I was. And when I passed, I did not pass like the others. I came here, and have been tending to these souls ever since.”

“So that means ... you did drink from the chalice?” Hope bloomed anew. “It can be used again?”

His shoulders sagged when she shook her head.

“Not for a long time, I'm afraid. It's been many millennia since last it was able to be used.”

That meant it still needed to be protected and hidden once again, until that time.

He needed to get back to Lamia. He was almost too afraid to.

“Lamia.”

She'd heard her name a few times now from inside her dream, but was too warm to wake up. Too safe. She knew that outside of this delicious dream she was having, she was in the arms of a delicious man. *Her* man.

“Mmm?” she managed to say.

“We have to talk,” Rile said, shaking her gently.

Her eyes flew open. His tone was scared and completely out of the ordinary. She scanned the tent to find him kneeling beside her.

Why was he trembling?

“What’s the matter?” she asked quickly, scooting to kneel across from him. Their knees almost touched, and she scooted forward so they would make contact. After so long of not touching him, she was going to have skin-to-skin contact with him at every possible moment.

It was still dark outside, and his figure was lit by the light of the moon shining through the tent and the brightness of her eyes. He was white as a ghost, staring at her chest.

“You have a really beautiful soul, you know that?”

Her eyebrows knit together. Of all the things she’d expected him to say, that wasn’t one of them. “Are you still sleeping?” she asked, leaning forward to take his hands in hers and bring them into her lap.

“No,” he said, gently pulling his hands away to place them at his sides. “Something’s ... happened.”

Dread flew up Lamia’s spine. “Just tell me what’s happening, Rile.”

He swallowed and told her everything he’d seen when he’d re-entered the Lake of Souls.

Lamia was numb by the time Rile finished his tale. “And

you swear you weren't dreaming?" she asked for the thousandth time.

He shook his head, as if he was just as tired of the question as she was. "There was no way I could be." His eyes fell to the center of her sternum again. "I can see your soul right now."

Her hand flew up to press against the space between her breasts. "What does it look like?"

"An orb, just like it would be in the Lake," he said, keeping his eyes on the spot even through her hand. "Deep red and ripply."

She rubbed at the spot, imagining a heart-sized ball inside her chest that took up no physical room, that powered her "vessel." The thought made her shiver.

"The entire time we've been fighting this war, I've never really thought about what a soul is or does ... just that we fight to keep ours."

Rile shook his head. It hung low, and his chin rolled along his chest while he swiped at his cheeks. A few tears fell before he could catch them. "I am so sorry, Lamia. Had I known, I would have tried to find another way. I was panicked and couldn't focus on anything in the Lake when I was imagining I was still cooking you alive somewhere."

By his tone, and the way his body was turned slightly away from her, she knew he was expecting her to send him away. And she should, considering her entire life's purpose was to protect demons and the souls they'd carefully darkened and given back to the Lake.

But as she stared at him, clearly scared of what she was going to say or do, she found herself unable to be angry.

She couldn't blame him. All she wanted to do was take him into her arms and mourn their mistake, to hold him and somehow begin to understand the magnitude of the damage they'd done.

So she did.

She threw herself against him, knocking him onto his back as she found refuge in the warmth of his chest, right above where his soul sat inside of him. She was curious about what he looked like, but would have to ask when she was coherent enough to speak again. For now, she just wanted to cry in Rile's arms, and he let her.

"I'm so sorry," he kept saying, and she realized that he, too, was sobbing. "I'm so, so, sorry. I will do whatever I can to help make this right, if you'll ever allow me."

She found her voice by channeling her surprise. "How can you think that, after everything we've been through, I would just want you gone?"

"Because I, a half-god, just cost the demons *everything*. I'm afraid to even say that out loud to you. If Coryn had caused this, you would have murdered her *and* Zagan in cold blood."

"But I love you," she whispered.

And suddenly, Lamia understood why Zagan was making so many decisions that seemed to hurt everyone but Coryn.

Chapter 28

Lamia never thought she would do this, but through Alex, who contacted the manifestations, who contacted Jinn, she asked Zagan to return to their island on Manusya.

She thought he would keep her waiting as a show of power, but much to her surprise, he appeared just as the sun began to rise over the horizon. The manifestations jumped at the sound of the portal exploding to life, then scattered when they realized he was on his way.

Zagan would probably kill her. After what she'd let happen, she would do the same if she were him.

She hoped he would listen to her plan first.

Rile placed a hand on the small of her back as Zagan approached in the muted light of dawn. No pleasantries were exchanged; they both knew he was here because Lamia had important news. She nodded and led him silently back to the beach, further away from the manifestations he may also decide to kill in his wrath. She wanted to protect Rile, too, but he'd already insisted on staying with her.

"I think I know what you really felt when Oriax got taken away," she said, meeting Zagan's stare. "You felt the moment all of the souls in the Lake were injected with light." She gave Zagan a moment to process that, but when he still looked confused, she added, "Rile can now see into the Lake of Souls after using the chalice. Every soul there now belongs to the Heavens." And she and Rile told him everything they knew.

Zagan stayed eerily quiet and stoic as they explained the

magnitude of the situation. When they finished, he continued to stay silent, but instead of looking at either of them, looked over their shoulders to the sun rising behind them.

“Rile, leave us,” he said after a time. His voice held no threat or menace, but Rile stiffened beside her.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him, nodding and encouraging him to walk back into the trees. “I’ll be okay.”

She caught Rile staring at Zagan’s chest—was he studying his soul?—but the insistence in her voice broke through. Rile reluctantly pressed a tender kiss to her forehead before disappearing into the brush.

Zagan remained silent long after Rile was gone. She let him take everything in and gather his thoughts. Maybe he was thinking of the best way to kill her or what he could say to make her feel even worse about what happened.

Instead, he turned to face her with an expression of fear she’d never seen before.

“Coryn is with child, Lamia—and now that child may be one of the last few born for a while?”

The impact of those words made her sway on her feet. Lamia thought she understood why Zagan did what he did to protect Coryn before, but it made even more sense now. Why she’d been sequestered, why he’d forced them to take angels topside to kill them, why he banned angel blood ...

“Seven Hells. Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“If we told you and Jinn, we would have to tell Oriax ... and then the entire realm would know. We couldn’t take that

chance. We needed to be sure the child was ... *viable*. An angel and a demon conceiving together? We didn't know what to expect. We still don't." He rubbed his hands together, staring off toward the horizon. "The baby's soul is already inside of Coryn, right? What happened at the Lake wouldn't affect it?"

Lamia shook her head. "The baby is fine." She placed a gentle hand on his bicep, expecting him to pull away and start yelling. Instead, his muscles relaxed beneath her touch. "Congratulations, Z. I'm really happy for you and Coryn."

"Thank you. It was a pleasant surprise."

Lamia nodded, then began to move her hand away, but Zagan pinned it gently against his arm.

"This changes things, doesn't it?" he added, finally shifting his gaze back to her. He gave her hand a squeeze. "I am sorry that I allowed Coryn's pregnancy to blind me. I knew I was choosing to keep her safe over the best interests of Hell, but I didn't think demons forgoing Hellsglory for a few months would make a difference. I was willing to lose you and the others in favor of my unborn. I had just as much a hand in what happened at the Lake as you and Rile ... and now we need to band together to fix it." He took her hand in his and brought it down, turning it over so her palm was facing upward, and placed something there. She was confused until he pulled his hand away and she saw they were portal beads. "Do you wish to be a knight again?"

She smiled despite the shake of her head. "I have always been a knight ... I am just no longer a *demon* knight." Those

beads would come in handy now that Rile no longer had his clouds, but they would figure that out. She had the waves to help get her around, so long as they never set foot in a desert again. The beads clinked together in her hand as she balled her fist and extended them back out to him. “Most of the souls that transition from the light now will be orange at first, not red. That means there will be more manifestations on Manusya that need a champion than ever. Rile and I will continue guarding them here.”

Zagan nodded, and the disappointment in his expression humbled her.

“I understand,” he said. He brought his hand to hers, but instead of taking the beads back, gently pushed them back toward her. “You keep them. We will always make sure you have enough and will supply any other resources you need.”

Lamia nodded as she placed the beads in her pocket. “Thank you, Z. And we will make sure to do everything we can to protect your little prince or princess.”

The smile Zagan flashed might as well have had beams from the Heavens spilling out between his teeth, it was so bright. “Now, speaking from one lover of a former Heavenly being to another, I would like to offer you some advice.”

“Yes, go ahead,” she said.

“Rile is probably struggling with who he is and where he fits in more than he ever has. I saw the same doubt in his eyes that Coryn had when she was coming into her own, and he’s processed a lot more transitions than even she has. He thought he was half-demon, half-god, human, and now possesses a

power to see souls that no one else on Manusya has ever had. You are his constant; make sure he knows just how much you care for him and stand by him. I knew it wasn't just me being a pain in the ass that gave you the nudge to leave Hell. I knew he was the real deal because you went right to him. Show him he means just as much to you as you do to him."

Lamia smiled widely. "Thanks, Dad. I'm one step ahead of you there."

Zagan shook his head and laughed. "Then go get him, squirt."

"There you are," Rile said when Lamia appeared back through the trees. He'd been pacing around their tent, debating whether or not to storm the beach again to protect Lamia from whatever harsh words Zagan had for her. Much to his surprise, she came back smiling widely. "What did Zaga—"

She fell into him, forcing the air in his lungs to expel out through his mouth with an "oof!" His arms entwined around her, just as hers did around his torso, and she gave him a tight squeeze.

"I'm going to be an aunt," she announced proudly.

Rile blinked. "What?"

"Zagan and Coryn are having a child."

Rile looked down at her with surprise. "That's incredible news!"

Lamia laughed and explained everything she and Zagan had

talked about on the beach. So Zagan had a soul, after all; he was doing everything he could to protect his family. Rile couldn't fault him for that.

As he contemplated Lamia's story, she added, "I love you. Do you know that?"

He wanted to believe it. His love for her was more powerful than any feeling he'd ever known. But there were a million reasons for him to love her: Lamia was smart, strong, beautiful, and an accomplished knight who took on angels and gods and now commanded a group all her own. But what did he, a simple human with an altered soul and pointed ears, offer her in return?

"Do you know that?" Her more forceful tone snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Yes. I guess I just wonder why," he confessed.

"You've been there for me as I figured out who I really am. You've been there to support every decision I've made, even if they led down a wrong path. You see beyond a knight or a gorgon ... You just see *me*." She laughed, taking his hand and pressing it against her sternum, where her soul rested beneath. "Hell, you see more of me than I can."

He smiled weakly. "But look at all that I've caused." He ran his fingers over the scars that marred her body, starting from the one on her cheek, then her arms, then the palms of her hands.

"You didn't cause these; they were caused by the gods trying to keep you away from me. I'm proud of every single

one.” She cupped his face in her hands. “What happened in the Lake was caused by a string of people and a string of decisions we can’t take back. We keep saying it: this is our timeline now, and we can only move forward. Even Zagan sees that. And I need you by my side to help fix it. You are more powerful than you know.” She traced her hand from his cheek down to his palm and bit her lip. “I wear these marks proudly, as a symbol of how much we’ve overcome ... and I would love if you would bear my mark in return.”

He was awestruck as she traced a circle over his left palm with her fingertip.

“It would be about this size, right here,” she continued, “in the same place you marked me first. What do you say?”

He pictured the symbol over the cave that meant so much to her. It brought her peace, and calm, and joy. She truly loved that spot, and he recalled her saying it was the only thing she’d ever claimed on Manusya. And now she wanted to claim him?

She said it was like matrimony. She’d essentially just proposed to him.

“Lamia, I’d be honored,” he breathed, falling to his knees in front of her.

Smiling widely, she held her open palm out to him, and he placed the back of his hand into it. Her rounded nails extended into claws as she stroked his bare palm with her thumb in small circular motions, as if gauging where she should place her mark.

“This will only hurt for a second,” she whispered and made

her first cut.

He had to stop himself from pulling his hand into his chest as her claw cut open the sensitive skin of his palm. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m going as fast as I can without making it look rushed.”

Holy Hell, did this hurt. He looked down, trying not to show her his eyes were flooded with tears. The burn was almost enough to make him want to pass out. *It’s worth it. Every mark she’s making is making me hers.*

“Okay,” she breathed, and he breathed a sigh of relief when she drew her claws away. He tilted his palm toward him, but couldn’t see the mark beneath the red pool of blood.

“Now the true test,” she said and clasped his hand between hers. The skin-to-skin contact on the raw mark made him hiss, but he again resisted the urge to pull away.

“Test?” he ground out through a clamped jaw and snarled lips.

Lamia looked at his hand between hers, and her eyes began to glow brighter. A delicious, comforting warmth he’d never experienced before flooded his entire body, making the burn in his hand fade away just as quickly as it’d started. A tingling sensation flowed in his hand, and when she pulled away, the wound was completely healed. The blood was gone, and all that was left in its wake was her mark.

“It worked!” Lamia whispered, then she let out the sweetest of laughs. “Now I can finally stop being annoyed about being unable to heal you.”

Emotion overwhelmed him as he stared at the beautiful symbol that now graced his palm. Only two other people had ever taken him in: his mother and Alex. But both were bound by an obligation to do so. With Lamia, he faced the greatest hurdles of all with his powers rejecting her, yet she stuck with him and chose him of her own accord. He never thought himself a crier, but recent events were proving otherwise. At the Lake and in their tent, he'd cried tears of anguish. Now, he cried tears of pure joy.

She sank to her knees across from him, crying with equal measure. "I love you, Rile," she said. And he felt it in his bones. In his new mark.

"I love you so much, Lamia," he whispered and captured her in a tight hug. His body roared to life, and his body heated a degree as he wanted to show her just how deeply his love and desire ran. He crushed his lips against hers, seeking, giving, taking.

Finally, he would give her all of him.

As he gripped her and moved to lay her on her back, a bloodcurdling scream rang out in the distance.

"ANGELS!" someone cried.

His head fell into her neck, and all they could do was groan.

"What's one more battle before we finally celebrate?" she asked, but beneath her humor, her frustration was just as potent as his.

As Rile followed Lamia out of the tent, he caught sight of his backpack out of the corner of his eye. Lamia had given him

something he would cherish forever, and now it was his turn. He quickly rummaged through the bottom of the bag, feeling around for the familiar worn string that held his mother's pendant. It meant the world to him, and now it was time to give it to the being that meant the world to him.

He extracted the necklace and held the pendant in the palm that now bore Lamia's mark. He had to blink a few times and shake his head to confirm what he was seeing.

Something glowed inside the pendant that he'd never seen before. He was sure only he and the Gardener could see it.

Had his mother known what she'd given him all those years ago?

Perhaps she'd known Orko wasn't a demon after all ...

Chapter 29

Now that Oriax, the current general of the demon army, was captured, it was Jinn's turn to summon the troops. Lamia ran toward the portal that exploded with light while watching angels rain down from above.

"You felt the shift in the Lake of Souls," Lamia told Zagan as she ran up beside him. "I wonder if they felt it, too."

Zagan crossed his arms. "Now that every soul in the Lake is eligible to become an angel, their soldiers are completely expendable. They're going to bring everyone they have."

"Coryn is safe in Hell?"

"Yes, she won't feel any of the deaths that happen in this realm."

Lamia nodded. "Good."

"I told Jinn about the baby," Zagan added as the sky grew dark.

"I had a feeling. He's never drawn a more perfect portal. He wants to bring Hell to these angels more than ever."

Zagan smiled. "And so do I. Permission to use the souls of your mannies to taint the wingers?"

"Permission granted," she said, and they nodded to each other. Though Zagan couldn't see souls like Rile could, he could feel the energy in them. Channeling dark energy in another's soul didn't hurt them or cost anything, but Zagan could use it to coax darkness into lighter souls. This would be a good start to tilting the scales back in the Lake again.

A loud clap of thunder made the ground shake as Rile caught up to them. “Not just angels,” he said, panting. He pointed up at the clouds. “Orko is here.”

“I love it when we bring gods to Manusya,” Lamia said, cracking her knuckles. “It’s such a compliment that they think their countless angel soldiers can’t win against us without them.” Hopefully they would also bring Oriax.

They scanned the skies for the god, but before Lamia could point out a stark white cloud among the black, it fell to the ground before them and slowed.

“Here he is,” Rile mumbled.

Orko hovered just a foot above the sand, eyes crackling with bright lightning. He was scrawny and simple-looking for being a god and Rile’s father.

“I have come to personally escort the Heavens’ hero back to his new temple,” Orko boomed. Though he did not shout, his baritone voice projected out all around him. Despite the violent storm he caused around them, his tone and look were warm. Proud.

Lamia wanted to cover her ears as his voice reverberated, but stood up straighter and took a step in front of Rile, who gently placed his hand on her shoulder. She wanted to protest, but stopped. Rile had no powers, but he was good with words. If she wanted to stand up for herself in her battles, she needed to allow him to do the same for himself.

“Wow, you came all the way down here for me? This is the first day you’ve been on Manusya since, what, you abandoned

Mom?"

"You're worth it," Orko said, smiling widely.

"Afraid your erelim weren't enough to get me back, you mean. So sorry about Landrathel. May his body break apart at the bottom of the sea."

Orko shrugged. "A necessary expense, now that we have a near limitless supply of souls from which to make angels. All thanks to you!"

So they did know what had happened. "I'm afraid you've wasted your time," Rile said, tracing down Lamia's arm to entwine their fingers.

A vein in Orko's forehead pulsed as he looked around at the angels in his entourage. They stayed stone-faced, but it was clear the god was embarrassed that his son was not only rejecting his own temple in the Heavens, but chose a relationship with a demon over it.

"Where is Oriax?" Rile asked.

"Why don't you come back to the Heavens and see?"

Lamia squeezed Rile's hand, silently pleading for him not to take the god's bait.

Don't fall for this because you want to save Oriax for me.

Rile pulled his hand away from Lamia's, and she wanted to protest out loud, but bit her tongue once again.

The demons and manifestations slowly inched toward the angels, both sides waiting for their superiors to issue the command to fight. Lamia was impressed that the lesser army,

deprived of angel blood for so long, was able to hold back.

“I’m not going with you, Orko. I’m staying on Manusya to undo the wrong I did.”

“The wrong?” Orko laughed. “Son, you did everything you were supposed to do! Now return with me to your home, where you belong, where we will both be worshiped and exalted for eternity. A father and his son, made and sacrificed in order to win the war.”

Rile, jaw slackened, stepped back. “You knew what would happen if I drank from the chalice.”

“I told you you played an important role. However you got to using it didn’t matter to me; all that mattered was that you did. This tryst you had with the demon female just made things easier. Children always want to disobey their parents. Forbidding you from being with her only made you want her more, and I knew that once your water demon got the chalice, everything would fall into place.”

Rile shook. “To use me is one thing,” he shouted, “but how dare you use Lamia!”

She placed a hand on his arm. “My army is your army. Zagan’s army is your army. Use them.”

Rile panted. With a scream, he hurled himself at the god, spurring the surrounding fighters to also engage in battle. Demon claws met angelic swords.

Finally, another battle with the Heavens. She realized she was just as excited as the lessers were for the angels’ blood. With one clawed hand and her long sword, she hacked at every

angel that came toward her and Rile. The angels were more careless than usual, but that meant they were also coming after her faster than she'd ever seen. With no reason to be cautious, they were eagerly willing to sacrifice themselves, knowing that more angels could be made easier than ever before. She cursed under her breath, yet relished just how many angelic fools she was taking down around her.

The barrage of angels made her lose sight of Orko, until she heard the snap of his electricity in the distance. Lesser demons and a few manifestations fell to their knees around him, and the angels nearby beheaded every single one of them.

No!

Every soul was precious, and they'd just sent a dozen back to the Lake. Lamia cursed and shouted, running a few steps toward them before turning back around for Rile. He would want to kill Orko just as much as she did, and she wanted them to be together when his soul left his body.

She was surprised to find him watching Zagan as the demon king moved his fingers, using the darkness of the demon and mannie souls fighting around him to corrupt their angelic opponents. Rile's eyes were following some kind of track she couldn't see. Was he watching the souls Zagan manipulated?

Whatever he was doing, it was dangerous for him to be so distracted. They were lucky he hadn't been taken down by angels yet, but perhaps Orko had already instructed his fighters not to strike down his son. Either way, they couldn't take the chance.

"Rile, be careful!" she called out, fighting her way back

toward him. They didn't have much time. Every second meant another chance a demon would lose its life. Orko needed to lose his before that happened.

Rile watched as Zagan seemed to pull essence from demons and manifestations, then manipulate it to inject into angelic souls before slaughtering them. Was Zagan able to see souls, too?

Rile reached toward a mannie's soul the same way Zagan had; he crooked a finger, beckoning the energy inside Stotter's chest to follow. Much to his surprise, the essence pulled away! It formed a trail, which he punched into the chest of a dying angel on the ground beside him, and he saw a dark spot form amongst the light. When the angel finally died, its soul dislodged itself from behind his ribcage, passed through the skin and into the air, then flew away and faded.

Grasping the necklace in his pocket, he knew how he would get revenge on his father.

"We need to restrict Orko," Rile said to Lamia as she came up beside him and took yet another angel down. His beautiful knight, graceful and glorious on the battlefield.

"How? He'll fry anyone that gets too close to him, and you're just as susceptible to his powers as I am now," she said.

"There has to be a way." But among the fighting, how was he supposed to think of what that way could be?

"I have an idea!" Lamia said as she thrust her claws through the neck of an angel. It gargled and spat silver blood that

traveled down Lamia's arm before it fell to the ground. "Cover me."

Lamia ran toward Orko, slashing her way through angels and jumping over demons as she looked up toward the sky. Ominous thunderclouds loomed overhead, swirling around at the same speed Orko moved his arms.

He was conjuring something with his eyes locked on Lamia.

"Don't you dare!" Rile shouted, pushing her to the ground and covering her with his body.

Lamia let out an ear-splitting scream beneath him, temporarily paralyzing everyone around her—including Orko and himself. She pushed Rile off of her and thrust her arms into the air as he rolled onto his side. The clouds shook. The lightning crackled, then fizzled out.

If Rile wasn't paralyzed, he would have laughed. But Orko started moving before Rile could. With his control of the storm clouds broken, Orko began to summon lightning straight from his own body. Rile shouted helplessly as his father's glowing fingertips pointed at Lamia.

With a loud snap, the area was enveloped in light. Adrenaline forced Rile's body to listen to his brain, and he pushed to his feet, knowing it was too late to throw himself in front of his father's lightning strike, but he was unsure of what else to do.

He took a few steps towards the light before a pillar of water fell from the sky, draining the thunderclouds of their dark color and enveloping Orko.

The waterspout dampened Orko's screams as it amplified his powerful electricity. Even he was no match for the potent combination of his electricity and Lamia's water, and Rile knew the pillar was drawing out every ounce of electric energy his father had and electrifying him instead.

"Soldiers! Get ready to hold him down!" Lamia shouted. Manifestations and lesser demons surrounded Orko before the water ran out. As soon as the deluge stopped falling, the demons were on the god, pinning him however they could.

"I thought of the steam in your room," Lamia said to Rile. "Though I couldn't see the molecules of water up there, I knew I could control them."

"You're a gods-damned powerful, beautiful genius," he said.

"I know. Now, you don't have much time. Do whatever you were going to do."

He reached into his pocket and held up his mother's necklace. "This is all I have left of her," he said, staring down at his father. "But I think you deserve it more than I do."

Orko thrashed weakly in the demons' hold, and he paused once he saw the pendant. He narrowed his eyes. "What would I want with that?"

Everyone else, including Orko, saw a bright, Heavensly blue pendant. But Rile saw its true contents—the necklace radiated a garnet red light in a darker shade than even Lamia's or Zagan's souls. He pressed the pendant into Orko's sternum, then directed the soul's essence away from it and through Orko's chest.

Gods must have been more sensitive to their souls changing than angels, because Orko's eyes went wide and his jaw dropped. Excitement bloomed inside Rile as he watched Orko's panic take hold.

"What are you doing!" Orko demanded, still thrashing beneath the hold of the demons.

Rile crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side, shrugging. "Everything I'm supposed to do, just like you said. When a god's soul returns to the Lake, it changes the souls around it. You're all I have to undo what I've done. So thank you."

Rile nodded to Lamia, but he still flinched when she lifted her sword above her head and slammed it into Orko's chest and roared as she strained to push it through and past his heart. Golden blood spewed around the blade, and Orko gurgled a scream.

Angels all around them gripped their chests in response to their god's pain, and the army of lesser demons took the opportunity to descend on them, tearing into them to drink their silver blood. The demons beside Lamia and Rile ignored the angels, turning instead to sniff wildly at the golden blood pooling around Orko.

Lamia removed her sword from his chest and gave a curt nod to the lessers. "Hurry, before the rain comes," she warned, and the demons didn't hesitate to pile on and dig into Orko's corpse. Rile wanted to turn away, but forced himself to focus on the space above the carnage instead, desperately trying to tune out the sounds of tearing flesh and keep the contents of

his stomach as he searched the air above them. He sighed in relief once Orko's soul, now speckled with dark black spots, left its vessel and soared away. He grabbed Lamia's hand, all too happy to walk away and leave the demons to their feast.

Any angel that was still intact took to the skies as soon as Orko's soul was gone. For some reason, Lamia let them leave. Maybe it was because they were too far away for her paralyzing scream, or because there were only a handful still standing. Perhaps it was because she felt just as tired as he did, with limbs and eyelids that felt too heavy for her body.

Whatever it was, Rile didn't want to ask. They continued to walk in silence, panting in rhythm with one another.

As they cleared the battlefield and the sounds of the lesser's feeding was replaced by the sound of a heavy holy rain, Lamia finally asked, "What did you do back there?"

"I darkened Orko's soul," he said, but his lips felt numb, and it was difficult to articulate his words. He was in shock. His head swam with visions of the battle and the stench of mixed blood. "Hopefully, that gives us a head start putting a few dark souls back into the Lake."

Chapter 30

Rile frowned as he folded and re-folded the all too familiar note in his hands. The necklace dissolved along with Orko's body in the holy rain, and the note scribbled in his mother's handwriting was now all he had left of her. "Never forget your strength, my son. Thank you for showing me mine," he recited, then held it up to Lamia, Alex, Jinn, and Zagan. They all leaned forward to examine it more closely in the firelight.

"What was she? What strength was she talking about?" he asked. His chest ached, and his head throbbed, tired from the day and overwhelmed by the newfound questions he wanted to ask his mother ... and the knowledge that he would never have the chance to do so.

Jinn pinched his chin between his fingers. "The markings on the pendent weren't demonic, and I don't think they were Heavensly. I'd just assumed they were decorative when I saw it at the waterfall."

"Well, it's gone now, too, so I guess we'll never know," Rile said.

Lamia frowned. "Do you think your mother knew that Orko was lying about being a mephis demon and somehow acquired that soul to try and capture him with it?"

Rile shrugged. "She had to have known something. I just wish she would have clued me in."

Lamia rubbed his back. "Well, if there's anything we've learned through all of this, it's not to dwell on why things happened the way they did. Even though she didn't tell you

what the soul was for, you used it to your advantage now.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I won’t know what it did until I fall asleep,” he said. “And even though my whole body feels like lead, based on how hard my adrenaline is still pumping, I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep ever again.”

“I think Lamia can help you with that,” Jinn said with a wink. He motioned for the rest of the crew to stand up around them.

“I’ll head back to the Heavens to see what I can learn about Oriax,” Alex offered.

“Are you sure?” Zagan asked, concern thick in his voice. He placed a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “They won’t strike you down up there?”

Alex smiled. “I’ll be careful. But when I get back, I’ll need to talk with Coryn about where she gets her mana from. I’ll be up in the Heavens as little as possible from now on.” He clapped Zagan on his shoulder in return. “Maybe we can have a dinner or two on Manusya together, for old time’s sake.”

Zagan smirked. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“I look forward to it,” Alex said, then turned his gaze to Lamia and Rile. “You’ll be here when I’m done? I can’t track Rile now that I’m not his guardian.”

“You couldn’t track Rile even when you were,” Lamia chided. “But yes, we will be here. This island is our home now. It’s surrounded by water, has all the resources we need, and what we don’t have”—she motioned to Jinn, who was

holding a portal bead—“we can easily bring back.”

“Got it. See you soon, then,” Alex said. He shook each of their hands and then kicked off the ground to ascend back to the Heavens.

A portal burst open with red light on the ground beside Jinn. “I’ll get my builders here first thing in the morning.”

“Okay, but all of the houses can’t look like demon nightclubs.”

“You’re really no fun, are you, Lamia?” Jinn winked before pulling her into a hug. “See you tomorrow. Don’t get too crazy.”

“Go away.” Lamia laughed.

Jinn chuckled before turning to Rile and extending out his hand. “Nice job today,” he said. “Admittedly crappy start, but you really redeemed yourself.”

“Leave him alone, Jinn,” Lamia said as she rolled her eyes.

Rile laughed. “Nah, it’s true.” He took Jinn’s hand and shook it firmly, hoping his face wasn’t too flushed with embarrassment. “Thank you.”

“C’mon, Z,” Jinn said, stepping closer to the portal.

Zagan nodded. “I need to get back to my queen anyway.”

Lamia grinned. “And your little prince or princess. Take care of everything in Hell; we got topside.”

“I know you do,” he said. “Take care, Lam. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“As excited as I am to actually be a father, let’s stick to brother.”

Lamia laughed. “I was thinking the same thing. Okay, bro. Give Coryn our best.”

“I will.” Zagan turned to Rile and put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re one of us now. Welcome to the family.”

Rile nodded and smiled. “I appreciate that.”

Zagan joined Jinn in the center of the portal, and they sank through the floor.

Rile and Lamia stood in silence for a long moment after the portal faded. She whispered, “Are we really finally alone?”

He smiled. “I do believe we are.”

He pulled her closer to him, catching her bottom lip between his teeth as soon as they were close enough. He tugged gently, coaxing her to bring her head closer so he could kiss her.

Her body felt so good against his. So right. He wanted to savor this, but he was eager to give her all of him. His desire for her had been pent up for so long ...

“Are you okay enough for this?” she asked between kisses.

“Are you kidding? I’m afraid that if we don’t do this right now, it will never happen. The next time someone interrupts this, the only thing left to happen is the apocalypse.”

Lamia laughed. “It kind of almost was, but then you saved it. You have more power than you know.”

“Only because you’re here to help me harness it.”

“We bring out the best in each other. That’s why I love you.”

“And I love you. Now I can finally show you how much.”

Rile wrapped his arms around her and gently guided her backward, toward the tent they finally now shared. It wasn’t the most comfortable or romantic setting, but it was their setting, and based on how Lamia was kissing at his neck as he blindly guided her into it, she didn’t care about the perfection of it all, either. *She* was what made the moment perfect.

He laid her on her back on the bed of blankets and pillows inside the tent and zipped it shut before covering her with his body. She was supple and warm; the feeling of her arms around his neck, welcoming him, was exquisite.

“I will never take these touches or kisses for granted,” he said, stroking up and down her arm with the back of his fingers and feeling the difference between the smoothness of her skin and the ripples of her scales. He fused their mouths together, taking the time to enjoy the firmness of her lips and the sweet taste of her tongue.

Lamia gripped the bottom of his shirt and pulled. In one swift movement, he let her body go to free himself of the clothing and then fell immediately back on her, kissing from the edge of her mouth, down her neck, and along the groove of her collarbone. She shivered, and he bunched the fabric of her desert top in his hands.

“As much as I love this on you, it needs to come off,” he said, and as she sat up so he could remove it, he pulled it and

her bra off of her and was suckling at one of her nipples before she hit the ground.

Lamia shivered and wrapped her arms back around him, pressing his head against her breast as he languidly traced over her taut nipple. “Rile,” she whispered, running her hand over the erection in his pants.

He groaned, giving her nipple a gentle bite before moving onto the other. “Your hand there feels even better than I imagined,” he said before sucking the nipple into his mouth. They both wiggled out of their pants and underwear, and he laid her down again, dragging his length down her stomach as he kissed his way down between her legs. He rumbled in approval as she fell further open for him, and he was eager to explore her folds with his tongue. She tangled her fingers in his hair, and he reveled in her undulations for him, eagerly seeking what he gave her.

“Rile, *yes*,” she whimpered, and his powerful warrior’s desperate mewl for him made his eyes roll back and his cock stiffen even harder.

“You taste so good.” He groaned, reveling in each of her responses as he explored her with his tongue. A plunge inside, a gentle suck on her clit. He ground his hips into the ground as she moaned his name to the ceiling, shaking with need as her moans grew louder and she tightened her grip on his hair.

“Rile,” she cried. She arched her back and he stole a glance at her breasts, nipples perfectly peaked, begging for him, as her hips rocked against his mouth.

Unable to hold back anymore, his gentle sucks at her clit

turned hungry. He nipped and sucked move forcefully, and she shouted, trembling as a climax rocked her. He lapped up all she gave, then pushed to his knees. His cock stood at full attention, aching with need.

She was on him before he had a chance to ask her how she wanted to be taken, climbing into his lap and straddling him while she kissed him hungrily. He wondered if her own taste in his mouth would offend her, but she kissed him with a passion that sent him reeling in desperate need. She was so wet in his lap, and he'd waited so long for this.

“Can I take you inside of me?” she asked between desperate kisses.

“Gods ... Seven Hells ... whatever. I need you to,” he replied. He would die if she didn't. With a groan, she raised herself up on her knees, positioned his erection, and sank back on it.

Stars winked through Rile's vision as her perfect sheath enveloped him, inch by inch, until he was buried to the hilt inside of her. Her eyes rolled back as if she was drunk with the feeling of it, and she sat in his lap like that for a few long moments.

He craned his head to see where they were joined. Here, this, with Lamia, was paradise. It took the world changing for it to happen, but they were finally able to be together now. He would have jumped into a thousand lakes and split his soul a thousand times over to experience this moment.

“You feel so fucking good,” she moaned as her claws bit into his chest. As she slowly began grinding on top of him, he

threw his head back and gasped, already feeling his body building toward orgasm. He locked eyes with her, fighting desperately to keep himself under control.

“You’re perfect,” he said, and once he regained control of his body, he began bucking his hips in time with hers. They found a beautiful rhythm as she bounced in his lap, and he couldn’t help but lean up to suck one of those delicious nipples into his mouth again.

“Those jets of come, I want to feel them inside of me,” she said, her undulations getting more and more desperate as their pleasure grew, and he groaned into her breast.

Gods, how was she so erotic. He pictured them sitting across from each other all those nights ago, watching his own spend shoot into the air and wanting this moment like none other. And now it was here, and he would give her exactly what she wanted.

“Lamia!” he shouted, and his hands flew to her hips, and he slammed her down onto his lap. His orgasm rocked him, and he felt hot streams of seed shoot into her eager body. She cried out with him, shaking as her own orgasm made her squeeze around his cock, making sure her body got every bit of spend it could.

They kissed again as he gently bucked against her, never wanting to stop despite his erection softening inside of her.

“Perfection,” she said. Yes, everything that had led up to this moment was worth it. He lay back and smiled up at her smiling down at him, still connected.

“Another round like that and I might be able to sleep again after all,” he said with a laugh.

“Then we should really tire you out, for the good of souls everywhere,” she teased. “It’s our duty so you can see how the lake is doing.”

He shrugged. “It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make,” he said, and they smiled at each other before kissing languidly again.

Rile knew what to expect when he fell this time.

The breeze that stroked his hair was kind of nice, now that he knew what he was getting into and how to control his descent.

As the lake drew closer, he took the time to survey the realm. It was still blindingly bright, but amongst the white were small patches of yellow. Yellow, as the Gardener explained, made them human souls. Those must have been the previously angelic souls Zagan and his army were able to influence before putting them down. He breathed a sigh of relief. There may have only been a few dozen human souls there now, but it was a start. Those were a few dozen souls that wouldn’t be part of the angels’ army.

And then, in the far distance, he saw what he was hoping for: a small island of bright orange and red lights and, in the center, the sparking, crackling soul that had very clearly belonged to Orko.

His plan had worked. They still had a lot to do, but at least fifty or more demons could be born now.

The Gardener was sitting in her boat when Rile landed in it, staring out into the patch of fiery souls that floated just below the surface of the lake. She and Rile watched them for a while, until he wasn't sure whether or not she knew he'd landed with her.

As he opened his mouth to say hello, she interrupted him. "Your mother and I are so proud of you," she whispered. When he furrowed his brow, she held a bright white soul up to him. "Jasminum-I. She has always been one of my favorite souls ... a fighter, always looking for the best for her and hers."

His breath caught. "You knew her? And she knew you?"

"Not in the way you're thinking, as you and I know each other. Her vessels and I have never crossed paths. Before she was born as a human—and your mother—I knew her next reincarnation would be something even more special than she'd been before." She stroked the top of the light affectionately. "I don't often get inklings like that, but they come to me every once in a while. The last time I'd felt a great destiny in a soul was when Orko was created, and I knew they would be intertwined and their ties would somehow impact this realm. So I sent a vesselless soul along with your mother, in a pendant she was born wearing, and trusted fate to intervene if this realm was ever put in danger. It appears my trust in fate worked; you are already restoring balance to this realm after having used that soul."

"If you were concerned about keeping balance, why let me jump into the lake at all?"

“I was trusting fate. You were so insistent on the jump, that I knew it would set us all on the right path.”

It was interesting that the Gardener was once a demon. Did she do all of this because she couldn't stand the idea of the Heavens winning the war, too? “Why not turn souls dark yourself, here in this realm?” he asked.

“I can only nurture the souls as they are when they come back to me—but that does not mean I am completely powerless when trying to maintain balance.”

“So will the war between angels and demons over the souls here ever end?”

“Not if I have any say in the matter. Light needs dark, and dark needs light to thrive.”

He didn't understand why, but wasn't going to question her about that now. He had more personal information to gain before he woke up.

“My mother told me *her* mother died alone in childbirth along a road in the middle of a forest. The people who found her thought her mother placed the necklace on her before she died.”

“A logical conclusion for humans to draw. The additional soul is not what killed your grandmother, however—I was sad to see her soul return so soon, but know that it had nothing to do with the pendant.”

Rile nodded. “Did my mother know the significance of it?”

“She couldn't see the soul inside of the necklace. No one else could but me, until you.” The Gardener lifted her chin,

and he caught a smile beneath her hood. “Fate works in mysterious ways. It figured out a most wonderful way to use that soul for good.”

“It was a dark soul used to taint the bright soul of a god—you have an interesting take on good,” he said with a laugh, “but I have to agree. Lamia and I will fight hard to continue restoring balance to this realm. I hope you will help guide us along that journey.”

“I will always be here to help.”

Rile bowed his head low to her. “Zagan and Coryn’s child ... what kind of soul was sent to them?”

The Gardener looked thoughtfully up at the sky. “Jasminum-II. He is a good, strong soul. An orange light, as the child will be in a manifestation vessel.”

“So he’s a male. A prince,” Rile said, nodding. “I think they will be very pleased by that.”

“Please send them my regards. They will be just as important to the restoration of balance as you and Lamia are.”

“I most certainly will.”

The Gardener nodded. “Now come. Since you will now be spending much time here, allow me to give you a full tour of this realm before you return to yours.”

Rile woke up to a day that was just as bright as the lake he’d just said goodbye to, and he was just as naked as the day he was born.

He rose and dressed to find it was mid-afternoon, and the island had completely changed in the time he'd been asleep. Small, beautiful homes guided him toward the river, where he found a larger home, which Lamia was decorating with shells and stones outside.

"There you are," she said, dropping everything she carried to run and pull him into a tight hug. "How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you. And long, it seems."

Lamia smiled and nodded. "How is the Gardener and the Lake?"

"We made some headway yesterday. A few dozen more demons can be brought into Hell now. There is still much to do, but the Gardener wants to restore balance to the lake just as much as we do. She will help us."

"That's wonderful."

"So is what's being done on this island!" Rile exclaimed, throwing his arms out and motioning toward all of the new structures surrounding them.

"Jinn lent us his builders, and between his people and ours, we've set up homes for most of the people here. We'll finish the rest by tomorrow." She led him to a small table with some extra tools and glasses all in a row with glowing liquid inside. "Can I interest you in an arile?" she asked, holding one out to him.

From the battle, he knew exactly what angel blood looked like, and though it was fine that Lamia enjoyed it, the thought of drinking the silver liquid made his human stomach flip.

“No, thank you. How about just some straight netsilana?”

While she poured him a glass, Stotter approached with paper in hand and two other half-incubi in tow. “Lady Lamia, Sir Rile,” he greeted. “Sir” would take some getting used to. “I have a full report of everyone on the island, who passed, and who is missing. We presume they were the ones captured along with Demon Knight Oriax.”

“Thank you, Stotter. We will review the list with Alex when he returns and see if he has any updates.”

“Thank you, Lady.” Stotter handed her the list. Rile quickly counted the names over her shoulder: six mannies, plus Oriax. What could the angels want with them?

“Have you seen your new residence, Sir Rile?” Stotter asked.

“I haven’t shown him yet,” Lamia said. “We were just on our way inside now.”

Stotter and the two mannies behind him bowed low. “Please let us know if you need anything at all.”

“Thank you again, Stotter,” Lamia said. As the group left, she took Rile’s hands in hers and gave them a tight squeeze.

They turned to face their new house together. Every house he saw was gorgeous, but this one was clearly built with extra love and opulence.

“The work that’s been done is incredible,” Rile said. “I can’t believe it’s ours.”

“Yours and mine,” she confirmed, pulling him inside. He

recognized the furniture, and Lamia filled in the blanks before he could ask. “We used a portal to bring everything from the waterfall and my home in Hell over here. It doesn’t fill it all, but it’s a start. We can move in more as we go.”

She took him from room to room, and he stared in awe at how much space they had. He was so excited to start a life here with her.

“And for the final room ...” she said excitedly, then swung the door wide open.

He gasped.

Above the king-sized bed facing a large picture window overlooking the beach was the same symbol he had on his hand, and beside it, a mess of straight lines that perfectly matched the scar on her own hand. The one his powers had left.

“You wanted this?” he said, choking up on the final word. He motioned toward the busy mark that looked inferior to her own.

“Of course,” she said, showing her palm to him. “I already told you I wear it proudly.”

He held up his own palm. “Fate is good,” he whispered, then brought their scarred palms together and interlaced their hands once again. He hoped it would continue to be good as they fought back for demons’ souls. It would be a tough battle, but as long as he and Lamia faced it together, he knew they could take on any realm that challenged them.

“Now come on,” she said, pulling him forward. “We still

have a lot more lost time to make up for.”

Thank you for reading

I hope you enjoyed spending time with Lamia and Rile. I'd sincerely appreciate it if you could leave an honest review of the story on Amazon. Reviews, no matter how long or how short they are, help more people find my books online. The more people discover them, the more I can write!

Thank you for taking time to support small authors like me. See you soon for book 3—Oriax's story!

About the Author

Alyson Caraway spends her Sundays writing books—slowly. When she’s not writing or working her day job in marketing, you can find her indulging in retail therapy, playing video games, studying Japanese, or living her best foodie life. She lives on Long Island with her husband, two kids, and maltipoo.

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