



*Is that a halo?
Cause you look heaven sent...*

hell of an angel

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHRISTI BARTH



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*To the man whose smile charms me and weakens my knees
every day...even after twenty-five years of married bliss!*

Chapter One

The best thing about Evangeline Thayer's job as an actuary was that she didn't have to talk to people.

Most of the time.

When she got to sit in her cozy home office, using statistics and the glorious certitude of math to analyze financial risk, she was happy. Well, *content*, for sure.

And she excelled at it. Which had led to the current problem. She was so good that her supervisor insisted she go, in person, to meet their big new client.

Goodbye, yoga pants.

Hello, stockings. Like it was 1954. But while Buffalo was admittedly nice in June, the inside of an office run by three male partners undoubtedly had the AC cranked to near-frigid. She'd worn the archaic, twisted nylon manacles as protection.

Not *just* because she'd grown up in Hell and preferred things on the warmer side...

So she'd been in the bathroom wrestling with the darn things for far too long. Her new clients were probably waiting for her. A bad first impression was an impression people remembered.

Evangeline didn't like to be noticed.

Or remembered. She took great pains to stay off everyone's radar. To simply blend in as (hopefully) a normal human. Was that really so much to ask?

Pushing past the bathroom door, she paused at the corner before the glassed-in conference room. Every step she took rode her skirt higher up her legs with static electricity on the stockings.

Eva loathed them. How had they not improved over the decades? Why had her boss insisted that "business attire" meant a skirt or a dress? But her job wasn't to address old-school sexism. It was to get through the next twenty minutes.

“Why do all three of us have to be here? This audit doesn’t need to be done by committee. Today’s just a meet and greet, anyway. I’m shit at greeting.” A man’s deep bass rumbled down the hall.

Oh no.

Metafora’s partners *were* already waiting for her. Eva lifted her laptop bag, ready to hustle in and apologize.

“Because I’m not doing the meeting alone, Z,” a smooth baritone responded. “Not with some numbers nerd who probably isn’t even hot.”

What?

What?!?

As a woman—okay, not a human woman, but female solidarity transcended the whole paranormal vs. humans divide—the assumption that giving up his time was only worthwhile for a pretty face? It was appalling.

As an unabashed lover of the beautiful perfection that was math? The slam against nerds was equally appalling.

“Gideon, behave,” a third voice reasoned. Or...ordered? Hard to tell without seeing their faces. Her view was of the gray-painted hallway. Covered with vibrant photos of far-off landscapes that she assumed were locations where they shipped? “This whole thing will go more smoothly if you *don’t* sleep with our new actuary.”

“Or will it?” Evangeline still couldn’t see them. But she could swear he’d just waggled his eyebrows. “Don’t you want us to get a glowing report? My, uh, personal involvement could guarantee it.”

“Your personal involvement’s already wasted ten minutes of my day,” the original speaker said flatly. “We’re a shipping company. Not a sit-on-your-ass-and-talk company. They call those consultants. And I’d rather impale myself on a dagger than run herd over a bunch of those.”

Yikes. Harsh. Plus, the dagger comment was oddly specific for a human.

But Eva got it. She'd rather impale herself on a *flaming* dagger than work for men who thought physical appearance had anything to do with her actuarial skills. Good thing these were simply clients.

"This is business, Gideon." A hand slapped against probably a table. "Not fun and games."

"That's the problem with you, Rhys. You don't get that you can do business *and* have fun."

Ewww. This Gideon guy was definitely a player. The other two at least sounded annoyed by his antics. Kudos to them.

Eva peeked at the nearest row of cubicles. Their inhabitants were close enough to overhear, just like her. Nobody was reacting. Which meant this braggadocio was no doubt Gideon's usual MO.

Best to just march in there and get it over with.

Eva tugged at her recalcitrant beige skirt. This guy didn't *deserve* an accidental flash of thigh. She made sure her heels clicked loudly against the cement floor on her approach.

A tall man with dark hair stood behind the chair at the head of the oval conference table. "Ah, Miss Thayer, I presume. Welcome to Metafora."

This was wild. She'd just gotten annoyed at one of them judging her on yet-to-be-seen looks but...these men were all jaw-droppingly handsome.

The odds of that occurring among three partners were quite low. A simple statistical fact, not an exaggeration. Lean and striking, she'd peg the speaker as the leader. Over at the window stood another dark-haired man. This one was more muscled, but just as tall, swarthy, and drool-worthy.

Then, at the center of the table, lounged the epitome of blond male perfection. High cheekbones. A ruthlessly tailored white shirt that did nothing to hide the definition of his pecs. Eva wished he'd been standing like the other two, so she could take a good long look at the undoubted thickness of muscled thighs to match those of his arms.

What was she doing?

She was here to work, not to ogle!

Not that she fully blamed herself. The three ruggedly handsome men had so much testosterone swirling in the air it was amazing she was still upright beneath its thick miasma.

The man who'd spoken to her rounded the table to shake hands. "Rhys Boyce."

Now she was on business autopilot. "Please, call me Evangeline."

"Over by the window's Xavier Carranza." The swarthy man nodded, but not a single centimeter of his face flickered into anything near a smile. It was fine. Eva didn't need the pretense. "And that's my other partner, Gideon Durand." He pointed at the blond man.

The one who had made the remarks that put her back up. The voice hadn't belonged to Rhys. And Xavier wasn't giving off playboy vibes.

To her surprise, Gideon did rise to his feet. But rather than coming closer, he simply reached across the table to shake her hand. "Welcome."

Ooh, he *was* the jerk!

But she wouldn't say anything. Because Metafora was throwing money at her company to conduct this year's audit. The goal was for Eva to make this easy enough, give them fast and painless results so that these men would offer her company a multi-year contract.

As much as she preferred sinking into numbers? Her sole job today was to kick things off on the right foot.

"Thank you for the opportunity to meet, face-to-face. I'm sure it will lead to a more pleasant working relationship."

"Really? So now that we've met, you'll sign off on any generalized risk assessment we put in front of you? We can skip the mind-numbing hours of discovery?" Gideon slumped back into the high-backed leather chair.

“No.” Starting on the right foot was one thing. Eva refused to mislead her clients. Or candy-coat what was to come. And because Mr. Thinks-He’s-So-Hot had been the one to ask? She’d go a step further than the simple shutdown. “No, we won’t be skipping any steps in the process. There are no shortcuts in risk assessment. That, in itself, would be an unacceptable and potentially expensive risk.” The first time Eva made that clarification to a client, she’d paused for laughter. And discovered from the gaping silence that actuarial humor went right over most people’s heads.

“We don’t want Metafora to have unnecessary risk as a corporation. Me, though? I like to dance with danger.” Then Gideon grinned.

Grinned with the swashbuckling air of a puffy-shirted pirate from centuries past.

Grinned with the roguish charm of the lead in a heist movie thumbing their nose at the clueless cops while hauling in the heroine for the kiss of a lifetime.

Did he actually think that would work on her?

Okay. It worked an infinitesimal amount. Because if you had two X chromosomes, it was impossible *not* to react to the suavely seductive, hot as Hell man.

But actuarial science was no joking matter.

Eva was under contract to project costs of potential natural disasters (hello, massively important to a worldwide shipping company!), the impact of death or illness of employees, and then draft insurance policies and strategies to reduce their financial risks.

“Well, I do *not*,” she said in a tone flat enough to quash any further attempts at levity on his part.

“Maybe.”

“I assure you that I know my own mind.”

Gideon continued as if Eva hadn’t said a word, let alone an entire sentence. “Or maybe you just haven’t danced with the right partner yet.” He’d leaned forward, forearms planted on

the table. The face tilted up to hers wore a smile so bright that she nearly squinted.

To heck with this.

It was the twenty-first century. She didn't have to put up with this behavior.

“Maybe you—shockingly—haven't paid attention to the fact that it is a breach of professionalism to so much as hint at anything in the realm of my personal life. Who or what I choose to dance with is none of your business. And if you think you'll flirt your way to a good report? Let me assure you that any inappropriate allusions or moves would not be reflected positively in my report. My deductions are based solely on numbers. It would, however, reflect poorly on you as a person.”

Ooh, that'd felt good. It released a little of the huffiness she'd been holding in since eavesdropping from the hallway.

Rhys winced. Glared so hard at Gideon that it was amazing his chair didn't slide backward from the force. Then he winced again, directing it at Eva. “I'm sorry. My partner does not speak for all of us.”

Zavier rubbed the back of his neck. “Gideon, why'd you have to complicate things? Why can't you keep your mouth shut?”

“I assume that one day you'll come around to accepting that I can't. Won't. Whichever. So you'll stop making me sit in on boring meetings.”

Eva had said enough already. Had skirted the line of courtesy just enough. She should let his comments roll off her back. That was her usual MO.

Nope. Not, apparently, today.

This man pushed buttons Eva didn't even know she had. Probably because it annoyed her how his voice resonated deep inside her body, as if it were plucking some unseen strings.

It annoyed her even more the way her skin flushed in response to simply looking at his masculine perfection. Gideon

Durand made her feel things, *want* things that she'd never before felt or wanted in the middle of a client meeting.

How *dare* he?

Eva deliberately sat down across from him. Planted her forearms on the table, mirroring Gideon's pose. "You think this meeting's boring?"

One side of his agile mouth quirked up. As did his perfectly arched golden brows. "Surprisingly not, so far. But once you start getting into the weeds of our numbers? Yeah. The Count of Monte Cristo, behind his mask in solitary confinement for twenty years, had more excitement than this meeting would hold."

"What I do? It is life and death stuff. The life or death of your company. As a partner? This should be *riveting*. If it isn't? I'll assume you just don't care about success, or the livelihood of the five hundred and forty-seven employees you have worldwide."

Gideon sat up straighter. Looked at Rhys, then twisted around to look at Zavier.

Neither sprang to his defense.

"I...I care," he spluttered. All playfulness had dropped from his demeanor. Had she actually gotten through?

"Perhaps. But not enough to spend a scant ten minutes meeting and greeting a 'numbers nerd who isn't even hot.'" Eva made air quotes as she threw his own words back at him.

It was a direct hit. Gideon was frozen, as if Medusa herself had turned him to stone.

Satisfied, she tossed her long, ash-blond braid back over her shoulder. "My only goal for today was to meet you gentlemen. *Not* to ruin anyone's afternoon with facts or figures. So unless there are any questions, I'll see myself out."

Silence blanketed the conference room.

As long as she didn't get fired? Eva would count this, ultimately, as her best client meeting ever. Leaving with the upper hand was intoxicating. She'd spent, well, *all* of her life

being told and reminded just how powerless she was. Her lack of powers defined her.

Right now? Eva was *powerful*.

She and her aunt would have to celebrate once she arrived on her long-anticipated visit late tonight. Eva picked up her pace, eager to put the men of Metafora—one in particular—behind her.

There would be no more thoughts about Gideon. She wouldn't allow it.

At least for the weekend.

...

There were a lot of things that, well, sucked about being a *Nephilim*. Gideon didn't have to try hard at all to compile a list of what he disliked about his half-angel, half-human status.

Full angels—from the lowliest angel to the highest seraphim—reviled and often hunted them as half-breeds. Abominations.

While angels simultaneously trained and used *Nephilim* as soldiers. Guardians of humanity to be chucked in front of evil like chum to a shark.

No halo. That one didn't really bother Gideon much, except on principle.

No admittance to Heaven while alive, thanks to that human blood of his. Again, he was mostly fine with it—aside from burning with curiosity. He didn't believe for a hot second that cherubim lounged on fat clouds strumming harps.

But...if not, then what *was* up there?

God, he hoped it wasn't filled with alfalfa smoothies and tofu.

But the one thing that was freaking fantastic about being a *Nephilim*?

Flying.

His wings beat through the cool night air as he followed the Niagara River across the Canadian border. The roar of the falls

hit him, even a good two dozen feet overhead. Gideon flew low across the river to keep from being spotted. Not that many people were out and looking up at two a.m.

Except for...one.

He swooped lower.

Because there was a figure on the edge of the falls. On the *wrong* side of the guard rail. Hunched over, hoodie drawn tight.

Son of a bitch.

It happened. Niagara Falls was a big draw for suicide seekers who wanted the legacy of drama with their death. The obvious spots were fenced and policed. But sometimes, someone with enough of a death wish got through.

Problem was, Gideon couldn't let 'em.

Bigger problem was, it'd mean revealing himself to a human. That was...not okay.

His one official mission in life, though? Protecting and saving humans. From demons, abusive fathers, and even themselves. So for all the grief he'd catch? Gideon had no choice. He had to do it.

On the plus side, a suicide attempt won you an automatic entry to a psych ward, where nobody would believe any ravings about guardian angels.

He adjusted his angle to come in sharply. To not be seen until the last second. Didn't want the poor guy to jump in prematurely to *escape* Gideon's save.

Wind gusts at the top of the falls were unpredictable and strong. Gideon could handle it. Just...it'd be trickier with an armful of human presumably struggling.

Well, he'd been the one to volunteer to do the nightly perimeter sweep, even though it was Rhys's turn. No good deed ever went as planned.

Gideon folded his wings in. Arrowed down steeply and silently. At the last second, he made a grab for the human and

winged back up.

“My suitcase!” A female voice shrieked at him. And only his supernaturally quick reflexes prevented her knee from connecting to his balls. “You idiot. If you’re going to kidnap me, at least bring my bag, too.”

Kidnap? Was that the messed-up term kids were calling it these days? He tried to stay current, but at eighty-seven, some things slid past him.

Gideon slammed on the metaphorical brakes.

And the real ones, hovering high above the blue-lit water. He’d known from the initial second of contact that he’d assumed the wrong gender. The figure in his embrace was skinny but curvy where it counted. Wind had popped the hoodie back, so he had a face full of silky hair.

Most of all, he knew that voice.

It was the actuary who’d verbally clawed off his balls a few hours ago.

Not a stranger. Far worse—it was someone who could connect him publicly to *Metafora*. Thinking *what were the odds* was useless. Weird, unexpected, and unexpectedly bad shit happened all the time in his world.

Wait. Nothing was adding up.

“You packed a suitcase to commit suicide?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Hell if I know.” Gideon racked his brain for her name. He hadn’t bothered to note it in his calendar. Hadn’t *wanted* to remember it after she’d so politely but cleanly eviscerated him.

“Oh, for goodness sake.” She kept pushing at the arm banded across her. Uselessly. Gideon was a trained and seasoned warrior. Far stronger. No way was he dropping a human. “I’m not suicidal. At all. So please put me down.”

“I’m just supposed to take your word for it?”

“Is there a quiz I can take that would satisfy you? Should I

start spouting iambic pentameter about the beauties of the summer flowers and how life is a radiant jewel to be treasured?” She stopped squirming. Pushed her hair out of her face and his. As they both finally got a look at each other, the woman frowned. Her chest heaved a sigh beneath his arm. “Oh, of course it’s *you*. Like you haven’t already ruined my day enough.”

Smart-ass.

Hang on. How was she so easily popping off the sass to him?

Shouldn’t she be freaking the *fuck* out about being held by a man with wings a hundred feet in the air over one of the biggest waterfalls in the world? Even if she did recognize him as a respected business owner?

No moon tonight. Gideon strained to see anything about her features to give away the reason for her weird calm. Annoyance and indignation at 200 percent, sure. But relative calm at the situation. The dark sky, even this close, didn’t reveal more than a pointed chin, a delicate nose, and deep-set eyes.

“Who *are* you?”

“I knew it.” How did she lace her words simultaneously with vindication and disappointment? “You don’t remember my name, do you? I’m just another potential fling filling out a bra to you. You probably go through women like potato chips. Quickly and mindlessly.”

She wasn’t entirely wrong. If Rhys and Xavier were along, they’d be laughing their asses off at how well she’d summed him up.

But now was not the time to poke at him. Read the fucking room, lady. “Hey, I just saved your life. That ought to count for something.”

“You didn’t. Oh, do you want thanks? A twenty dollar tip? You’ll have to wait to get those from the next unsuspecting person you rescue.”

Okay.

Gideon believed her. About the not being suicidal thing. She was acting as if they were having this argument on a street corner. Not as if he'd suddenly disrupted the biggest decision of her life.

“Fine. You didn’t need rescuing. My apologies for trying to do the right thing.”

Long lashes dusted her pale cheeks as she closed her eyes for a moment. Then, after a sigh that made Gideon even more aware of the soft breasts bracketing his forearm, she said, “I suppose it’s not your fault. You *Nephilim* have that mission beaten into you from the cradle, don’t you?”

She knew what he was?

He flew higher, making sure they’d be masked by the darkness from anyone below. The wind disappeared the farther he got from the falls. The air got colder, though. As the woman shivered, Gideon realized she was wearing only a thin tank top under the unzipped hoodie.

All he could do was wrap his other arm around her to share his body heat. Because he wasn’t letting her go until he had an explanation.

“I’m asking again. And I expect an answer this time. Who *are* you?”

“Evangeline Thayer. Try not to forget it this time.”

The attitude she kept throwing at him was so strong it might as well be a third person hanging out in mid-air with them. That was the thing, though. Gideon suspected that Evangeline wasn’t a *person* at all.

“Yeah, this whole episode will stay stuck in my brain. Evangeline Thayer, the woman who berated me for trying to save her life.”

“I get that. I’m sorry. I really did assume you were kidnapping me at first.”

“Why would I do that?”

“The world is chock full of evil creatures. Most of them don’t need a reason.”

It was an answer. Gideon also pegged it as an evasion. Clearly there was a reason Evangeline thought herself at risk.

“Evangeline. Old-fashioned name.”

“Yeah, well, my family’s old. Very old.” She twisted to look at her wrist as her smart watch vibrated. A *tsk* of disappointment slipped out. “Damn it. Now I’ve missed my boat.”

No matter how hard Gideon tried, he couldn’t follow her train of thought. Their conversation went in circles and then whipped out into randomness. “*That’s* what you were doing on the edge of the falls? Waiting for a boat? You know they stopped running hours ago.”

“I was waiting for the ferry.” She spoke slowly. As if he should know better. “It took months to get an appointment. Months and quite a few bribes. Well, I hope you’re happy.”

“Happy that you’re hallucinating? Nah.”

“I’m not—do you really not know?” The snippiness disappeared from her tone. “I assumed from the wings and all, even if you are only *half*-angel, that you’d be aware that Niagara Falls is one of the ferry’s stops.”

“Ferry to where?”

“Hell, of course. Charon, the River Styx, any of that ringing a bell?”

Gideon lived in Niagara Falls. Well, right behind it, in the *Nephilim* Watchtower. He’d know if one of Hell’s big shots swung by his front door on a regular basis.

Wouldn’t he?

“Enough of this. New question. *What* are you?”

“Ah. That’s right.” Something—resignation? Sadness?—tightened the corners of her eyes. “You wouldn’t be able to tell. I’m a dark angel.”

Gideon had been trained by the Right and Holy Seraphic Order of the *Nephilim*. He’d fought hundreds, if not thousands, of demons. Interacted with the rank and file of paranormal

creatures.

He'd *never* heard of a dark angel.

But he knew about angels. And that if you put the word "dark" in front of anything in his world, it pointed to one specific place. "My new actuary's a denizen of Hell?"

"No." Her entire body jerked at the suggestion. "Definitely not. I live here now. Well, in Buffalo. I can't even get *back* to Hell to visit my aunt without making these complicated plans with the ferry."

Gideon wasn't up on all the various ways in and out of the netherworld. But he knew one sure way. And if he could do it, a *dark* angel sure could. "Fly yourself."

"No!" Evangeline shrieked out the word. Then she clutched at his arms as hard as she'd fought him earlier. "Don't let go."

"Women always come around to begging me like that, given time." Was he being a jerk? Yeah. But she deserved it.

"I can't fly, Gideon. Please." Evangeline's voice trembled on the last word.

Shit. He wanted to bicker with her. Pay her back for being bitchy about the whole life-saving mix-up.

He didn't want to scare her.

Without thinking about it, he rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. "Don't worry. I've got you. I've flown across half of Poland carrying an *ozmanthin* demon. They outweigh you by a solid two hundred pounds."

"I suppose, as only a half-angel, that's considered impressive?"

Funny that Gideon was relieved at her jibe. It meant she wasn't scared anymore. "This half-angel can fly. Right now, I'd say that ranks me higher than whatever a dark angel is."

"I'm more of a real angel than you. But now that you've done your good deed for the day, would you please put me down? I'm cold."

Gideon mulled her request.

For all of half a second.

But Evangeline could be a threat to his mission. He couldn't keep the world safe from evil if he didn't know all the ways it existed. And Rhys and Xavier would grill him about Hell's boatman apparently docking right under their noses.

He needed *way* the hell more explanation.

"Nope."

"So this *is* a kidnapping? What's the point? As a partner in Metafora, it's obvious you don't need a fat ransom. Not that I've got anything to pay you with. And I think we'd both agree that we can't stand each other. Which means you wouldn't keep me for more salacious reasons."

"I don't ever keep a woman against her will." Gideon arched down, stuck his foot through the handle on her weekender, and shot back up. "What's the police term? I'm holding you for further questioning."

Then he backstroked with his wings over the churning froth. The blue spotlights cast a mystical glow across Evangeline's face. For the first time that night he really saw her. How pretty she was. The pale gray of her eyes, so deep-set. High cheekbones that gave her an aristocratic and delicate look.

Not that he was interested.

Not that he even liked her. For all that Rhys and Z teased him about sleeping with every woman who smiled at him? The smile was the key. He had to *like* at least something about a woman to screw her.

It wasn't that hard to find something. In most women.

Evangeline, though? She'd done nothing but piss him off since they met. He'd rather get into bed with a life-draining succubus.

And then he flew, full-speed, straight into the roaring width of Niagara Falls.

Chapter Two

Eva hadn't been wrong about Gideon being full of himself.

Smug. Cocky. Insufferable.

She'd been furious that he'd made her miss Charon's ferry. It had been half a year since the last visit to her aunt.

But as soon as he said *why* he'd snatched her up? She couldn't stay mad. It was a heroic act.

Her insta-loathing, however, returned in a flash when he freaking flew *into* Niagara Falls without warning.

The scream building in her throat didn't have time to emerge. Eva saw the solid wall of water, and then it was gone.

They were through the falls. Behind them, she saw as Gideon set her down at the edge of the floor. Beyond it was a gap, and then the back of the familiar blueish-green of the falls. There had to be some invisible, mystical barrier. No water splashed at her, and the sound was all but muted.

Still, Eva couldn't back up fast enough from the edge.

Heart still pounding, she carefully shuffled back about six feet. Then she turned and took in the rest of the cavernous room.

Well, the first thing she noticed was Gideon's wings. Only a glimpse before they disappeared. It had been too dark outside to see them as anything more than shapes.

But that glimpse had her mouth gaping in awe.

Her own wings were a simple white to silver ombre. All the other dark angels she knew just had black feathers, with maybe a few splotches of gray. Your basic Hell camouflage.

Gideon's wings were...breathtaking. The perfect pairing to his blond good looks. At the top arch they were a tawny brown that put her in mind of the smooth coat of a mountain lion. From there, they morphed to a deep, ancient gold, then pale yellow ending in tips of pure cream.

Eva actually resented him tucking them away so quickly. She craved another glimpse.

Not that she'd let him know.

So she quickly scanned the rest of the room.

He'd landed them in an enormous open workspace. Clearly, part of it was an armory. Shelves held numerous variations of guns. Clear drawers below held smaller pistols, and rows of knives, swords, throwing stars, and numerous other weapons.

Glass doors on the right carved off a big workroom resembling a science lab. It had a long island complete with a Bunsen burner and test-tube stands. Along the wall behind it was a sink, a two-burner stove, and myriad glass-fronted cabinets filled with bowls, goblets, vials, and a classic potions cauldron. Looking out of place amidst all the sleek glass and chrome was a tall wooden apothecary cabinet.

Rhys and Xavier were at the opposite end, sparring in a target practice area. Spears, arrows, and guns were in cases next to it. They'd frozen when they spotted her. They were both shirtless. Drenched in sweat.

Eva wondered if it was possible to get drunk on so much testosterone floating in one room.

"What the fuck, Gideon?" Xavier stalked toward her. Beneath a mat of dark hair, his pecs rippled with every sharp swing of his arms. "Nobody comes in the Watchtower. Especially not a stranger. Or a human."

Gideon didn't look at all ruffled by Xavier's anger. He just began removing the weapons she hadn't even realized were strapped to his body. "Rhys brought Maisy here a couple of months ago."

"After we discussed it."

"If you'd let me finish, Evangeline is not a stranger. She's our actuary, remember? And, big surprise, she's not a human."

Zavier froze. Again.

Rhys, on the other hand, bounded the length of the room with what must've been a sweep of his wings, even though she

couldn't see them. Because of course his partners would be *Nephilim*, too. "What is she?"

Was he intimidating? Out of the slick suit and in only loose workout shorts?

Yes.

If the wall of weapons hadn't been enough of a clue, if she hadn't known that *Nephilim* were essentially special forces for Good, then Rhys's bare torso, legs, and arms sculpted into a quintessential fighter's build did. This man—all three of them—could kill her with their bare hands. Possibly as little as two fingers.

But Eva had done nothing wrong. And she'd grown up being constantly bullied. In literal Hell. These guys didn't come close to what she'd already lived through.

So she didn't even flinch as he towered over her. "Stop talking about me as if I'm invisible."

Rhys folded his arms over his wide chest. "Fine. What are you? It'd better be good, for Gideon to bring you in here."

Good was...a matter of degrees. "I'm a dark angel. Should I assume that you two are as uneducated as Gideon about my kind?"

The men triangulated looks. Probably trying to decide if it was worth admitting their ignorance. Or if they should make an excuse and go Google it.

Rubbing oil along the dark edge of his dagger, Gideon said, "Go on, then. Explain it to all of us."

She could stand up to bullies. But Eva was well aware that the *Nephilim* were only trying to protect humans. They wouldn't attack her for the fun of it.

If they didn't like her explanation, however, things could get tricky. If they thought she was a danger, just because she'd been born in Hell.

Eva had no desire to be locked up. Not even by three of the handsomest men she'd ever seen. So she forced herself to subsume her irritation at missing her boat. Tamped down her

innate fear at being surrounded by defensive warriors.

And tried really hard not to keep flicking glances over at Gideon in the ridiculous hope that he'd reveal his wings again.

"I'm sorry if I was condescending. You don't know what you don't know."

"Now you sound like an actuary," Gideon chuckled.

"I am. I've lived up here, as a human, since I was fifteen. Saying I'm a dark angel is more like a human saying they're Irish. It's just a description of my background."

"Your background has you raised in a dangerous place. We're going to need more."

It was odd. Like trying to describe a turtle. You just assumed everyone knew what they were. Since Eva couldn't reveal her true side to anyone in the human world, she'd never actually explained this before.

"Dark angels are Lucifer's offspring, and their nature can be good or evil, as he is both."

"We've never heard of this," Rhys said flatly.

How was that her problem? Wasn't Hell all about being sneaky, and Heaven all full of healthy communication?

Of course, that was probably the same as assuming all Americans liked baseball, or the French were good lovers.

It was a very thin line to tread between being factual and not being insulting. Cautiously, Eva said, "Your side is definitely aware of us. I can't explain why they've kept it a secret from the *Nephilim*."

"Master Caraxis is full of secrets," Zavier grumbled. "He hoards them like a teenage boy with porn videos."

"Z. Have some manners." Rhys flicked him with a towel, then tossed it over. "Let's not talk about porn in front of the lady."

"She was born in *actual* Hell. Pretty sure she's aware."

Eva stomped her foot. Not in a tantrum way. Just to make a

loud enough noise they would acknowledge her presence. Too bad she was wearing only soft-soled gray Keds.

“Again, I am right here. I can hear you talking about me. How about you stop doing that?”

Gideon flowed forward smoothly, as if hosting a cocktail party. He put a hand over his heart and gave a quarter bow. “Evangeline. My apologies. Everything about you has caught us off guard. Those two will get dressed. We’ll sit down and discuss this civilly. Would you like a drink?”

He’d lobbed a charm grenade at her.

It *almost* worked.

It probably would have, in everyday life. But Eva was on high alert. Her fight-or-flight response had kicked in the moment Gideon lifted her off the banks of the Niagara, and it hadn’t turned off yet.

These were good men, but dangerous men. Powerful men.

Ahhh.

Power—or lack thereof. *That* was why he was suddenly treating her like a guest instead of a threat.

Gideon wasn’t worried about her being a danger. Not to them, at least. Because he already knew she couldn’t fly. Probably assumed that dark angels were pale, pathetic versions of the real thing.

Nope.

She was the only pale, pathetic dark angel.

The only powerless one.

“I’d love a drink. Literally anything.” It’d give Eva something to do with her hands. Right now they were curled into fists. Part of the whole reflex of being stared at by Rhys and Xavier like she was dangerous prey.

And despite everything else going on, her heart rate still hadn’t normalized from being flown directly *into* Niagara Falls.

Gideon ushered her to an area with brown leather club chairs circled by a fireplace (where did the smoke go?) and a sleek chrome and glass bar unit. “Your preferred drink reveals volumes about a person. I wouldn’t dare presume.”

Was Gideon flirting with her? Or just trying to get her to relax? Or, third option, was he such a consummate flirt that he did it without thinking?

“Oh, I think you would to some extent. I’m guessing there’s zero chance of you whipping me up a frozen strawberry daiquiri.”

Zavier snorted as he followed them. “Because you’re not nineteen trying to sneak drinks at Olive Garden.”

This was clearly a test.

“If I ask for a shot, you’ll assume I’m trying to steady myself. If I ask for a beer, it means I’m trying to go along with what I think *you* all want. White wine marks me as a woman already prepping for her soccer mom days.”

Gideon paused, one hand on a rocks glass, the other on a highball. “You’re saying there’s no chance you’ll tell me what you want.”

Correct. She wanted to give them as little ammunition against her as possible. “Consider me someone who doesn’t choose to *reveal volumes* about themselves to strangers. I’ll have what you’re having.”

Gideon flashed a smile tighter than a ballerina’s bun. Guess he didn’t like her evading his little personality test. “There’s a distillery we like in the Finger Lakes. Their Seneca Drums gin will blow your mind.”

“That.” She slapped her thighs as she sat. And then kept rubbing them, because while shorts and a tank were just right for Hell? They hadn’t done anything to keep her warm high up in the midnight air. “A blown mind is exactly what I’m in the mood for.”

Rhys tugged a black tee over his head. Stood with his feet apart, clearly bracing for her answer. “I’ll go ahead and ask the question we’re all thinking. Are you a good or evil dark

angel?”

“A good one.” Would she have brought it up otherwise? Here in the inner sanctum of three powerful *Nephilim*? Sheesh. “I’ve never embraced so much as a hint of the darkness.”

“Living in Hell. Really? Seems unavoidable.”

Here she’d pegged Zavier as the blunt, snarky one. Turned out that Rhys could be just as acerbic. It was a timely reminder not to take any of these men at face value. “Which is part of the reason why I left.”

“What’s the other reason?” Gideon asked.

Seriously?

“Um...it’s freaking *Hell*?”

“Yeah, that’s too obvious.” He was hacking away with a lethal looking old-fashioned pick at a big square of ice. “You’re leaving something out.”

“I’m reluctant to tell you all my foibles and eccentricities and weaknesses.”

Rhys drummed his fingers along his biceps. “We won’t hurt you.”

Slowly, with the liquid grace of an owl, Eva swiveled her neck to stare pointedly at the multiple walls of weapons and armor.

“You have my word,” Gideon continued. “If we don’t like what we hear? We’ll just return you to Hell.”

As Gideon mixed the drinks, he filled the other two in on what little she’d already told him. Because “Fucking *Charon*?” blurted out of Zavier. Quickly followed by “What do you mean she can’t fly?”

And that was when a metaphorical lightbulb went off over Eva’s head.

This was the closest she’d been to warriors on the side of good. The closest she’d (knowingly, anyway) been to any paranormal creature outside of Hell.

This was her opportunity.

Because Eva had wanted exactly two things her entire life: to leave Hell (check!) and to ditch her so-called powers and become fully human.

It was possible.

It just required a lot of things far beyond her power to obtain. For a *Nephilim*, though? It'd be a cinch.

They had to help her. Helping the less powerful was what they did, right?

By the time Gideon handed over her gin and tonic with a perfect half-moon of lime, she was ready to spill everything.

“You’re right. The other reason I left home was because I hated it there.”

Zavier snorted again as he dropped into a chair and sat with his legs all man-splayed wide. “Because...Hell?”

“Beyond that. Because I was bullied and ostracized. Dark angels—the evil ones—are incredibly powerful. They’re used by the forces of Hell as soldiers of vengeance. There aren’t many who embrace their good side. As you keep referencing, it *is* Hell. What’s the point of trying to be good, when advancement in your society emphasizes the evil?”

Rhys dangled his wrists off his knees, leaning forward intently. “So it’s a choice, but most don’t bother to make the extra effort to go against the flow?”

“Exactly. The more you choose one path, it becomes hardwired into your system. You truly become a good or evil angel.” Eva hadn’t known, as she matured, that she was literally growing one way or the other. She’d just done what seemed right and obvious. “No different, really, than how people behave up here. Easier to stick with the popular group. There are a few, but they mostly stay behind the scenes, helping Lucifer.”

“He’s the devil.” Gideon’s lips tightened into a smirk. “How good can he be?”

It was so much more complex than that. Most, even in the

celestial realm, thought of Hell only as wholly bad. But it wasn't. How could it be, when it was ruled over by a being who *wasn't* evil?

"He's Lucifer Morningstar, one of the brightest angels ever. He is a Fallen Angel, but a good angel, first and foremost." Eva wasn't sure how to buck eons of legend and fear. "Would you want to be known only for your worst mistake?"

All three men gave short, bitter chuckles. Gideon gestured between his partners. "Guess you haven't heard of us. That's exactly what we're known for. We went rogue. Dropped out of the Order of *Nephilim*. We don't see it as a mistake, but everyone else does."

"Then you should be able to understand, at least a little bit."

"Maybe so," Rhys acknowledged, after a beat.

They all sipped their drinks, silence broken only by the clink of ice and the barely noticeable rush of the falls.

"If you're so powerful, how were you bullied?" Gideon asked.

"Oh, I'm not. At all. That's the thing. That's why I don't fly. I've got nothing. Except one ability that goes over very poorly in Hell. I'm what's known as a thwarting angel. Very rare." Eva made mocking jazz hands. Children—and the adults they grew into—just wanted to be like everyone else. To be included.

Being rare made her very much excluded, to this day.

"Thwarting—that sounds like a term Lancelot and Arthur would've used. What and how do you thwart?"

Here went nothing. She looked down at her hands, gripping the leather seat cushion tightly. "I can completely nullify the powers of evil."

Rhys arched one eyebrow high. "Seriously?"

Zavier shot out of his chair. "Hot damn! We could've used that against that demon in Chile. What am I saying? It would've been handy in every single mission we've ever had."

Gideon, however, just stared at her. Then his eyes narrowed, as if truly seeing into her. “Can you control it?”

“No. There’s no on or off switch.” Her life would be so much simpler if she could. “Evil powers just...turn off in close proximity to me. I’m the anti-force field.”

“I’m guessing that means that nobody in Hell wants to be within, oh, a hundred feet of you. A demon without any power’s just ugly and green and mean for no reason.”

“Correct.” Demons, demigods, other dark angels—they all loathed her.

“That’s why you were bullied. You were different. You made them weaker, so they lashed out to make *you* feel weak.”

So the man was evidently more than just an obscenely handsome face and a ripped body. “Do you have a psychotherapy practice as a side hustle to running your international shipping company?”

“Nah. Just a lot of experience with evil—human and non. Picking on the underdog’s a classic move.”

Evangeline was the ultimate underdog. “That’s why I’m no threat to you. No threat to humanity. I was rejected by all of Hell, except for the aunt who raised me. So I left. I took refuge in the human world. Got my degree, got a job. I plan to live here for the rest of my life.”

Gideon raised his glass in a toast. “Good for you.”

“But to do so safely, I need to get rid of my useless power. There’s a spell. I’m certain it’ll work. It’ll strip my power and make me fully human.” Eva would finally be *free*.

Rhys let out a long, low whistle. “That’s a big step.”

“A necessary one.” One she’d wanted to take since she was old enough to realize it was doable. “You must be aware that demons are among us all the time. I can’t tell when they’re hiding behind a human guise. They get near me, they suddenly show their horns or their scales. Maybe become vulnerable right as they were about to start a fight with another demon.”

“They get mad at you. Blame you.”

“That’s an understatement. It’s hard to protect myself against a bitter demon. It’s dangerous. The only way to live safely is as a human. That’s why I need your help.”

The three men looked at one another again. Clearly having some unspoken communication about just how much help they were willing to give.

Rhys asked, “You want us to hook you up with a coven? A witch who can do the spell?”

“No.” If only it were that simple.

Gideon’s eyes narrowed, *again*. Eva wasn’t comfortable with how he kept...assessing her. Analyzing her. Coldly calculating...something about her. This *Nephilim* absolutely had depth and brains topping off his muscles. It had almost been less disconcerting back in the conference room when he’d been busy hating her for bringing boredom to his day.

“Did you engineer this whole thing to trap us into helping you?”

What?

How could she even— Eva shook her head. “No. You didn’t know the portal to the River Styx was here, at the base of Niagara Falls, any more than I knew there was a *Nephilim* Watchtower behind it.”

He swirled the ice lazily in his glass. “Then what do you want from us?”

They seemed...guarded. This wasn’t a big ask. Not for beings as powerful as they were. Eva tried to swallow her huffiness. Because she’d been trying to get the ingredients for this spell for years, to no avail. They were her best chance.

“I don’t need a witch. The spell requires various objects. Hard to obtain pieces from the paranormal world. Things I can’t get to. You can. With your wings and contacts—it would be no trouble at all.”

“I doubt that.” Rhys practically stepped on her last few words, he was so fast to reject them. “In fact, I’d call that a massive understatement. Any spell powerful enough to strip an

angel—those ingredients would definitely require some effort, if not trouble.”

Hmm. What happened to the selfless aid of *Nephilim* to those who required it? Why were they hesitating?

Eva frantically tried to come up with a different angle.

“Let’s take a step back.” It was Gideon speaking, much to her surprise. “This could be a two-way street. Z, you’re always going on about the ROI of a mission. Don’t overlook this one.”

He’d called it a mission. Yes! “You’ll help me?”

“Didn’t say that. The mission I was referring to was saving your ass twenty minutes ago.”

“You didn’t save me. I wasn’t in any danger. Stop taking credit for a service you didn’t provide and I resent.”

“Touchy.” He came over to crouch next to her. Why was that? Was the man so used to his effect on women that he assumed she’d agree to anything if he was close enough for his pheromones to mesmerize her?

Sure, she’d *noticed* them. But they wouldn’t melt her brain.

“Factual,” she corrected.

“Here’s my fact: I think you could be incredibly useful to our side. To the army of Good. Your power is, in fact, an unparalleled weapon. Instead of giving it up? You should join us.”

“No.” Was he out of his mind?

“Just like that?” Gideon’s tawny gaze, along with his tone, sharpened. Oh, good—she’d pissed him off *again*. “You don’t want to spend, oh, maybe as long as it took me to spit out the words to ponder the possibility?”

“No.”

He leaned in closer, both hands on her armrest. “You could do some real good.”

“I could *die*. The whole point of getting rid of my power is

to keep myself safe. Intact. Off of Hell's radar. I'm no soldier."

"You could be."

With no powers? Fat chance. Even a nullified demon could still impale her with a sword. The modern ones had embraced guns, too. "No."

"Fine." All the men stood up. Did the *Nephilim* have some sort of telepathy? Or had these three worked as partners for so long that they were that good at reading one another?

Rhys gave a single nod. "Then that's our answer to your request for aid. No."

"Why? I promise you'd be able to help me collect the objects without endangering yourselves."

Zavier turned his head partway—like a robot making calculations. "Why should we neuter a power that's a weapon against Evil? We have zero interest in removing you from the field of play."

"I have zero interest in staying *on* the field of play!"

Gideon took her upper arm. He didn't drag her out of the chair, but just lifted her as if she were a single wing feather. "We're done. I'll put you right back where I found you. Obviously, speak of none of this when we're at Metafora." His grip disappeared for only a moment as he ducked into the lab area to retrieve a windbreaker. "You can wear that."

It was the last thing he said to her.

Suitcase in one hand, he tucked Eva under his other arm, flew through the falls, and deposited her on the road. It was over in seconds.

Her best chance, over in seconds.

Eva hated the man.

Chapter Three

It was a typical Saturday morning for Gideon. Except for how he *hadn't* started it by crawling out of a woman's bed.

After the midnight disruption of Evangeline, he hadn't bothered to text any women to see if they were interested in a hookup. They'd stayed up for another hour, discussing all the new information she'd dropped on them.

It left him in no mood to contemplate sex.

Another shitty result he'd blame on the dark angel.

So he'd gone for a ten-mile run this morning. Devoured the raspberry-cream-cheese-stuffed French toast to refuel. Now, he and the guys were practicing some complex gymnastics-based moves. After a tricky battle with monkey demons, they'd realized it was time to up their game, parkour style. Use the elements in their surroundings more.

Zavier was cartwheeling across the training area as Rhys hurled a police-style baton into the wall. The angle was good. It bounced right off, changed trajectory, and landed in Z's hand.

"Nice combo." Gideon rubbed his chin, considering other options. "Could you do it with a dagger?"

"If the wall's smooth. Any bump or ridge could flip it the wrong way, though. Couldn't guarantee if you'd end up with the hilt or the blade in your hand."

Zavier pulled a dagger from his ankle sheath, tossed it spinning into the air, and caught it neatly with a grin. Hilt-first. "That's a hard no."

Gideon tsked. "Gotta open your mind to new tactics, Z."

"Then *you* be the test dummy next time."

"And risk marring this perfect face? No way. You know Rhys is the brains, I'm the looker, and you're the sack of meat—I mean muscles."

It was an old joke. One an Order trainer had made, decades ago.

None of them had laughed. It diminished each of their skill sets. It insulted who they were at their core. So even though they were at the very start of their training, with not much beyond brute strength and willpower in their bag of tricks, they'd challenged the trainer.

He'd laughed. Accepted. Scornfully chosen to take them all on at once, in front of their entire training class.

That particular *Nephilim* never taught again. Nor did he fly. In the ultimate humiliation, they'd ripped off his wings.

Nobody ever undervalued Rhys, Gideon, or Xavier again. Not in the Order. And it sent a powerful message that they were a *unit*.

Now they made the joke, as a reminder of one of the first times they stood up, collectively, for one another. It was a mark of their friendship.

God help anyone else who dared ever try to make that "joke."

"What if we heated up the end of the baton? Pulsed it in as it's thrown. When it's caught, it'd be scorching on one end."

"Again, that depends on catching the *right* end." They looked at each other for a beat, then turned to Rhys.

"No. No way. I'm not burning my hands." He waved them. "These bad boys get to touch Maisy's beautiful body. Don't want her dealing with the roughness of charred fingertips."

Gideon was happy for Rhys. *Despite* the shadow twinge of pain he felt about his own long-gone love at the sight of Rhys and Maisy being so into each other. A pain he never discussed with his friends.

The pain he only acknowledged to himself every night when he fell asleep, remembering the woman he'd loved who betrayed them *all*.

But he still huffed out a huge sigh. On principle. In a call back to the good old days of two months ago when the three of

them cared only about protecting humanity and protecting themselves. “Is *everything* about your woman now?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.” Rhys grinned unrepentantly.

It was good to see his friend smile so much more often these days. He’d carried the weight of their decision to leave the Order. For some stupid reason, decided he alone was responsible for their survival once they left, and the success of Metafora. Stubborn idiot. Thank God falling in love had shifted his perspective. Turned him back into the *slightly* less serious version of himself from, oh, forty years ago.

“It pleases me that the match with your Keeper is a success.” It was Master Caraxis speaking.

He’d suddenly appeared through the waterfall portal. All *Nephilim* could access the portals in every waterfall. The ones into the Watchtowers, though? Got you inside and about a square foot of breathing space and no more.

He waited, on the lip of the big room. He’d already disappeared his wings. Any random observer would see only a stocky man in a tunic and leggings like an extra from a Robin Hood movie.

Any random observer would miss the coiled power and centuries of wisdom in the Fallen Angel.

He’d trained them. Respected them; and that seemed to have jacked up since they left the Order. After all, he hired them as contractors for the jobs too dirty or dangerous (or occasionally dull) for the Order to bother with.

Did they trust him? Maybe a solid 62 percent.

Was it petty to keep him standing there, effectively locked out?

Yeah. But he’d been keeping secrets. Secrets that could’ve gotten Rhys and Maisy killed during her transition to Keeper of the Key to the gates of Hell’s worst prison. So Caraxis could stand there until he gave them a good enough reason to let down the barrier.

“You didn’t need to come all the way here to gloat.” Rhys

crossed to his phone on the shelf where the flail rested. “In this decade, no, in this *century*, people aren’t supposed to drop in unannounced. It’s rude.” He made a show of scrolling down his screen. “And I don’t see a text asking if our morning was free for a visit.”

“I am aware of today’s conventions. I keep up with societal trends, Rhys Boyce. No need to insult me.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I could not risk sending a message. I’m here in secret.” He dropped his hands to his sides. Spread his arms wide. “I’m here to ask for your help.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Gideon mumbled. They ran a business. *Two* businesses—one for humans, one for everyone else. Why did people think they were offering handouts?

“You need our help? Not an official mission?” Xavier bared his teeth. “That’ll cost definitely double. Possibly triple.”

“I would expect you to bargain for nothing less.”

That was interesting.

Caraxis *always* negotiated them to death. A total cheapskate. If he’d come here with an open wallet? This had to be one hell of a favor.

Rhys flicked away the barrier. “Then let’s hear it.”

“Perhaps over some of that thirty-year-old Scotch you keep on hand?”

It was ten thirty in the morning. Little early for even a hardcore partyer to start—unless it was a bachelor party or a tailgate for the Bills.

What had Caraxis so spooked that he needed to day drink?

Gideon knew his role. The host who smoothed everything over. “Of course, Master. Always glad to share a dram with someone who appreciates the Macallan as much as we do.” He put a single, fat, square ice cube in each glass. Poured everyone a shot, with a double for Caraxis. They were seated

when he finished, just like they'd been with Evangeline last night.

And why did his mind keep blipping back to that annoying woman?

“What can we do for the head of the Order?” he asked in a pleasant tone.

“Let's be more specific.” Xavier braced his hands on the armrests and leaned forward. “What can we do that *scores* of your fully trained and far more obedient soldiers can't do for you?”

Damn it.

So much for the subtle art of information gathering.

Gideon understood. Xavier had a metric shit ton of anger and bitterness to lash down when around any Order leader. To say they'd done him wrong was to say you'd need a sweater in Antarctica.

Ideally, Rhys and Gideon would hold this meeting *without* him. To be certain they strategically squeezed every drop of info from Caraxis. Without letting on how much they already did or didn't know about whatever this latest crisis was.

But they'd never squeeze Z out like that. It was the three of them, together, always.

Period.

Still—he'd find some way to sucker-punch him while sparring later, for not even trying to keep his temper under control for five minutes.

“For this mission, I can't trust a single *Nephilim* in the order. You three are my only hope.”

“Quit with the dire theatrics.” Xavier gave a move-this-along gesture. “What's the deal?”

Caraxis took a slow sip. Sighed. Smiled. Then he turned to Rhys. “As you recall, you and Maisy were brought together a few months ago when the previous Keeper of the Gates of Hell's prison was killed.”

“Yeah. Her Uncle Harold,” Rhys bit out. As if it would actually make Caraxis quit recapping and get to his point.

Fat chance.

You could tell the man was a teacher. He loved to lecture on and on and on...

Caraxis set down his glass to steeple his fingers. “And when she passed the Trial to fully ascend into his spot as Keeper, we discussed that perhaps his death was...not natural.”

“Murdered.” Zavier pushed out of the chair to pace in front of the fireplace. Well, he’d lasted a whole two minutes sitting and being semi-civilized. That was practically a record. “That’s what you’re trying to say. Harold died long before his time because someone killed him.”

There was a too-long beat before Caraxis slowly dipped his head. “That is our working theory.”

“Ours, too.” This time Rhys sounded sad, not impatient. Because his girlfriend had been forced into the role of Keeper far too soon. Without any training. Harold had assumed he had decades more. Maisy had missed out on so much with her uncle’s untimely death.

Gideon shifted in his chair. Despite the mutual agreement, it wasn’t much of a theory. Harold’s ghost had been more focused on sharing a few moments with his niece than helpfully exposing his murderer. And since then? They hadn’t uncovered any smoking guns. No leads on how. No guesses as to why.

“Sadly, another Keeper has been killed.” After a break that Gideon almost interrupted, the master continued. “That we know of.”

Okay—*that* was breaking news. Gideon drummed his index finger against his thigh for emphasis, to be sure Caraxis didn’t do his usual vague hint thing. “You mean you suspect there’ve been more?”

“Yes. Right now, I’m the *only* one who suspects. Or who has managed to put the pieces together.”

When a Keeper died, they had two weeks to get a new one installed. Otherwise, the Gates wouldn't stay locked. One by one, Hell's worst prisons would release untold, nightmarish horrors upon the earth.

Getting a new Keeper up and running wasn't as easy as it sounded. They'd learned that the hard way with Maisy. It had taken all three of them, her human best friend, and the help of a powerful witch to get her installed as Keeper. Apparently, that had been considered a smooth transition, with only three near-death attacks to fight off.

"That sounds targeted."

"Indeed." Caraxis threw back the rest of his Scotch in a single long drag. "And that's before I reveal more distressing news. Five more *Nephilim*, paired with Keepers, have been killed as well. There's a serial murderer out there. With a very evil plan."

"Shit."

"I have a suspect."

Zavier suddenly had a dagger in his hand. Even though they were still in just workout gear with no place to hide a weapon. "Then why are we still sitting here?"

Shaking his head, Caraxis said, "Allow me to rephrase. I suspect that whoever is doing the killing is a full-blooded angel. In cahoots with a demon, to accomplish the actual killing."

"Cahoots?" Gideon repeated with a full shot of snark as he got up to refill the master's glass.

"I've been around for several centuries, Gideon Durant. When I find a word I like, I stick with it."

A full angel, huh? That, of course, zipped Gideon's brain right back to thinking about Evangeline. The dark angel—which, hey, Caraxis had never bothered to mention even existed. When your entire mission in life was to fight the creatures of Hell? It helped to know what to look out for.

Not that they'd ever have to fight Evangeline. She was as

powerless as a human against the forces of Good. On top of that, apparently not evil at all.

That must've been so hard for her. Being good amidst all the worst evils in Hell. Gideon...admired the strength it must've taken. And, as miserable as it all was in the underworld, the additional strength it must've taken to walk away from everything she knew to restart a life here on earth.

Why was he still thinking about her? He needed to go out tonight and clear his mind over drinks with literally *any* other woman who didn't have all of her Hell baggage...

Rhys standing up snapped Gideon's attention back to the conversation. "So you're desperate."

The master contemplated the hands clasped over his chest before finally saying, "Yes."

That was a big admission. Startling and very unsettling. When a powerful and ancient Fallen Angel admitted to being desperate? Things were pretty much *shit*. Gideon went ahead and topped off everyone's glass.

"You're starting from square one. Casting a wide net with the classification of who's capable of doing this dirty work and getting away with it. You've got no actual list of names for us to cross off."

"Correct."

Zavier slapped the flat of his hand against the wall. "You're setting us up to fail."

That was an interesting take. Definitely possible.

Doubtful, though. The Order had pitched their tantrum when they left. Nobody cared enough to get rid of them anymore. They were too useful. They took care of this Watchtower. The Order gave them only a few missions a year. But the Order—indeed, the entire supernatural world—was *well* aware of all the crap they cleaned up for other clients. Without being on the Order's dime.

"No, Xavier Carranza." To Gideon's shock, Caraxis stood and crossed to Z. Even squeezed his forearm as he stared

straight into his eyes. “I give you my word I’m not. I am at a loss as to how to stop these senseless deaths. You are my only hope.”

Z appeared to take in the surprising honesty. For a whopping two heartbeats. Then his natural distrust of anything Order-related kicked in. He twisted out of the man’s grip and stalked away. “That’s laying it on thick.”

“You quit the Order fifty years ago. Since you three are... renegades, you’re the only ones I trust to investigate.”

Ahhhh.

They’d been so distracted by the shock of Caraxis’s revelations that they hadn’t thought through to the next piece. Gideon shook a finger at him. “Because it must be an inside job.”

“Yes. It could be a *Nephilim* and not a full angel. Or a *Nephilim* assisting an angel. Either way, the sanctity of the Order has been breached. The worst of it is that I can think of no reason *why*.”

“Harder to track down a killer without a motivation.”

“I did not say it would be easy. And, before Zavier begins to squeeze me, I will pay you for your investigation, even if you are unable to find an answer for me.”

Holy shit.

They *never* got paid until and unless a mission was completed successfully. Caraxis’s desperation was apparent.

And that was the tipping point for him.

Gideon didn’t wait for the others to weigh in. “We appreciate that. It isn’t about the money, though. Someone is murdering our kind. We won’t stand for that.”

Rhys and Zavier did a double take at him jumping in—usually they’d go off and discuss before accepting an assignment from the Order. But they also nodded their agreement.

“It eases me to hear that.” Caraxis stood. Gave a half bow to

each of the men, in turn. “Because I am certain the murders *will* continue. And the danger of the Keepers being struck down affects the entire world. Hell on earth is not something we want to occur.”

True. But...his phrasing gave Gideon an idea. Maybe crazy. Maybe crazy good.

“It won’t happen.” Rhys walked him to the edge overlooking the blueish-green rush of water. Patted the stone wall. “Not on our watch.”

As soon as Caraxis flew through the waterfall, Zavier turned on him. “You know the rules. You’re supposed to let me haggle about the price when he brings us a job.”

“Whatever. You’re supposed to let us take the lead and not be a dick when we’re trying to tease out extra info from him.”

“Whatever,” Z snarled back.

Gideon knew that was as close as Z would get to an apology. “He’ll pay us. Sounds like the sky’s the limit. That’s not why we’re doing it, though. You know Caraxis is right. We’re the only ones who can safely track down whoever is behind these murders, along with the demon doing the dirty work. We’re sworn to protect. That isn’t just humans.”

“I know that.” He sighed out his frustration. “Of *course* we’re doing it.”

Rhys pulled on a workout tank. Shelved the weapons they’d been practicing with before the interruption. “You’ll get the fee you ask for, Zavier. Move on. We’ve just accepted a mission we have zero idea how to begin.”

Gideon pulled on his own shirt, tossed one to Zavier. And led them over to the hanging whiteboard where they strategized their missions. “That’s not entirely true. I’ve actually got a plan. A starting point, anyway.”

“That Macallan this early in the day lubricated your brain cells into overdrive, huh? Can’t wait to hear this.”

“It’s a little out-of-the-box,” he hedged, picking up a marker.

Rhys cocked a dark eyebrow. “Since when do we play by

the rules? That was half the fun of leaving the Order.”

“Let’s hear it,” Xavier ordered.

He wrote “Evangeline” on the board and circled it. “The best way to catch one of Hell’s creations is *with* one of them...”

Chapter Four

The house was in an older neighborhood of Buffalo. It looked...nice, but not anything that suited the three suave partners of *Metafora*. Evangeline had no idea who it belonged to or why she was here.

Well, the *why* was desperation laced with hope.

Gideon had texted her this address and the intriguing sentence *We've changed our minds*. He had to mean about helping her with the spell, right? If her reveal that she was a dark angel had made them want to fire her as an actuary, there'd be no need to drag her out here.

Unless they'd decided that as one of Hell's angels—even a wholly good one—she was too dangerous to let live. Maybe they were going to execute her?

Yup, *that* was what growing up in Hell did to a person's train of thought. Always ran the tracks of possibility right through the worst possible scenario.

Too late to second-guess now. The brown door opened to reveal a petite redhead.

"Hi. I'm Maisy."

Her wide smile was approachable. Welcoming. She wore rainbow Converse, red leggings, and a paint-spattered orange tank. Much like the house, she in no way looked like a match for the powerful *Nephilim*.

"I'm sorry. I must be at the wrong address." Eva started to back off the wide porch.

Maisy tsked. "The guys didn't bother to tell you that this was my house, did they? They get all focused on a mission and skip over social niceties. Evangeline, right?" She made a game-show-hostess wave. "C'mon in."

She'd mentioned a mission. Did that mean she knew the men were *Nephilim*? But Maisy looked so very perkily human. It made no sense.

They went down the wood-paneled hallway into a dining room. It had a mahogany chair rail bisecting the toast-colored walls. Diamond-shaped panes at the top of the windows looked out over a lush garden. A fussy, old-fashioned china cabinet was filled with rocks and small talismans rather than plates.

And at the long table covered in a white lace tablecloth sat Gideon. He captured her attention even though he wasn't speaking, wasn't looking toward Eva. He was just unutterably handsome in a retro Cuban brown and ivory shirt. The afternoon sunlight flooding in burnished his thick golden hair with an almost-halo.

Not that she cared.

Oh, and also Rhys and Xavier were at the table.

It felt a bit like a Mafia summit from a *Sopranos* episode. The juxtaposition of the comfortable home with the big, muscled mercenaries. Because Eva had figured out that's what they were.

There was no way they still belonged to the Order. They clearly didn't take orders from anyone. In their entire conversation, there'd been no mention of needing to check with a superior to decide if they would help her.

Maisy bustled around, getting her seated, pouring iced tea into a pink crystal tumbler, and setting out a plate. She pointed at the platter in the middle of the table. "There're lemon bars and raspberry thumbprint cookies. Help yourself. I'd recommend doing it quickly before the guys demolish them all."

Rhys drew his brows together into a very stern, intimidating frown. "Hey, we didn't sneak a single one while you were letting her in. That displays a supernatural level of self-control."

"Wrong." And her wrinkled nose indicated an utter lack of intimidation at his glower. "It displays a basic human level of courtesy. Even for a half-human. Stop trying to take credit for every little thing. I already tell you how awesome you are at

least seventeen times a day.”

“Maybe I need to hear it twenty times,” he said in a sly tone.

“Then get your besties here to pony up a compliment or two.” And she flicked the back of Gideon’s and Zavier’s heads.

It was normal. Easygoing teasing.

So Evangeline had absolutely no idea what was happening. “What is going on? How do you know them?” she asked, gesturing at the men.

“Oh, I’m Rhys’s girlfriend.”

“Arm candy,” Gideon said with a wink.

“True love,” Rhys corrected as he snagged her waist. Maisy melted into his lap, where they indulged in a long, uncomfortable-to-witness kiss.

Okay. So the big, bad *Nephilim* had a soft spot. Surprising that he’d chosen a human. Still Eva didn’t know why she was being plied with cookies.

But she wasn’t stupid. She’d take a lemon bar.

To her relief, Gideon began to explain as she sank into the tart, powdered-sugar-covered bliss. “We thought you’d be more comfortable meeting in a neutral location. Neutral, but secure enough where we can talk things through.”

It was a horrible, 1950s style question to ask, but Eva had no choice. “In front of his girlfriend?”

“Maisy’s one of us. She’s a Keeper.”

And the surprises just kept coming. “A Keeper of the Key? To the Gates of Hell?”

“One set of ’em.” Maisy shimmied off Rhys and took her own chair. “Yup. I’m new to it. My Uncle Harold, the previous Keeper, was murdered recently.”

“Murdered? That’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“Horrible on several levels. And it happened before he could tell me anything about my powers and responsibilities.”

Resignation replaced her chipperness. “You know how if a soldier’s captured, the only info he gives up is his name and serial number? That’s where I am right now. I can tell you that I’m the Keeper. That’s about it.”

Eva, of course, knew of the Keepers. Not details. But she knew there was a whole lot more to it than just assuming the title. “Nobody can train you?”

“Not exactly.”

How could you be a part of this world without knowing the parameters of both what you could and should do? More specifically, how secure *were* those Gates if Maisy didn’t know what she was doing?

“We’ll get to all that later,” Gideon obfuscated smoothly. “Any chance you’re into cryptography as a fun hobby?”

“Decoding things? I enjoy a good thriller. But my skill set is statistics.”

Maisy’s bright face scrunched into disappointment. Especially her unusual brown eyes with a green ring around them. “That’s a shame. I’ve got an instruction manual from my uncle. The only problem is that it’s encoded.”

“Feels like that defeats the purpose.”

“There’s probably a key—ha!—somewhere. We just don’t know where. Or what it’d look like. Or if instead of a cryptographer, we need a hacker.”

Evangeline had zero interest in the Gates of Hell opening. “I can help you there. I went to college with a hacker. Well, probably more than one, but they don’t exactly advertise. Happy to make the connection.”

“That would be *stellar*. Thank you. I’ll go grab my tablet to shoot you an email.” Maisy stopped in the doorway. Glared at Gideon with a hand on her hip. “I don’t know why you called her unreasonable. Maybe you just weren’t nice enough.”

“Maisy, if I were any nicer to the female population, industry and commerce would shut down as they all lined up at my door.”

“You can’t really believe that.” Eva regretted letting the words burst out. But the inflated size of his ego *required* a slap back to reality.

On top of discovering that he’d insulted her.

“I believe I can do whatever I set my mind to,” he mocked solemnly, one hand over his heart. “I also believe it’d be dangerous to test, so we’ll never know...” Gideon let the words trail off. With a smirk.

A smirk that just drew attention to his perfectly formed lips. The ones Eva could suddenly imagine melding with hers—

No. No she could not. *Would* not, actually. That’d be as smart as...rollerblading with scissors. With no handles. Just really two double-edged knives clutched in her palm.

“Well, count me out.” Eva ratcheted up a bitter half smile. “Since you’ve evidently already labeled me as unreasonable.”

He shrugged it off. “Heat of the moment. We were all pissed the other night for our own reasons. I’ll bet you went home and called *us* names.”

“True,” she conceded. Many. Various. All unflattering.

“After some reflection, we realized that we weren’t fair to you.”

Wow. That was easy.

But...*too* easy. You didn’t grow up in Hell and fall for the first easy offer that dropped in your lap. That was a good way to end up impaled. Or skinned. “What’s the catch?”

Eyes widely innocent, Gideon bit into a cookie. “We’ll help you with your problem if you help us with ours.”

Absolutely not.

She’d been extraordinarily clear about that. As clear as a lion made his intentions while chasing a zebra across the savannah. “Feels like you missed my main thesis. I want to do the spell to become safer from the powers of darkness. Aligning with you opens me up to *more* danger. More interaction with them.”

Zavier jumped in. She'd almost forgotten the other two men were at the table, she'd been so laser-focused on Gideon. "We heard you. Loud and clear. Self-preservation's a basic instinct. We're not judging you."

Rhys unfolded his arm across the table toward her. "That's why, instead, we've come up with this *quid pro quo*. Help us on one mission. We'll be with you the whole time, so your safety won't be compromised. Then we all go our separate ways."

Did they think she was *that* naïve? "Nice try, gentlemen. I repeat, what's the catch?"

"Hey, we don't even know what we're agreeing to on your side." Gideon jutted his chin. "What exactly goes into that de-powerification spell of yours?"

She tried to play it off like they were no big deal. Run-of-the-mill. Like scraping up some pocket lint and a decade-old cough lozenge from the bottom of your purse. "Mermaid scale. Blood of a full angel. Feather from an alicorn. The usual power items."

Zavier hooted. "A real walk in the park. If the park's hosting a gang war. And one of the gangs is zombies."

Zombies didn't seem like a thing that would remotely bother the big *Nephilim* with the perma-scowl and the hard clench to his jaw. "You know they're all doable, if a bit difficult," she chided. It didn't seem prudent to call him out as a wuss. "Now you show me yours."

Rhys rolled his hand in a *go on* gesture to Gideon. Who then rolled his eyes.

Geez.

So sorry that he was the one who drew the short straw of having to talk to her. Was the disdain because she'd been born in Hell?

Or because he was still pissy that he hadn't known dark angels existed?

And/or/also bitter that she'd known about Charon's portal at

the foot of the Falls and he hadn't?

Hmm. Or—most likely—was Gideon's pride pricked that she hadn't prostrated herself in homage to his good looks and undeniable charm?

To her surprise, Gideon straightened out of his relaxed lounge stance. *Everything* about him sharpened; from his eyes to the tight lines suddenly bracketing his mouth to the taut muscles in his arms.

"We're tracking a killer, Evangeline. A demon. You know far more about Hell than everyone in this house put together. You'd be useful." He stopped, mouth half shut. Turned his head partway to the side as if trying to shake out the words, and then continued. "You'd be *appreciated* and useful."

It had taken Eva years to confirm that the spell to remove her un-power even existed. Another year after that to convince her aunt it was her greatest desire so that she'd allow her to leave Hell. At least another three to get the complete list of ingredients and the complex verbiage.

Then she'd ground to a halt. Gathering everything seemed far beyond her ability.

This was the first inching forward on the subject she'd had in ages. And their protection *did* mitigate her biggest objection.

Eva knew better, however, than to throw confetti and scream *I'll do it*. That'd be like offering to pay sticker price at a car dealership.

With barely a flicker of her eyelids, she said in a tone utterly free of interest, "I do know a fair bit about demons. Tell me more."

By the time Maisy rejoined them, Eva was up to speed. Horrified, but up to speed. And honestly, not so much feeling the need to negotiate anymore. She needed to be kept safe. But that was it. This murderous rampage had to be stopped.

"Are you to my part yet?" Maisy asked. She set her tablet down, pointing to the contact list where Eva could add her info.

Rhys joined her, kissed the top of her head. Then he tilted her chin up with one finger, staring intently into her eyes. “As long as you’re sure about it.”

A drop of her head brushed her lips against that finger. “Stop protecting me.”

“Never.”

They were adorable. Nauseatingly adorable. Rhys came off as two-dimensional—stern and serious—until Maisy was in the picture. Eva wondered how she’d seen past his reserve into his obviously softer center.

Maisy sat down next to Eva. “The guys are fully on board to protect you. They’re very good at it. But you shouldn’t have to move into their lair.”

“The Watchtower,” Rhys corrected.

“Ha!” Maisy held up one hand to tick off points finger by finger. “Three badass, rogue half-angels, living in secrecy, in a building cloaked from humanity? Oh, that’s a lair. It even has a long underground tunnel-esque driveway like the Bat Cave.”

“Please. That comparison’s insulting. Batman didn’t have any powers. All he had were gadgets.”

She toyed with the ends of her bright red ponytail. “Hit a nerve, did I? We’ll circle back and argue about that later. About how a superhero without powers is clearly even stronger than all the rest.”

If that were true, Eva wouldn’t be sitting here, consorting with three men she didn’t wholly trust.

“You always side with humans.” But his tone was teasing. His smile indulgent. Wow, Rhys was putty in her hands.

No man had ever looked at Eva with anywhere close to that level of naked adoration. Which was fine. After all, she’d managed to successfully leave Hell. What more could a girl ask for in one lifetime?

Not to mention—she could never share her life with a human. It’d be impossible to hide something as big as who and what she was and still consider herself a true partner in a

relationship.

So what did that leave her for an option? A beautiful, bright creature like Gideon? Hardly. Well, *definitely* not Gideon The Player (probably his video game handle). Or look at Xavier—he was clearly a tortured soul (quite possibly literally).

And from what little she knew of *Nephilim*, the members of the Order were treated like the soldier action figures you'd give a child. Interchangeable. Replaceable. And thus often sent on impossible and fatal missions.

The HR admin at her company often ranted about how terrifying it was to date a fireman—never knowing if they'd make it back after a shift.

Eva imagined it was much worse dating a foot soldier in the Army of Heaven...

Maisy lightly patted the back of her hand. “Rather than be stuck with the guys, Evangeline, I'm inviting you to stay here, with me. You'll still be with them most of the day. When you need a break—because, whew, they are a handful—and to sleep, consider this your supernatural, supersafe B & B.”

Gideon and the other *Nephilim* may have doubts about her being a dark angel and her level of...goodness? But clearly they trusted her enough to have her room with the woman Rhys loved.

That gave Eva a tiny pinch of ease. Because there was almost as much distrust in the room as oxygen and ugly, mid-century wallpaper.

“That's very kind of you, Maisy. And please, call me Eva.”

Gideon's right eyebrow shot up. Was he seriously put out that she hadn't revealed her nickname to him first?

“This house—it used to be my uncle's, who was the Keeper before me—it's protected. We're not even sure of all the ways.”

Zavier peered out the window. Shaded his eyes against the glare. “I'm telling you, there's got to be a full-blooded angel blessing around this place. That's stronger than any covenant.”

spells.”

Wow. If that were true? Eva might just ask Maisy if she could move in permanently. Talk about a safe house.

Her current landlord charged an arm and a leg for her measly garage spot. Even with Buffalo’s infamous winters, she’d give that up in a heartbeat for living in the safety bubble of an angel blessing.

“How would a Keeper ingratiate themselves with an angel to receive it?” Rhys asked. His tone, and the tired way he rubbed at his eyes, indicated they’d gone round in circles on this topic before.

“We don’t know jack shit about being a Keeper, do we?” He flung his arm out to the side. It stretched his black polo taut across his impressively defined chest. “Maybe there’s a coffee hour on the first Monday of every month where the Keepers and their *Nephilim* all huddle with an angel to debrief.”

That was a very...corporate approach to conducting business with beings who sat literally at the right hand of God. Or was it a very down-home, Midwestern, aw-shucks approach? Either way, it was 1) unlikely, and 2) an indicator of Zavier’s matching level of frustration.

“Angels hate us.” Gideon spat it out. His frustration was evidently coated in thick bitterness. It was admittedly *fascinating* watching the inner workings of these creatures both similar and vastly different from the Hell hierarchy with which she was so familiar. “They think our whole species is impure, watered-down trash. Now that we know every Keeper is paired forever with a *Nephilim*? There’s no way angels are granting favors to a Keeper.”

Maisy shifted in her chair. Shot a glance at Rhys full of care and worry. “Let’s just say there are layers upon layers that kept my uncle safe here.”

Except...now that she’d mentioned her uncle again, Eva had second thoughts. “I thought you were working under the hypothesis that he, the previous Keeper, was *murdered*?”

“Yes. True.” Maisy covered her mouth—and a snort-laugh

—with fingers streaked in bright blue and yellow paint. “Oh geez, that does sound bad, doesn’t it? But his death’s not due to the security being breached. That’s about the only thing we’ve been able to ascertain. The protection’s strong enough that I stay here by myself. Well, with my best friend, Liss. She’s my roommate.”

“Is she a Keeper, too?”

Zavier...growled? What was that about?

“Liss is”—Maisy cupped her hands around her mouth—“a human.” Her brown-with-a-ring-of-green eyes widened in pretend shock. “She knows all about all of this, though, because she’s been knee-deep in it since we were attacked by an *Aldokriz* demon. She’s fine with you being a dark angel. I already ran it past her.”

Evangeline had literally told not one single human about her past in all the years she’d lived up here.

It was...disconcerting to have the secret revealed. Worrying about various factions of Hell attacking her was bad enough. She didn’t want to *also* have to worry about some dark-ops branch of the U.S. government swooping in to seize and test her.

“Who else have you told?”

Gideon made a sound akin to a cat horking up a furball. “Maybe, if you don’t want people to find out what you are, you shouldn’t stand on the wrong side of the safety rail on the edge of an enormous waterfall.”

That wasn’t just beating a dead horse. That was using the bottle of glue made from the dead horse to glue together a collage that blamed Eva for ruining his night. “Will you let that go? I’ve never been spotted before. Our *encounter* was just bad luck.”

“Bet that’s what all the women say after a night with Gideon.” A laugh rumbled up from deep in Xavier’s chest.

“Most women temporarily lose the power of speech after a night with me, from screaming their pleasure so loudly.” Gideon’s tone was pure *I’ve told you this a hundred times*.

Unbelievable.

He was a man. Okay, a half-man, half-angel but, since he wasn't a demigod or an incubus, Eva was certain that the caliber of his bedroom calisthenics was remarkably average.

"Another way to look at it?" She made sure sweetness coated her words like chocolate-covered caramel around a poisoned apple. "Perhaps they fake laryngitis so they won't have to constantly stroke your ego, since they actually faked their orgasm, too."

Maisy burst into laughter. Rhys smiled and dug an elbow into Gideon's ribs.

"You're not half bad, for a Hell spawn. Hope you stick around." Zavier tucked his fingertips over the doorframe—with room to spare—and stretched. "I have to go pick up Liss. She's ordered me to bring the Land Rover so she can get another month's worth of gift basket supplies back here."

"Huh?" Gideon shook his head. "You don't let anyone order you around. Ever. Unless you're pinned down by demons and we're trying to toss you a sword."

He dropped his arms. "She accidentally got pulled into our world. Our scary, dangerous world. It sucks to be her a little worse, because of us. So yeah, I'll chauffeur her stupid supplies as often as she likes." Then he left without saying goodbye.

Eva had no idea what the story was with him and Liss. She was, however, fairly certain that there *was* some sort of a story.

"Wait, I'll come with you. She always forgets to pack enough glitter tissue paper." Maisy jumped up and bolted after him. Halfway down the hall, she yelled, "I left you an envelope with a key and instructions. Nice to meet you, Eva!"

"You're not going without me. No way am I missing out on the chance to drive Zavier crazy by holding hands in the back seat." Rhys used a bit of his supernatural speed to catch his girlfriend. Eva's hair blew in the wind gust he created.

Gideon calmly bit into another cookie. "Rhys may be eighty-seven, but he's regressed into a lovesick teen since

meeting Maisy. You have no idea the amount of PDA we put up with now.”

They were alone.

Without any time for her to mentally prepare for it.

The story of the angel/demon killing team had more than captured her attention. But there was a part of Eva that had never fully let down her guard.

If she did? She would’ve spent this whole meeting staring at Gideon. Because holy Hell, he was handsome.

Not just in a *that Monet lily pond is stunning* way. Also in a *I’d give anything to devour you like a piece of chocolate cake* way.

She wasn’t ready to be alone with him.

It was why her freezer contained zero ice cream. If the temptation wasn’t available, Eva wouldn’t have to work so hard to resist it.

She cleared her throat. Disagreeing with Gideon seemed the most obvious way to resist him. And it was second nature. “I think they’re sweet together.”

“Yeah, see, that’s the weird part. Rhys Boyce is a streamlined military machine. He strategizes—for business and for battle. He fights with a singular intensity. He doesn’t ‘do’ sweet.”

“Clearly, you’re wrong.” Arguing *should* be tamping down her attraction.

Why wasn’t it?

“He didn’t. Until a few months ago.” Gideon leaned across the table conspiratorially. “Z and I had him checked.”

“For what? Lovesickness isn’t an actual diagnosis in the Merck Manual.”

“To see if he’d been cursed or possessed or something. That’d explain his one-eighty in personality.”

Men. Men! Demons or angels or humans—they were all the

same. No respect for love. Eva stood. Propped her fists on her hips. Easy to stay mad at him through this particular idiocy. “When he fights with you, is he any different?”

“No.”

“When you’re working at Metafora on some international customs holdup for your shipping containers, is he any different?”

Gideon pushed out of his seat, a confused squint in no way distracting from the gold-flecked hypnotic warmth of his brown eyes. “No.”

“Then his personality hasn’t changed. It’s just been augmented by another facet of him being revealed.”

“Another layer that doesn’t have any room for me or Z.”

Oh.

Gideon didn’t *actually* think his friend had been possessed. He was just hurt. Worried that their decades-long bond was weakened.

He felt left out.

Evangeline had a PhD in feeling left out, if life experience counted for credits. And her heart hurt for him.

“It feels that way now. It won’t last,” she promised. Eva even dared to come closer and lay a reassuring hand on his upper arm, because the man’s face had literally melted into lines of sadness. “Rhys is bushwhacking a new path. Figuring out how to find the balance with these disparate pieces of his life. The transition is, of course, awkward. But you’ll all find a new configuration. One that includes Maisy. You’re getting an extra puzzle piece, not losing any.”

Silence filled the room for a few moments. As if Gideon was deciding whether or not to grab the lifeline she’d just thrown. “How many metaphors do you plan to mash up?”

“Pretty sure my limit’s four. Any more than that and you descend into gibberish.”

He stepped closer, breaching the invisible and universally

acknowledged circle of personal space. The stiff hem of his linen *guayabera* brushed against her wrist. “Well, we’re apparently adding yet another piece. If you agree.” He sort of shuffled into the final inch of breathing space she had. *Loomed* over her. “Do we have a deal, Evangeline?”

His proximity forced Eva to tilt her head up.

That’s when it hit her. A move so smooth she’d almost missed it.

Hell, no.

“You’re trying to kiss me?” she accused.

“Do you really have to ask?”

How was he unrepentant about it?

Eva lurched backward. “I don’t like you. You don’t like me. We’ve snarled and bickered at each other since we met. Since *before* we met, when I overheard you insulting who you expected me to be.”

“Water under the bridge. Or over the waterfall.”

“Gideon, *why* on earth do you want to kiss me?”

“Assuming you say yes to helping us stop the murders? We need to seal the deal. Kissing’s more fun than a handshake.”

How was he so matter of fact about it? “Let me be perfectly clear about two perfectly disparate points. Yes, I accept your offer.” Because ultimately, she’d get what she wanted. *And* do so with the added cherry on top of stopping a serial murderer. Which really described many, many demons, come to think of it.

“Thank you.” The flirt was gone. Sincerity rang in his tone and bracketed lines around his mouth, as though Gideon were a wholly different person than the one on kissing autopilot.

And that person was still annoyingly appealing with his sincerity.

“I’ll go back and collect some things and move in with Maisy tonight. But the second point is that I do not now, nor will I ever, want to be kissed by you. We are colleagues. In an

extremely limited-time partnership. Think of me as a special consultant. And keep your lips way the *hell* away from mine, or the deal's off."

The nerve!

Evangeline grabbed her bag and stormed down the hallway. Before she lost her resolve—which she'd already almost lost, when she'd realized she was leaning *in* toward him.

Nope.

She'd *never* kiss Gideon Durand. Eva refused to be another tick mark on his belt—no matter how well said belt set off his slim hips and the visible bulge just below...

Chapter Five

It was the crack of ass. Gideon was uncaffeinated. And his sleep had been restless, thanks to their new “consultant.”

She’d turned him down.

Rebuffed him. Yeah, she’d still taken the deal, but Evangeline was the first woman in, well, his long lifetime to *not* respond to him.

Was it her dark angel-ness? Were they like oppositely charged magnets? Or was that protons and ions? Fuck if he knew.

And it was just before dawn. Waiting until a reasonable hour to fly through Niagara Falls into Hell brought the risk of being seen. So even though the timing of the trip had been his suggestion? It still felt fair to lay the blame for his exhaustion and mood squarely at Evangeline’s feet.

He was in Hell.

Literally. That *alone* was enough reason to be in a shitty mood, right? Add to that freaking climbing a goat-sized trail around a dusty mountain that kept him close enough to Evangeline to be teased by her rose perfume, *and* making sure his arm didn’t brush against hers with every step.

“You know, I can hear you grunting. If you’re pissed at me, just say so.” The blonde gave him a cool, assessing gaze from beneath half-shuttered eyes. “Although I thought your ego would have more of a backbone.”

“I have plenty. Of both.”

“Oh? You’re not being all snarly because I turned you down last night?”

Like she was God’s gift to mankind? Helen of Troy and Halsey and Elizabeth Taylor wrapped up in one seductive skin?

Now which one of them had the raging ego?

“No. Don’t think you would’ve done me any great favor. I can find a woman to kiss me in a snap.” He snapped his fingers.

The sound wasn’t as crisp as usual. *Everything* felt muted here in Hell. The sky, the mountains, the dirt were all shades of dull gray. The scuff of their boots against the gravel sounded like it’d been draped in cotton.

Eva wore hiking boots, gray spandex workout shorts, and a loose white tank. The outfit highlighted her endless pale legs. Yeah, he’d noticed. Just like he’d noticed the small, perky breasts providing interesting peaks and valleys to her top. Hey, Gideon was tired, but he wasn’t dead. He *noticed* the beautiful bits and pieces of a woman. Even one who never stopped berating him.

Gideon wore his steel-toed fighting boots, because—Hell. Never knew what trouble you’d get into down here. That’s why his black cargo pants were filled with three potions, four throwing stars, a WWI trench knife with spiked knuckleduster grip guard, a pair of Japanese sai—perfect for stabbing squishy demon bellies—and a dagger sheathed at each ankle.

They trudged along up another steep curve. After another couple hundred feet, she asked, “Then why are you acting so snarly?”

“No coffee.”

“Oh, did you want a Starbucks?”

“Fuck, yeah.” Talk about global domination. “Starbucks really has a kiosk in Hell?”

“No. You’re hilarious. And quite gullible.” Her laughter echoed off the rocks.

“Shh.” Gideon shot out an arm to clamp a hand across her mouth. Where was her caution? Her common sense? “You don’t want to draw attention.”

Evangeline slapped at his forearm until he dropped it. “Goodness, you’re jumpy.”

At least she was quieter. “Not to sound like a broken record,

but we're in *Hell*. Of course I'm jumpy."

"Well, to me it's just home. But you seem uber uncomfortable. Haven't you ever been here before? When you offered to fly me here, I assumed—"

He cut her off. "Yeah." Doing something more than once didn't mean you lost a healthy respect and fear for the worst place *under* earth. "Twice. Once with a trainer. Once by myself to prove I could do it."

"Do what? Once you've flown through a waterfall portal, aren't they all the same? Flap a couple of times. Land. Jump up and flap back the other direction."

Clearly spoken by a woman who'd never ever used her wings...

"That part's the same. Except for *choosing* to fly into Hell. Knowing you might not return. As a sort of final exam, we had to stay down here for a day. Fight whatever crossed our path." Gideon pushed back the memory. He kept it locked down as much as possible. It'd been one of the three worst days of his life. And for a man who battled monsters for a living? That was saying something. "Survive. If we did? We were ready to become active duty *Nephilim* in the Order."

"If?"

"It's Hell, Evangeline. There are no guarantees. No safety tips on the weapons." He cleared his throat. "Not everyone comes back."

"I'm sorry." Her voice no longer held the snippy edge. "You lost friends, then?"

"Yeah."

"And you don't even know how? They just never returned?"

Gideon stopped.

Her innocent question literally ground him to a halt. Anger poured through his veins, more bitter than an Italian triple espresso.

Hands fisted, he choked out, "We know. We had to sit

through training sessions to learn where they fucked up. Because it turns out you don't come down here alone the second time. They send someone to watch. Someone who *could've* stepped in and saved them. And didn't. As soldiers, they weren't deemed worthy anymore."

"Gideon. That's awful. Unimaginable. Unconscionable." Evangeline put a tentative hand on his biceps. "No wonder you're so, ah, vigilant. I didn't mean to make light. And I'm sorry I made you relive it."

"You didn't know. How could you? Who'd expect even partial angelic beings to be so cruel?" He made sure to not just look out over the plain behind them, but down into the ravine and up into the seemingly endless gray sky. An attack could come from anywhere. Creatures down here walked, flew, skittered, clawed, and climbed.

"You don't have to stay."

"Guaranteed protection. We're not welchers."

Her nude lips pursed into an *O*. "We could go back. You could ask one of the others to bring me."

"No. You're my responsibility. And Rhys was just down here a month ago. He almost lost Maisy. I wouldn't make him come back." Gideon drew in a deep breath. It smelled faintly of sulfur and dust—but it was easier with Evangeline's warmth spreading across his arm. "I'll be fine."

"How long ago did this all happen?"

It had gone on for eons. Apparently. But as to when Gideon found out about it? "Right when we finished training, so... sixty-five years ago, give or take?"

"And you're still just as angry?"

"I'll stay that way until the day I die." He started each day by reciting the names of the unreturned—of the few he knew, anyway—so they wouldn't be forgotten. "You don't devalue a life like that."

"Agreed," she said softly.

It was enough.

It was more than so many of his own kind would bother to say.

They began walking again. Gideon shortened his gait to match hers, but he didn't have to hold back much with her long legs.

Not that he was *still* noticing her legs. Not actively. But it'd be rude not to at least mentally acknowledge how long and lithe they were.

"Thanks for bringing me here." Evangeline tossed her head, sending her ashy blond hair back over her shoulders. "I know we agreed to alternate working on your murder and gathering my ingredients. I appreciate starting with this visit."

Like he'd had a choice. "According to you, I'm the one who made you miss your ride to see your aunt. Only right that I fix it."

"That's surprisingly chivalrous." They crossed a bridge. It appeared to be a single slab of rock balanced on a slender stalagmite that shouldn't be capable of holding an eighth of that weight.

Gideon wasn't scared of heights.

He *was* scared of whatever might be writhing and roaring in the chasm of hellfire below them.

"I'm not the bad guy you think I am."

"Nothing's *only* black or white." She gestured at the landscape around them. "Truly, the world, and everyone in it, exists in shades of gray."

Oh, so "dark angel" meant she was emo and gloomy, too? "That's depressing as fuck."

"Remember, my, well, grandfather was the top angel in Heaven. As good as they come. And now all that goodness is entombed down here. Dealing with the worst creatures...and everything in between. A gray area."

Evangeline paused. Bent down to brush aside what looked like beach grass, except, of course, gray instead of green. She stood up with a flower in hand. Gray petals, each edged in

black. But the center was a fuzzy explosion of white and purple, like a miniature dandelion head. “There’s color to be found, beauty, if you look for it.”

Okay. Maybe there *were* more layers to her than just biting snark and pessimism. And the hypnotizing, misty pre-dawn gray of her eyes. “Like you. A ‘good’ dark angel.”

“I’m not that colorful. My life’s spent staying under the radar. Trying my best to go unnoticed.”

How was that possible? Gideon didn’t like how she chipped away at him, nonstop. But she was obviously smart. Pretty in a way that made you think *there’s more there* and take a second look. He’d certainly tried his hardest to ignore the actuary when they first met.

Look how that’d turned out...

“That’s a shame.” And he was struck by the urge to comfort her. To touch her as softly, as carefully as Evangeline had touched him.

“I’m...content having escaped from here. Truly.”

Their trail started to flatten out. Hopefully the next curve would be a valley, and not the start of another mountain. Gideon tried not to let the bleakness lull him into a false sense of security. “Content. Is that enough?”

“You want to get into a deep philosophical discussion about happiness in Hell’s courtyard?”

Probably not. But they were literally from different worlds. And they’d pretty much hated each other from the get-go. Gideon had zero idea of where to start with small talk. “Gotta pass the time somehow.”

“Oh!” Her hand flew to her throat. “My bad. I’m being a poor tour guide. How about I point out some of the big sights?”

Seriously? What passed as a tourist destination in Hell? “I think he was a shitty human, but I don’t *actually* want to watch Hitler being tortured.”

“No worries. That’s an entirely different section of Hell

from where we're going. You're still not thinking of Hell as its own kingdom."

"I know, it isn't all bad. It just isn't Heaven." That was the company line, anyway.

"A few religions do reincarnation. Those souls bypass this system and jump right back in. Then there are religions—or lack thereof—that don't believe in an afterlife. All those people wind up here."

"As punishment for not believing?" Talk about harsh.

"No. Because there isn't anywhere else for their souls to go. So the non-evil, outer part of Hell is just a neutral place for them. Not truly Hell, but not Heaven. Zero suffering, I promise. Same with those who don't believe in religion at all. Not to mention the people who aren't that bad or good, just average. They sort of live in the suburbs."

Gideon chuckled. "Suburbs are their own form of hell. Can't imagine what they're like down here."

"Not that exciting. Then there are all the other Fallen Angels. Like Lucifer, they're still angels—mostly very, very good. They have their own enclave."

"Like Penemuel. He founded the *Nephilim's* training school." Gideon had never met him. But legend had it that he also taught humans how to read and write.

"Exactly. Demons who are basically punching a time clock, following orders from up the ladder. They might look scary, and have toxic blood, but they're fairly average and decent."

"So you're going to show me suburbia?" The final curve put all the mountains behind them. They were approaching an obsidian plaza, similar to a traffic circle, with five offshoots. And Gideon couldn't see what lay down any of them.

One immediately turned into a path of fire, the flames licking up at least six feet in the air. Another was pure darkness. His eyes couldn't make out any form—just a ten-foot wide absolute void stretching as far as the eye could see.

Evangeline paused them at the dead center of the shiny

black circle and pointed to a path of clear glass with streaks of smoky gray woven throughout. Unlike the others, it had railings that shimmered like the sparkle of sunlight on water. It was beautiful. Peaceful. Unexpected. “That leads to the Fallen Angel enclave.”

“Easy access,” he noted.

“No. Not at all. You have to have angelic blood, or the path won’t let you pass. If a human or a demon tried to follow it, they would simply go nowhere. They could walk and walk and still end up right back here. Forever.”

“Interesting version of security.”

She bumped elbows companionably. “You’ll be fine.”

Gideon stopped. There’d been zero mention of a tricked out, VIP only portion of this trip. “Huh? No. Not willing to risk an endless Hell loop.” Maybe he could fly over it? Take the long way around to get to her aunt? There had to be another access point.

“You’re half-angel. I promise you can safely walk with me along the Enclave path—” Her voice abruptly cut off. “That’s strange.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific. This all looks strange to me.” Because the fifth traffic-circle offshoot? It was a perfect mashup of Dante and Wes Craven. The path was made of giant, irregular boulders that looked like someone had smashed down a dungeon wall. The railings—if you could call them that, since they extended up to the sky—were a patchwork of bones. Clearly not all human, from the size and shape. Also? Some still dripped pieces of flesh.

And there was a stench. One he’d last encountered during the Vietnam War, when they’d stumbled across an actual pit of decomposing bodies in the jungle.

“That’s the drawbridge to the prisons. All those Gates the Keepers oversee are in there.”

Rhys and Maisy had *not* described this in their trip down here for her final Test to become Keeper. “Is there another way to get to the Gates?”

“Yes. The Keepers have their own entryway. More like the hallways to a government building. They belong at the Gates, so they don’t have to navigate all this.” Evangeline circled her hand. “This is more of a show—a fear factor to prevent others from wandering in.”

“It’d shut down my curiosity.”

Propping a fist on her hip, she said, “What’s weird is that... it’s unguarded.”

“The oozing, rotting, *stinking* flesh isn’t enough of a deterrent?”

“Well, no.” She shrugged. Did he notice her breasts again as the tank pulled taut? Yeah. After all, this was Hell. Gideon had to savor every minuscule goodness that he could. “There are still plenty of horrible things down here. Things that would very much like to break free what’s locked up in Hell’s prisons. So there’s supposed to be a full angel and a dark angel on guard, just like on the drawbridge to Heaven.”

Instinctively, his head jerked up to look at a sky he knew full well did not connect to Heaven. “Run that by me again? A full, light-bearing angel is stuck down here in Hell on guard duty?”

“I mean...they rotate in and out.” Evangeline waved her hand back and forth. “We chat. Some are quite friendly. Others are more focused. Or just really uncomfortable being down here.”

The rest of her sentence hit him. “So dark angels—which I didn’t even know existed forty-eight hours ago—they guard an entrance to Heaven? And it’s a drawbridge?”

She wrinkled her nose. Squinted her confusion. “You’ve never been?”

Ah. There she went, poking at another sore spot. The woman had a talent for finding his long-hidden emotional weaknesses and exposing them to light.

Gideon could come to Hell as much as he wanted (although *never again* would suit him just fine). Had the run of Earth and the ocean kingdom. And any inter-dimensional lands. But

although angelkind saw him as worthy to defend? He didn't get the payoff of even a day-trip to Heaven.

"No. Being a *Nephilim*? That half-human part of me means I don't have the full access pass. We're not allowed. Or not welcome, depending on who you ask."

Eva rolled her hands, like she thought she could explain away why that wasn't fair. "But you work for them. You're expected to die for them. To protect the eternal balance and keep it tilted to the side of good."

"Yeah."

"Doesn't that infuriate you?"

"Yeah." But it didn't keep him up at night. Especially when there were problems to ponder that he *could* solve. Or sex to be had. "So there's supposed to be two angels here at all times, keeping this locked down?"

"Correct. No coffee breaks. No PTO. They *must* guard."

Well, *shit*. "This can't be good."

"No. It's entirely disconcerting. More than a little frightening." Evangeline hugged her arms tight around herself.

Something this big? This wrong? It always had repercussions. Gideon just didn't know what they'd be. Or when. He did know that they absolutely didn't want to be found anywhere near the very wrong, unguarded gate.

He grabbed Evangeline's waist and hauled her close as his wings unfurled. Always faster to fly. Especially when you needed to get as far the fuck away from danger as possible. But before he could lift off, he heard a noise.

Someone.

Something.

He'd never been so thrilled with his ability to keep his wings invisible.

A human-shaped figure was a lot easier to explain down here than a *Nephilim*. Yeah, they were allowed, but his presence would lead to a ton of questions and probably a fight.

And, since he didn't know what a dark angel looked like—aside from powerless Evangeline—it was too big a risk to try to pose as one.

Which left the obvious cover for a man and a woman.

Gideon planted his other hand on her ass and kissed her.

That was a double whammy of goodness. Hard to know which was better—the tight ass molded beneath his palm or the yielding lips beneath his. Hmm. Couldn't ignore the breasts rapidly rising and falling, either.

This was a cover. Hiding in plain sight. If they'd been in a bar, he'd have grabbed a pool cue and bent over the table. It was a tactic.

It was fucking *great*.

Evangeline had gasped when he fused their mouths together. That meant hers was open for his tongue from the get-go.

Warm.

Wet.

Pliant.

Enthusiastic.

That, he hadn't expected. Not with how much the lady doth protest about him every damn second. Her fingers dug into his back. Her soft, sweet lips moved with his in a sinuous, passionate dance.

And she'd clamped a hand on his ass.

Did he keep his senses attuned? Notice the slightly off-balance rhythm to the ever-louder clip-clop gait approaching?

Yeah.

Did he notice Evangeline's nipples tightening? Her tongue tangling with his? The way her head tilted back into a better angle so their kiss deepened?

Yeah.

It was all hot. Not *because they were in Hell* hot. Just zero-to-a-hundred on the lust-o-meter. He worked the grip on her

waist up her ribs to graze the tantalizing underswell of her breast with his thumb.

God, he wanted to cover it with his mouth.

“Hey. Dark and defenseless. You don’t belong here.”

Slowly, Gideon pulled out of the lip lock to look over his shoulder.

Yup. Classic Hell spawn. At least eight feet tall. Bottom half of a goat—explained the weird footsteps. Those were hooves. No pants. Waaaay too much poking out of the filthy white fur.

The top half was...sort of a dinosaur? Reptilian. Scaly and grayish green. The requisite way-the-fuck-too-many teeth. And long, curved claws that looked as dangerous as scimitars.

Evangeline might be able to nullify its powers. But it’d still be a bitch to fight. And he’d have to worry about protecting her the whole time.

Best way to win a fight with uneven odds? Avoid it.

“Are we in a no-makeout zone?” Gideon gave an open-mouthed wink. “Thought that Hell was a place where anything goes.”

Evangeline backed them up a few steps. Farther away from the goat-thing and closer to the shimmering glass path. “I’d hoped we’d pick up a sexy little power bump from being in the Circle of Terminus.”

A...noise came out of its mouth. Along with some black drool. “You wouldn’t be the first to try.” A gravelly cackle sprayed more spit. “Don’t blame you. You need whatever power you can leach.”

The insult was obvious.

She tossed back her hair. And boldly ran her hand up Gideon’s chest and back down to his belt. “I like to try new things.”

“Surprised you found anyone down here willing to try anything with you.” The stereotypically red eyes shifted to Gideon. “Buddy, your desperation’s so pathetic the *damned*

are laughing at you for being with her.”

The urge to punch the hideously visible ball sac right off the goat’s body was strong. It’d also keep their visit from being low-key and hopefully unnoticed.

Not to mention that protecting the powerless Evangeline had to be his top priority.

“Gotta taste something at least once to see if it’s any good.” He licked across his top lip. Hopefully in the most lecherous and disgusting gesture of his life. “Especially something so rare.”

“So boring and useless, you mean.”

“Stay here much longer and I’ll assume you want to watch...”

“*I’m* not desperate. I’ve got a nice thing going in rotation with some faun demons.” He puffed his chest and thumped it.

Guess a faun was a step up? Yeah, Gideon really didn’t want to know.

“Then move along,” Evangeline said dismissively.

“*You* move along with your boy toy—this area’s restricted.” He stomped a hoof. Sparks flew off the back of it. “And keep your distance. I don’t want to feel a speck of my power draining, or I’ll make you regret it. Or maybe I’ll hunt you down and make you regret running into me at all. For fun.”

Gideon’s teeth ground together. The demon deserved to be beaten. And he would be. When this was all over? He’d come back to Hell, find it, and make it *regret* being such an ass to Evangeline.

“I’ve got this fine specimen. I don’t want to lose my lust buzz by getting any closer to you.” As she delivered the insult, Evangeline pulled Gideon away.

Fast.

He didn’t object.

Which meant he was a good twenty feet down the glass pathway to the Fallen Angel enclave before Gideon

remembered to be worried about it potentially dissolving him or smiting him or whatever for not having enough angelic blood.

Good. He could focus on yelling at Evangeline. Before her recklessness got them into any more sticky situations.

He kept an arm draped loosely over her shoulder. In case there were eyes on them. Keep it looking sexy and casual. But his tone slapped at her. “Why’d you do that?”

“What?”

“Escalate the situation. Mouth off to that thing. Make it angry for no reason.” How had she survived down here for so long and not have better instincts?

Evangeline slid her hand into his back pocket. Like they were two kids at the movies, instead of off-brand versions of angels traversing a hellscape. “I *had* a reason. To keep us safe. Even powerless little me is expected to show some strength in an argument. Think of Hell as full of...old time mobsters. Lots of posturing. If I’d apologized, he would’ve been suspicious.”

Shit. Bad was good, angry was calming—everything *could* be backward and upside down in this mostly evil sub-world. Gideon sighed. “Hell is weird.”

“Why’d *you* do that?” The slap of angry accusation pierced through her words, too.

“What?”

“Kiss me. For no reason whatsoever? Without any invitation?”

No way was he the bad guy for fucking *protecting* her. Why’d she assume, every damn time, that he had the worst possible motivation? “I had a reason. To keep us safe. You can’t be that dense.”

“I’m not.”

“Then don’t bite my head off for trying to keep *yours* attached to your body.” He tugged at her hair. It’d look playful to anyone watching.

Evangeline would know he *wasn't* playing.

Right now? Where they were? Every interaction balanced on the knife's edge between life and death. He intended for them to stay on the right side of it.

Her fingers twitched in his pocket. "Look, I needed to hear you say it. To know that you weren't taking advantage of the situation. That you weren't just...toying with me."

After a statement like that, Gideon's instinct was to wonder who did her so wrong? But then he remembered where they were. Safe bet that there wasn't a ton of healthy intimacy for her to model after down here.

Guess he had to scale back his anger. Mostly. Not all the way. She'd been living topside for long enough now to have picked up at least a few solid examples.

"I won't be as crude as—what was that thing?"

"His name's Horace."

He laughed. Choked it off immediately. "Really? Like the Roman poet?"

The ends of her ponytail caressed his arm as she nodded. "Yeah. They met, he liked him and took his name."

Gideon's left hand clenched. His fingers up on her shoulder slid beneath the strap of her tank. *Unintentionally*. Surprise made him do it. Appreciation of her silky skin had him lingering as he unclenched. "That goat thing's been around since ancient Rome?" Seemed like Hell was dangerous enough that a demon's lifespan would be short, to say the least.

"You know time is more of a fluid concept in Hell?" Her voice rose at the end in a question. Clearly the woman had little faith in his education. "But yes."

The end of the glass path shimmered into a sort of moat. Across it were houses and buildings made of the same glass. The trees and bushes didn't have the usual foliage. They looked more like they'd been carved from rock candy. Sharp. Faceted. And all their colors were muted in a range between sand and charcoal.

Gideon did a mental check to make sure his wings were tucked away and invisible. They hadn't slipped out in decades. But if this place was full of Fallen and dark angels? He couldn't risk any of them discovering a soldier from the opposite side was in their midst.

The shit Rhys and Xavier would give him for *accidentally* starting an apocalypse would be worse than the end-of-the-world battle.

It annoyed him that Evangeline probably hadn't needed his help dealing with the demon.

Yet again.

It also made admiration for her thrum in his veins. Which was equally annoying.

Still, he had to ensure she was crystal freaking clear on the kiss being purely professional. "So without being like Horace, I can say I do just fine on my own. With women. I don't need to steal a grope in Hell, of all places."

"Okay."

"And for the record? I'd never kiss you—for real—unless you wanted it. When you do? We'll talk. And you'll like it."

"I never said I didn't *like* it." The inference hung in the air between them. While he tried not to think about how much he'd liked kissing her, because getting an erection in Hell was eight kinds of wrong. "By the way, you can call me Eva now."

Was it because of the kiss? Or because he'd attempted to protect her?

With any other woman, Gideon would *know* it was the caliber of his kissing that got him nickname access.

Evangeline, though—*Eva*—was unknowable. Opaque. Different.

But clearly he was getting to her. At least a little.

Now it was getting interesting...

Chapter Six

Like all grown-ups, Eva found it weird being back in her childhood home. Especially after living topside for more than a decade. But in her case, it was extra weird, since the Fallen enclave looked like it had been lifted from ancient Greece. Which was ultra-modern considering when the Fallen had arrived in Hell? Yeah, that whole fluid time thing made generalizations difficult.

Basically Aunt Charmaine's house looked like an actual villa. Marble columns, big interior courtyard—fully of the era, aside from things like bathrooms and power and extra wide rooms to accommodate wings. Still, it made Eva feel like she was in a museum. Cautious and respectful...which was also how she behaved around her uber-powerful aunt.

She'd barely gotten past the obligatory hug when Eva's aunt whipped around, her torso and arms beating her lower half by a solid second. On others, the move would look disjointed. Jerky. On a Fallen Angel frozen in time at an unbearably beautiful thirty-something? It was grace personified.

Charmaine raised her hand. Dramatically. Artfully. How she did everything. "Someone's here."

"Yeah. Me. Your beloved niece."

"Someone else. Outside. Pacing." She moved to the door in a burst of wavery light. By the time Eva finished blinking, the door was open. "Who are you?"

Crap.

Eva had left Gideon outside on purpose. To avoid any possible discussion. Or argument.

Ankles crossed, he leaned against a glass and gilt column. Gideon was beautiful enough there and blended so perfectly with his sun-streaked hair to pass for a living statue of Apollo. "I'm Eva's ride."

"Of all the cursed idiocy—get in here." Charmaine grabbed his arm and flung him inside. With a touch of angelic strength.

It would've put Eva through the wall. Gideon, though, must've used his own wings to counter the force. His boot's heels left black streaks on the floor. He stayed standing, though. Managed to plant himself with a whole two inches to spare before contacting the wall.

This wasn't off to a great start. Eva hadn't figured on her aunt being less than polite to a guest.

In the same voice she'd ordered Charmaine away from the last slice of cheesecake a hundred times (the woman did *not* know how to share), Eva ordered, "Don't manhandle my bodyguard."

"Evangeline, you don't get a vote on whatever this lovely creature wants to do to my body." Gideon smiled. Slowly. Rather like opening the drapes one slow tug at a time and having sunlight flood your face.

Okay. Fine. Aunt Charmaine was one of the original one hundred sixty thousand Fallen Angels. So yes, she was preternaturally beautiful. Hair that was both blonde and iridescent that rippled in beachy waves down to her butt. The same gray eyes as Eva, except the colors around the pupil sparkled and spun like wraiths of smoke and fog. And a body that would make a Vegas showgirl feel inadequate.

One that had *definitely* made younger Eva feel...insufficient in every way.

So she wasn't surprised by Gideon's reaction. Just a little disappointed.

After all, he'd had his tongue in her mouth only ten minutes ago. Shouldn't there be at least a half hour, um, neutral break between her and ogling her relative?

"Gideon, this is my Aunt Charmaine."

The lascivious smile melted off his face. As did the slouchy, sexy pose. "Didn't realize you were Evangeline's family. Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Well.

That was gratifying. At least he hadn't *intentionally* been a

skeevy jerk.

“Never be obvious about not belonging *anywhere* in Hell. Attracting attention down here is never a good idea.” Charmaine narrowed her eyes. Clearly found the elegant, droolworthy man lacking in some key respect. “You’re not qualified to guard my niece. You’re no angel.”

For someone permanently banned from Heaven, she was a bit of a halo snob.

Gideon didn’t so much as blink at her intimidation. “First off, your niece doesn’t think she needs protection most of the time. So I’m qualified in that I’m willing to protect first, and argue with her second.”

With a sly grin, Charmaine nodded at Eva. “He’s a sharp one. Saw past your thorns to give you what you need instead of what you say you want.”

Oh yay. Now the woman who’d raised her was ganging up with the man who hated her.

He held up two long fingers that looked better suited to serenading a woman on the guitar than cold-cocking demons. “Second, I’m qualified. I’m not discussing it. Not throwing down my list of battles won and demons vanquished. We’re in Hell, and that feels rude. Like I might have unknowingly decapitated one of your cronies.”

That squeezed out another sidelong glance to her niece. “Sharp *and* sensitive.”

“Last? I’m no angel.” He spat the word out like it tasted of vinegar and ash. “I’m a *Nephilim*. Which explains my willingness to bother to drag my ass down to this pit of evil and pain and regret.”

Well.

He’d nailed it.

Eva chose not to acknowledge how turned on she was by Gideon’s bold assessment.

Charmaine sat on a gold velvet upholstered chair that bore more than a passing resemblance to a high-backed throne.

Spine erect, she barely touched the armrests. “My darling girl, I had no idea your life would become more interesting by going to the surface. Where did you ever find him?”

See, the long explanation was precisely what Eva was trying to avoid. She’d filled her aunt in on her ability to work the spell finally being in reach. Touched on the “I’m a consultant” fact to make it believable. And had planned to leave before going any deeper.

But...if she’d made this complaint, out loud, to Gideon? She had no doubt he’d shake his head and simply state *It’s Hell*. It was clear he had a Plymouth Rock sized chip on his shoulder about her homeland.

So to her aunt, Eva simply said, “He’s my client.” Then she made a beeline to the plate of macarons that were always out on the gilt sideboard. Looked like today’s were caramel fleur de sel, lavender honey, and matcha.

See? Not everything in Hell was bad.

In fact, with a mouth full of sugar, Eva’s equilibrium was almost completely restored.

“I thought you did something boring with statistics.”

So much for equilibrium. *Why* did Aunt Charmaine always make it sound like Eva was wasting her life as an actuary? Uh, it was a career *outside* of Hell. Which gave it a hundred times more cachet than anything she could do down here.

On the other hand, to a centuries old Fallen Angel? Maybe it was harder to muster up enthusiasm for anything. Was her aunt finally hitting a mid-life crisis?

Grabbing a third macaron to help with her patience, Eva mumbled, “I make life and death calculations. Not so very boring.”

Gideon crossed his arms. “You can be proud of your skill. It’s important to the success of my business. But it *is* beyond boring. That’s just a fact. No different from saying a lemon’s tart. Or that women are complicated, wise, and endlessly entertaining.”

Not so much the backup she'd hoped for. Gideon was clearly not the numbers-oriented partner.

Given his disgustingly impossible-to-ignore charm, he undoubtedly handled sales.

Well, Eva wasn't buying *anything* the man was selling...

"You hired your client to protect you? While you go on this ridiculous quest for spell ingredients and solve a rash of murders?" Charmaine took Eva by the hand. Led her to the white satin pouf and tenderly hooked the hair away from her face with two fingers. "I barely believed it when I read your email. It's still hard to believe looking in your eyes. This doesn't sound like you at all."

True.

And Eva did have trepidations about gallivanting around to pick up her spell ingredients.

As well as serious second thoughts about tracking down a powerful murderer and his, well, demonic henchman.

Sometimes, though? You had to stop inching along, day by day, and take a leap to get your heart's desire. She'd done that by leaving Hell for good. Ditching her un-powers was the next big leap. Then Eva could go back to her original desire—living a calm, boring, *normal* life.

Gideon's wrists twitched. The next moment, two daggers appeared in his hands. He tossed them in the air. They both spun, then crossed and landed in the opposite hands.

Admittedly impressive.

Astonishingly sexy.

Sheathing them again, he said, "I'll keep her safe."

"You'd better." And yes, there was a hint of power pushed through Charmaine's words. A warning. A threat. The power shimmered through the air and made all the hairs on Eva's arms stand up.

Which was sweet, but...it very much took a swipe at Eva's independence...in front of a man who already thought her

incapable of self-care.

“Excuse me.” She strong-armed her aunt to stand a whopping inch outside the zones of intimate and personal space. A little something she’d learned in HR training at her company. A concept no doubt unheard of in Hell. “I have kept myself safe for a decade living amongst humans.”

“Yes, but now you’re inserting yourself back into *this* world. This *dangerous* world.” Charmaine floated forward to stab a long finger savagely into the pouf. Which really diminished the effect she was going for. Nothing looked dangerous in this elegant and luxurious mansion.

Eva knew the excessive caution all came from a place of love. And that her aunt would prefer her to stay in her childhood bedroom and simply exist in boring safety and never go anywhere.

Which was simply not going to happen.

“I love you, but I didn’t come here to argue. I came to apologize for missing our scheduled visit—”

Gideon stepped forward. “No. Let me.” Dramatically, he swept down onto one knee. “I’m the one who detained your niece. Without her permission. I’m wholly to blame.”

Charmaine arched an eyebrow. “You might want to temper your words. The underworld is not the safest place to admit to blame. Punishment usually swiftly ensues.”

What was she doing? The woman wasn’t a torturer. She hadn’t delivered any punishment in Hell since falling—except to Eva, when she stayed up past her bedtime.

“Doesn’t matter. The blame *is* mine. I won’t lie. My action, my consequence.”

The satin of her toga-esque gown rustled as she shifted to lean closer to Eva. While keeping her eyes locked on Gideon. “That’s extraordinarily refreshing.” And she sort of purred the words, deep in her throat.

Great.

Now her aunt was crushing on the responsible good guy. To

be fair, Charmaine didn't run across many of those down here.

"The point is that I simply stopped by to explain. I can't stay. I have to ask, though, do you know why the angelic guards are missing at the fork to the prison quadrant?"

Charmaine straightened as if someone had tied her to a stake. "We don't joke about the angelic guards."

"I know. That's why I'm asking."

"Has there ever been a time, in your memory, when the guards weren't there?" Gideon asked. His tone was casual. His hand was on the macarons. But his gaze was as sharp as the Webb telescope.

"I'm not sure if my dear niece has told you who I am."

"She said that you raised her. That you're very important to her. That's enough for me."

"I am a Fallen."

Gideon froze, cookie at his lips. Slowly, he lowered it. Those tawny eyes rounded a minuscule bit.

Not that Eva was staring at him or anything. But she already *knew* her aunt's lineage. No need to look at Charmaine.

"You're a Fallen Angel?" His voice was low. Hoarse. Tentative, like he didn't believe what he was saying.

"Yes. I'm not bragging. I am not proud of it in any way. But I mention it so you know that my memory encapsulates *all* of Hell. In that time, never once has that post been without a pair of angelic guards."

To Gideon's credit, he recovered quickly. It was almost possible to hear him switching gears, back into work mode after jaw-dropping over a legend. "Then I'd call that dire."

"Indeed."

"Have you heard anything that could help us?" Eva asked. Charmaine appeared off-balance enough to freely spill any possible tea. "Gideon's who I'm consulting with. If there are whispers about a demon working for an angel, we need to know. No matter how vague or unsubstantiated."

“There are always rumors. About everyone and everything.” She turned to Gideon. “Do you realize how many dukes and legions there are in Hell?”

“No. I’d love to, though. Knowing precisely what we’re up against would be helpful.”

“Nice try. The point is, rumors swirl. Demons scheme. Fallen Angels plot. Lucifer does...well, he mostly watches, but when he does get involved, watch out.”

Eva knew all this to be true. That it would be like searching for a...single drop of water in all of Niagara Falls. They had to start somewhere, though. And her aunt heard *everything*. Knew everyone important...as well as the technically less important who had the actual dirt.

“We need an actual clue. Just one.” Desperation had Eva continuing. “A thread to follow, to tug on. A name. A description.”

“I’m not being obtuse. I could think of two dozen possibilities without trying. Two dozen more in the blink of an eye. Coming up with something real and worth chasing? That will take time. To sift through the braggadocio and wishful thinking.”

Gideon had his stoic, serious, warrior face on. “The more time we take? The more likely there will be another murder.”

“I suppose I can skip my set tonight.”

“Set of what?”

“I’m a chanteuse. I sing.” She brought the tips of her fingers to her lips. “You *Nephilim* have the gift of angel song, do you not?”

“Yes. To a lesser degree, but yes.”

“I would be interested in singing with you. It would be a new experience. I do not have many of those anymore.” There was a hollow sadness in her words.

Living forever while being denied true happiness—even with free-flowing macarons and decadent clothes and every creature comfort—was truly the cruelest punishment. Eva had

wondered if her aunt would rather end it all. If any of the Fallen felt that way.

But they weren't big into sharing deep feelings with a young, powerless girl.

"I'd be honored to sing with you. Another time. Perhaps my brothers-in-arms could join as well."

Charmaine's typical flirtatiousness sparkled her right back up. "More gorgeous *Nephilim*? It will be quite the party."

Eva needed to move the conversation along to the biggest reason for this jaunt back home. "First, I'd like you to make good on your promise."

"I've made so many, dear girl. You'll have to narrow it down. Do you finally want to experience an incubus? You'll nullify his potent power, but the raw talent alone is worth it."

Really? The first thing that came to mind was hooking her up with a sex demon? "No. Consider that to be my answer for time and all eternity."

It wasn't safe to let her keep guessing. Not with Gideon grinning as he leaned against the doorway. The man slouched—leaned—propped himself on any available hard surface. It triggered a primal need to curl against him.

"This is fun. Do I get a guess?"

"No!" This conversation was *anything* but fun for Eva. She stood, and took her aunt's hand. "You promised me your blood. For my spell. I need the blood of a full angel. Fallen or not, yours will do the trick." She slipped a vial from her front pocket.

"How about I wait until you've gathered everything else? Then you can come back, ask again, and I'll get one more chance to talk you out of this foolish thing."

"Aunt Charmaine. My mind's made up. My useless power only puts me at risk. It would mean a lot to start ingredient gathering with you."

A storm swirled in her eyes. Streaks of actual lightning flickered across her pupils. "Fine. Fetch me a knife."

“Would you allow me to assist?”

“I think it would hurt much less if you did.”

Gideon beckoned to Eva. Then he flared one stunning tawny wing. “Pluck a feather.”

“What? No.”

“The end is sharp, like a thorn. It’ll cut her safely.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I fight demons, Evangeline. For a living. I can withstand a sharp tug. Administered by the gentle hands of a beautiful woman.”

She was oddly reluctant to cause him any pain. “Then have my aunt do it.”

“No. You need to participate. To make the gathering of each ingredient more powerful.” He waggled the bottom tip, where it would drag on the floor if his control wasn’t so good. “From down there.”

Eva couldn’t resist. She brushed a hand across the velvety softness. First the backs of her knuckles, then her palm. The scrape of the feathers on her skin sent tiny shocks of heat up through her arm.

After swallowing hard against the unexpected pleasure, she plucked a feather. Gideon wrapped his hand around hers, directing the angle and depth of the fast puncture.

Thick silvery-gold ichor pooled like mercury in the bottom of her vial. Gideon pressed his finger to Charmaine’s wound and it closed to a thin pink line.

Eva immediately grabbed her aunt’s arm to give it a closer inspection. *Nephilim* couldn’t heal...could they? “How did you do that?”

Gideon shrugged. And wrinkled his nose in an aw-shucks vibe. Guess he didn’t want to brag in front of an angel? “We can channel the elements. I surged heat through it.”

“Indeed you did.” Charmaine touched the scar, then gave a full-body shimmy. “That was delightful.”

It had been a *lifetime* of watching her aunt flirt with, well, everyone. Including the most disgusting of demons. As a child it had embarrassed Eva to no end. Since Charmaine was the closest thing she had to a mother. And it still embarrassed her. Stupid? Yes. But there it was.

“Please, I’m begging you, stop flirting with my bodyguard.”

“You’ll be gone soon enough that it shouldn’t matter,” she snapped out.

Ouch. Familial guilt. Even angels weren’t above wielding it.

“We should leave now. It was a long walk here.”

“That’s why you went past—” Charmaine shook her head. “You flew here through the Falls of Despair?”

“Yes. It’s the only waterfall portal, aside from the one the Keepers utilize.”

“No. It’s the only one *you* know about. The Fallen have their own. I’ll walk you to it.”

“I don’t want to get you into any trouble.”

“I’m a Fallen Angel. Kicked out of Heaven. Living in Hell. What worse trouble could you possibly put me in?”

There was that tinge of heartbreaking sadness. Charmaine used to hide it from Eva. Guess it proved her aunt saw her as a mature adult now that she no longer hid the toll the centuries took on her.

She worried over that on the short walk. The walk to a waterfall she’d never before seen. It wasn’t very high, but the thin stream of charcoal water fell into a pool surrounded by a grove of trees with heart shaped, deep purple leaves.

Except, as they approached, the nearest tree lost what she’d assumed to be leaves as thousands of butterflies took flight. “Why didn’t you tell me this was here?”

“You didn’t need to know. There is much of Hell I shielded you from, darling girl. Just as I wish I could shield you from all the bad things in the world above.”

Gideon knelt to fill another vial with water from the pool.

“Is this from the Styx? It’s a different color. It’ll be fun to tinker with it in our lab and see if it’s got any properties we could use for protection. Like a live virus vaccine—use Hell itself against its demons.”

His inquisitive mind intrigued Eva. “If that’s true, I wonder if you could use *my* blood for the same purpose.”

The look he gave her from beneath heavy-lidded bedroom eyes positively *smoldered*. “You want a little zap of heat from me? You don’t have to give up blood. You just have to ask. Nicely.”

Incorrigible playboy. They didn’t even like each other. Much. Why would he bother to use a line like that on her?

Eva turned her back on him without responding—and saw a tall figure in a hooded robe behind the nearest tree. Which looked very out of place here. The Fallen preferred to dress in style. The style, of course, ranged through all the eons they’d lived, but, as a whole, they were flashy, sometimes elegant, oftentimes over-the-top.

“Who’s that?” she asked her aunt.

The figure unsheathed an enormous sword.

Oh no.

“I am your end,” he intoned deeply. Slowly. In stark contrast to how he leaped up and flew at the two women.

Ohnoohnoohno.

This sort of thing did *not* occur in the Fallen Angel enclave. There was an unspoken “no violence” policy. Since they were merely denizens of Hell, and not actually evil. Lucifer made it known that they were not to be drawn into any of Hell’s politicking and battles—unless they chose to wade in, usually out of boredom.

Eva tamped down her initial panic.

She had this.

She stepped in front of Charmaine—who, for a powerful angel—stood surprisingly frozen with her eyes wide with fear

—and reached out *for* the attacker.

As expected, her move threw him. Nobody leaned into an attack. It stopped him just long enough for her to grab his arm. Nullify his powers. The inevitable shame would send him skulking away.

But...her plan didn't work.

As she touched the rough wool of his robe? His big-ass sword turned into a freaking *flaming* sword.

What? Was? Happening?

How was she unable to nullify his power?

Right as panic kicked back in, Gideon appeared next to her. The *Nephilim* delivered a strong kick to the center of his chest.

This time, Eva was thrilled to be rescued.

As the man staggered backward, though, the edge of his flaming sword slashed downward to cut Eva's bare shoulder.

Cut and burned.

A tiny scream burst out of her throat. That kicked Charmaine into action. She thrust Eva behind her and flared her wings wide as a wall of protection. So she couldn't see what transpired between Gideon and the figure.

She knew that for all the weapons he'd strapped onto himself, he certainly didn't have anything to compete with a flaming sword. The whole notion of him accompanying her to Hell was that she'd keep *him* safe with her nullifying power.

This was bad.

As bad as the pain searing her arm. Eva risked a glance down as fleshy smacks and grunts sounded through the grove. There wasn't much blood—ah, due to the flame probably cauterizing as it cut—but a blistered area was red and raw.

It hurt so much that she was woozy. Abruptly, Eva sat on the ground. Wasn't like she needed to stay upright for the fight. Her one trick was useless. She cradled her arm to her chest and tried to breathe. Tried not to fall over onto her side as the hot pain pulsed through now her entire body in nauseating waves.

A wet, dull noise made her assume something pointy had penetrated deep and hard into flesh. *Whose*, though?

A guttural moan followed. Off to the side, flames licking along the sword sputtered out as it fell into the pool. Then the robed figure shot through the air to the waterfall with deep green wings before winking out of sight.

“Oh, well done, dear boy!” Charmaine clapped.

Guess that meant Gideon hadn’t just won the battle, but was mostly in one piece? Yay?

Holy shards of sulphurweed, she felt like she was dying. The world was diminishing to a fuzzy black dot. Her throat was too dry to allow sound to pass. Eva reached to tug on her aunt’s wing. It was maybe three inches away, but she couldn’t manage it.

“Evangeline couldn’t stop his sword from flaming. That wasn’t a demon. Or a Fallen. That was an *angel*. What the hell’s going on?”

“It makes no sense, but your logic is correct.” Charmaine’s voice sounded tight, choked out by fear. “I can sense a true angel. He was one.”

“So why’s an angel roaming fucking Hell? Let alone attacking the two of you?” Footsteps shuffled around. “Where is Eva? Is she hurt?”

Yes.

But her last thought before blacking out was that it hurt less once Gideon picked her up and cradled her in his arms...

Chapter Seven

Gideon let go of Charmaine's hand right as they breached the entrance to the Watchtower. That left her on the edge of the precipice, while he continued to fly in and lay Evangeline on the lab worktable.

"Guys! Emergency!" he bellowed. They might not still be around. But he'd at least give them the courtesy of a heads-up before allowing Charmaine into the Watchtower.

The first thing he did was push cold into her skin. Yeah, the burn was obvious. But her entire body felt like a towel he'd just plucked out of the dryer.

"She's poisoned. What would it be?" he yelled over his shoulder.

"Let me in. I'll help," Charmaine offered.

"Not yet. Protocol. What would an angel coat his flaming sword with before fighting demons?"

"I...it's been so long...I don't know."

Gideon's mind raced. Without knowing, he might accidentally make it worse with the wrong treatment.

Waiting for Charmaine to have a bright idea wasn't an option, though. Evangeline had been panting when he first picked her up. Now her chest barely moved. Her eyes were shut. He channeled more coolness from the air and carefully pushed it through her entire body.

"What's the matter?" Xavier entered at a run, but stopped dead at seeing Eva. "I don't see any blood. Poison?"

"Yeah. Angelic. Got any ideas?"

Zavier took Eva's hand. Winced at its unnatural heat. "Too many. Or not enough. Gotta go big."

"We don't have much of it." Gideon had, of course, thought the same as Z. They had a healing potion. Extremely strong. So strong that if you weren't at death's door, it'd kill you.

Water from Terme di Saturnia in Italy. Legend said the natural pools were formed from Jupiter throwing lightning bolts at Saturn.

Half right.

It was angels who'd fought. Michael and Lucifer. Their lightning bolts had formed the pools and infused the spring with angelic power.

The healing potion was juiced up with angel tears. Obviously hard to come by. Master Caraxis gave them each one vial per year. No more, no matter what happened.

“And it's only June,” Xavier cautioned. “You use your vial now, you're SOL the rest of the year if you get a bad injury. Stuck with my shitty sewing skills to piece you back together.”

Gideon shot a look at Charmaine. “You sure you don't have any idea what we could treat her with?”

Wringing her hands, her wings fluttered at the very edges, the fidgety motion revealing her distress. “I'm sorry. I've spent centuries in Hell.” Xavier's dark eyebrows shot to his hairline at that. “There's been no need to heal—or to poison. I'd do anything to save Eva. I just don't have the knowledge anymore. Some things...didn't survive the Fall.”

Zavier jerked his head at Charmaine, locked out at the forcefield. “Who's that? Why's she here? Why's she locked out?”

Uh, how about none of that mattered with a dying woman spread out before them?

“Later. Get me that *fulgur lacrimae* potion.” Gideon kept his hands, one on her burn and the other over her heart, pulsing cooling through Evangeline's body. But it wasn't enough. Respiration was thready. Pulse as slow as a vampire's.

Damn it, why had she been so brave? A flaming sword was still a freaking *sword*. Evangeline could've called out, gotten his attention sooner. Instead of needlessly attempting to save her aunt.

The one with the least power of the three of them, stepping

forward to defend all of them. It was stupid.

It was *valiant*. Selfless.

As he rummaged through the cabinets, Xavier asked, “You wanna run this by Rhys?”

“It’s my potion. He doesn’t get a say.” It’d shut Z’s logical question down.

Gideon was also the potion master among the three of them. If he didn’t know what else to try—besides *everything*, which they had no time for—Rhys wouldn’t have any better ideas.

A single push of his wings got him up on the table. Gideon pulled Evangeline up, supporting her limp body against his chest. In the few seconds it took to position her? Heat already poured back through her, spreading through his shirt and pants.

Gently, he brushed open her mouth with his thumb. Xavier handed him the filled dropper.

“C’mon, Eva. Fight for yourself. Then you can get back to fighting with me. I know you love it.” He dripped in the scant three drops of clear potion.

On a whim, Gideon pressed his lips to hers for good measure.

For luck.

For reassurance. For the crazy thought that if she was about to die, he didn’t want her last thought to be only of pain.

That was where he first felt the shift. As he kissed her.

The poisonous heat pumping off of her completely stopped. Evangeline took a long, shuddering breath. Identical to those Gideon had witnessed as so many *last* breaths in the nearly dead.

Was the potion too powerful?

Shit. Would it backfire on a dark angel? What had he done?

Then a spasm contorted her body. Almost twisted her out of his grip. Xavier grabbed to hold her down. And *then*...she

normalized. Breathing. Heart rate. Relaxation of her body matching that of sleep, rather than deeply unconscious limpness.

Swallowing hard, Gideon muttered, “Looks like it worked.”

“Agreed.” Z let go with an awkward pat on her wrist. And raised an eyebrow at Gideon that threatened he’d ask about the kiss later.

Okay. *Okay*. He ran the backs of his knuckles down her pale cheek with just a hint of normal color. “Now we let her sleep off all the trauma and hopefully wake up completely healed in a few hours.”

A snick of steel unlocking and sliding out of a sheath whipped both their heads around. Rhys had a sword leveled at Charmaine’s throat.

Oh, *hell*.

Talk about overkill.

Nothing could get through the Watchtower’s forcefield unless they released it. And yet Rhys couldn’t start with a basic “hello?”

“Before you start jabbing the stranger, I think she’s Gideon’s guest.” Zavier strolled over to join Rhys. He juggled the *three* knives that had flashed into his hands as he walked.

Gideon lay Eva back down. Used angelic speed to grab a blanket from the chest by the fireplace and drape it over her. Tucked it in tightly for good measure. Everyone could just wait until she was settled.

Rhys’s sword didn’t lower even an inch. “We don’t allow guests at the Watchtower.”

Z snorted. Tucked his knives back away. “Yeah, that rule’s pretty much gone to shit recently.”

“True.” Nice of Z to point it out. Gideon hooked a thumb toward Rhys. “And Rhys was the first to violate it, with Maisy and Liss. So chill and let me explain.”

Charmaine flapped her wings. The pleated skirt of her toga-

gown swirled in the updraft from the Falls. “Could you let me in? I’d like to check on my niece.”

“Not yet,” Rhys growled.

Explanation done. Enough for now, anyway. Gideon waved an arm at her. “There you go. She’s Evangeline’s aunt. Nice lady.”

Z’s knives flashed back into his hands. He stalked right up to the edge of the forcefield. Stared at her. Then turned back around to squint suspiciously at Gideon. “I thought her aunt lived in Hell.”

“Well, yeah.” Shit. They were going to make this complicated. When it was just a worried family member trying to check on her sick niece.

“You brought a creature of Hell into the Watchtower?” Z’s bark of a laugh was dark. Foreboding. He wasn’t the by-the-book type like Rhys. But he wasn’t taking this with a wink and a nod, either. “You’re kidding, right?”

They’d calm down in a minute. Once he explained the rest of the way. “Mostly? Because, well, she’s not a creature of—”

“I’m a Fallen,” Charmaine added. Semi-helpfully. *Aka* now the fact was out there. Dropped like a bellyflop of truth. Painful. Spraying consequences everywhere.

Rhys sheathed his sword. His other hand shot out and grabbed Gideon’s shirt at the neck. “She’s a Fallen freaking Angel? Evangeline did *not* mention that.”

“No, she did not.” Couldn’t argue about that until she woke up, though. Man, he was looking forward to arguing with her again.

Through gritted teeth, Rhys ground out, “We can’t harbor a Fallen Angel in the Watchtower.”

“Why not?”

“Because it stands—with *Nephilim* guarding it—for the angels. Not as an annex of Hell. How do you think Master Caraxis would feel if he knew we let a traitor in? He could kick us out of the Watchtower.”

Charmaine—unwisely—flapped her wings. As if they weren't paying attention to her otherwise. "You report to Caraxis? He was always fair. But a stickler for rules."

Before Rhys lunged his sword at her, Gideon knew he had to defuse her comment. "No offense, but I'm guessing anyone who is still a full-fledged angel feels like a stickler to you."

"There's no need to be snide. A single choice shouldn't define you."

"And yet it does. You're banned from Heaven." Rhys drew his hand across his throat in a sharp gesture. "Forever. Because of that one choice."

"I don't see *you* three flitting in and out of the Pearly Gates. You're banned, too."

"Ignorance is bliss." Xavier bared his teeth. "We don't care about going there now. You do."

"Look, can we stop debating entry and reentry to Heaven? That's not the issue. Yes, Charmaine was banished to Hell, but she's allowed to come to Earth." Maybe? Wasn't anywhere that *wasn't* Heaven fair game? "We're not breaking any rules." Again...maybe? "She's not evil."

That he was certain of.

Mostly.

"Why did you bring her here?" Rhys asked.

That part was simple. "Everything happened so fast. This robed and hooded guy attacked out of nowhere. No provocation."

Zavier crossed his arms over his black tee with a pitying look. "Uh, it's Hell? Don't they attack just because it's a Saturday?"

His friends were assholes.

Gideon trusted them with his life. They were his brothers in every way that mattered, DNA notwithstanding. They were his best friends.

They also never passed up the opportunity to give him a

hard time. Which was fair. He did the same to them. Brothers, right?

But with an angel hanging out on the front step, now wasn't the time to joke around.

So he ignored Z being a smart-ass. "By the time I realized it was happening, Evangeline was injured. I fought the guy. Got in some good licks. So he turned tail and ran. Well, *flew*. He escaped through the waterfall."

Rhys startled at that significant fact, stretching his neck forward like a turtle. "You should've led with that part of the story."

Interesting, sure. Pertinent to their investigation, sure. But... "That's not why I brought Charmaine here. You didn't see her, Rhys, but Eva was *dying*. I had to get her out of there. No way to tell which woman the attack was on. So I couldn't leave Charmaine unprotected. I grabbed and flew."

"With no thought for our safety." Rhys hammered home his tired, redundant, worthless point.

Gideon started stripping off his weapons. "Don't bullshit me. Eva's been here before. As a former angel, Charmaine's aware of the Watchtowers. No big secret reveal there. And we haven't let her in yet, so there were no unwritten protocols breached."

"I don't like it." Rhys walked toward the table. Frowned down at the unconscious woman and tucked the bottom of the blanket against her legs. "Sorry. I didn't realize Eva was down for the count. Will she be all right?"

"Think so." He'd skip mentioning the poison, since Rhys was already in a shitty mood. They could debrief on that later. Maybe after dinner and a few beers to get the security-obsessed stick out of his ass. "She got sliced and burned by a flaming sword."

"That's an angelic calling card if ever there was one."

"Yeah. Proven by the fact that her nullifying power didn't work. It wasn't a demon with wings. Definitely someone who plays for *our* team."

Rhys stretched his hands to rub both temples. “Well, shit.”

“Description?” Z asked with an uncharacteristically hopeful uptick in his voice.

“Not a useful one. Robe. Hood.”

“Like Torquemada from the Spanish Inquisition.” Charmaine, again, interrupting at the worst time with useless info. The woman was beautiful and sultry beyond measure, but maybe not great at reading the room.

Rhys stalked to the invisible barrier. Braced his fingertips along the ceiling. Gideon didn’t have to see his face to know his friend was doing the intimidating glare thing at the sublimely beautiful angel who outranked them by an immeasurable percentage.

“I hope you’re talking about the Mel Brooks character from the movie. I can’t handle you telling us that you play poker with an infamous torturer.”

“I would *never*.” Charmaine’s tone held enough outrage that Rhys did take a step back.

Not Z, though. No, his fearless friend took pride in leaning into a threatening situation. Always fun to watch. Less fun when Z drafted him to ride along...

He stayed where he was. But the arrow of his pointed words had an obvious trajectory. “Because you don’t consort with historical torturers? Or because he fleeced you one too many times and you’re still sore about it?”

“There are soulless creatures in Hell who are not inherently evil. I’ve made friends with some, over my long exile. But I am the same angel I have been since creation. A being of good and light.”

And holy fuck, if her halo didn’t pop into sight and begin to glow.

C’mon. How could anyone say no to a halo?

Gideon jerked his head to indicate the guys should follow him into the training area. He didn’t want to allow the Fallen to overhear any more insults.

“Look, we already have Evangeline set up to stay at Maisy’s house. We’ll just put Charmaine there, too. There’s room. It isn’t a sacred angelic building. But it is protected. Simple solution.”

Zavier bumped his shoulder against the heavy bag. “The simple solution would be returning her to Hell.”

It would. And it wouldn’t. Gideon stared him down. “Do you want the death of an *angel* on your hands? Even a Fallen?”

“Damn it. No. Shit.” Rhys punched the speed bag. Hard enough it tore from the chain and flew into the corner.

That happened at least twice a week.

“We can’t be divided on this. Hiding a Fallen’s a big deal. Keeping her safe will keep Evangeline willing to help us. Which comes back around to Caraxis asking us to solve this murder for him. He can’t object to *how* we do it, so long as we do it.”

“The stakes are too high to dick around.” Zavier clasped Gideon’s hand, then put another on his forearm as they shook. “We’ll do it.”

There.

He’d foiled an assassin.

Saved Eva’s life.

Convinced his friends to fall in line with the seat-of-his-pants plan.

Saved an angel.

Obviously, something spectacularly dangerous and/or fucked up was about to slam into his day...

...

It was weird. Disconcerting. Feeling...fine after almost dying a few hours before.

Eva remembered every second of pain and fear that lasted until she blacked out. There’d be nightmares about it, no

doubt.

But aside from a little pull along her arm muscle, she felt herself. Well, a version of herself spewing gratitude like Tinkerbell sprinkled pixie dust. She wasn't sure how she'd ever repay Gideon for saving her life. Or his friends, for allowing her aunt to also stay with Maisy.

What did you give half-angelic soldiers as a thank-you present?

She'd seen the balance sheets on their company. Metafora provided them with a solid profit margin. The jobs they took as supernatural mercenaries probably paid exponentially better.

So she fell back on the one gift that everyone enjoyed. Eva was cooking a *feast*. It'd just be easier without a certain man watching her. Intently.

And Eva had no idea why.

Without looking up from slicing the red and green bell peppers, she asked, "I'm not in trouble for having Instacart deliver here, am I?"

"No. Who has time to shop? Why?"

"Because you're hovering. Not literally. But you are standing about taking up a considerable amount of space in this kitchen." In a considerably distracting way. In the hours between being unconscious and transported back to Maisy's house, he'd showered. Changed.

That golden artful tousle of hair was just as sexy as when sweat beaded along the nape of his neck in Hell. Rugged, ever-ready warrior looked as good on Gideon as suave seducer did. His pale lemon polo revealed a hint of curling chest hair at the open neck. The perfect tan warmed his legs in khaki shorts. Could he be a GQ model? No. Because its pages were full of barely grown boys, and Gideon Durand was *all* man.

"I'm helping," he offered.

"Really? I don't see you holding a knife. Washing romaine. If this is your definition of help? Then I'm going to have a

super simple time with the ‘help’ I officially promised to give you.”

“I’m here *to* help,” he clarified.

“How would I know that? Standing stock-still? You also look like you’re here to...be a pallbearer. Or wait for a wasp to stop zooming at you.”

“I’m not scared of wasps.”

“Good.” She darted her gaze to the ceiling. “Since I just saw one up in the light fixture.”

Gideon lurched off the doorway. Headed straight for the row of pendant lights over the island. With a push from his wings, even. Her soft giggle brought him right back down to earth.

Landing next to her, he said, “You were *testing* me?”

“Maybe.” You betcha. And now she knew the big bad soldier didn’t like bug bites. It made Gideon a bit more human. Hmm. Poor reference for a half-human. A bit less larger-than-life. More relatable. “Maybe I just wanted to see if you were hermetically sealed to that doorjamb.”

“First of all, I reacted with haste to protect you. After the day you’ve had, you don’t need it capped by a sting.”

Maybe. But would he really be in such a defensive huff if that were true? Eva still didn’t have a bead on Gideon. The real, down-deep Gideon, and not the cocky player he presented to the world.

Safer to assume the worst. She’d learned that from a very young age.

“Very self-sacrificing of you.”

“I’m serious.” He came closer. So close she had to pause her knife work. He pushed her hair back from her neck. Then slowly glided his knuckles along her pulse point. “It would be a shame to see a welt on this beautiful skin.”

Chills raced up into her skull.

Down...considerably lower. Chills that morphed into a rush of heat. Not like the punishing heat that had suffocated her

hours earlier. No, this was like the toasty brown crackle on a melting marshmallow.

Eva had *never* likened herself to a marshmallow before.

“I appreciate you being willing to leap into action to protect me twice in one day. And I can’t ask you to help when I’m making this dinner to thank you for doing so.”

To her relief—mostly—Gideon stepped back. “I had every intention of helping. I like to cook. Our lifestyle’s not conducive to subsisting on takeout. You come home from a mission at three a.m., you want a good meal.”

“I feel that way.” Eva moved over to brown the Italian sausage. “Not with the battle scenario, of course. But I like to be cozy. Wallow in the comfort of my home. Having a delicious dinner is part of that.”

“That explains it. Why I couldn’t stop watching you.”

Was this another line? Something automatic he’d spouted dozens of times? Or was he truly revealing something he’d noticed about *her*, Eva?

The latter seemed unlikely. “Is that because you can’t resist staring at anyone with breasts?”

“Sometimes.” She could all but hear the unapologetic smirk in his tone. “Not this time. I forgot to offer to help because I was enthralled with watching you.”

Riiiiight. “Because I’m a thrill-a-minute chef who deserves her own show?” Eva waved the spatula. Rather wishing she could twirl it like a hibachi chef...

“The opposite. Because you’re so...peaceful as you cook. Meditative.”

Hmm. That didn’t carry the faintest whiff of being a well-used line. It certainly wasn’t a sexy compliment.

It worked on Eva, though. “I do get in a zone.”

“Me too.” To her surprise—dismay?—Gideon moved away from her. Back over to the island where he grabbed a fresh cutting board. “Watching you do it’s better, though. It’s not

just soothing. It's...*compelling* to someone who's been a warrior for sixty-plus years."

Interesting. "So your home is your, what, sanctuary?"

"I guess." He poured the strawberries from the colander and began slicing with a precision and speed that proved he had skills. "We have a normal home, in Buffalo, and the Watchtower. The important thing is that when I'm in them, I'm safe. I can let down my guard. Almost the only places in the entire world where I can do that. So yeah, a peaceful home's important."

"Says the man with an entire wall of weapons."

"We have a non-arsenal library. Standard man-cave with a massive TV, too. The weapons aren't everywhere." When Eva blandly, wordlessly continued to stare, he shrugged. "Okay, yeah, they're in every room. But they're *hidden* in most of 'em."

"So the big bad mercenary just wants a home? With cozy blankets?" Wasn't that a surprise?

"And a kick-ass sound system. Egyptian cotton sheets. You risk your life every day? There'd better be something worth coming home *to*."

How were they so similar on this? Maybe—no, definitely—it was growing up in Hell, but Eva wallowed in the joy of returning to her peaceful home every day. Not just the pale blue accent walls and squishy sofa. But knowing, just like Gideon, that it was the place she could stop pretending. Stop being so alert against any possible attack. Her sanctuary.

And, apparently, *his*.

Then Eva remembered his mention of fighting for twice her lifetime. Gideon wore the years well. Very, very well. The late afternoon light burnished the hair on his forearms as he oh-so-competently dispatched the berries. It made Eva want to rub her cheek along that forearm.

Why was it so easy to want things that were bad for you? Butter. Doritos. An older man with a dangerous life who'd discard her like a gum wrapper...

“How old *are* you?”

“Eighty-seven. And you?”

“Oh, I’m exactly as old as I look. A newbie in this world of ours. I’m thirty-one.” Age was rather meaningless when raised by an ancient, immortal being.

“Ha! I can make you do things.” Gideon swiped the berries off the cutting board and started on the rhubarb. Then he gave her what could only be characterized as a lascivious eyebrow waggle. “As your elder.”

The waggle’s potency was lost on Eva. Mostly. Because he’d poked at a very tender spot. “No. You may be teasing, but I’m deadly serious. I won’t let anyone tell me what to do. I escaped Hell to make sure that was the case.”

“I *was* only teasing.” He dropped the knife. Crossed to loom over her. “Would that have been more obvious if I’d done this?” Slowly, he tugged at the bottom of her loose hair, still damp from the shower. “More convincing if you had a ponytail in, but the intent’s there.”

“It’s possible I overreacted. There are plenty of demons out there who’d like to enslave me. Plenty of dark angels who want to keep me as a pet to sic on misbehaving demons. I make my own choices.”

“As you should. Autonomy’s important. That’s a big part of why we left the Order.” Gideon turned off the stove. Took her by her shoulders. “There are only two reasons I’d ever try to tell you what to do. The first, given our current situation, would be to save your life. If we’re being chased, I’m fighting off God knows what, and I tell you to run or move, then you do it, Eva. I swear I won’t abuse it.”

“That’s fair.” She tilted her head up and to the side. He was just so tall and so very much in her space. Filling her vision. Taking up far too much oxygen—or was she forgetting to breathe? “What’s the second reason?”

His grip on her shoulders softened. His palms curled around, then stroked down her biceps slowly. “When we’re in bed. If I give you a command then? I promise you’ll want to do it.”

What?!?!?

“You’re making an awfully big assumption off one little pretend kiss.”

His grip tightened again, momentarily. Then Gideon let go entirely. But he didn’t step back. And his jaw clenched as his eyes darkened to the color of her favorite chocolate mint tea. “You don’t want me to give you orders? Well, I don’t want you to lie to me. That kiss started off one way, but it damn well ended as real as any I’ve ever had. Don’t deny it.”

“Fine. That doesn’t mean I want to sleep with you.”

Was it hurt that darkened his tone? Or heat? “You sure about that, Evangeline?”

No. Not at all.

If he respected the line she’d drawn in the sand, the least Eva could do was respect his. “Allow me to restate. I don’t want the *complication* of sleeping with you. All I want is to finish this mission and go back to my quiet, ordered, stable life.”

The hard lines bracketing Gideon’s mouth softened. Guess he recognized that she’d amended to the full truth.

Eva dumped the peppers and onions in with the sausage. She was eager to put it all together with the ziti and mozzarella and start baking. At least then she’d have the oven’s heat as an excuse for the flush in her cheeks.

But when she started to turn the burner back on, Gideon’s hand covered hers. “Or...you could live a little, first. Have some noisy, disordered fun.”

That was entirely antithetical to her carefully crafted life. Plus, the search for a paranormal serial killer felt like enough unwanted excitement. Not to mention the danger factor, which she’d also turned herself inside out trying to avoid for the decade since leaving Hell.

Still...Eva was supremely aware of the muscled thighs pressing against her butt. Of the warmth of his skin covering her hand and forearm. Of the hitch in her breath at his

nearness. Not to mention how...*open* they'd been with each other in this conversation, which was a turn-on all by itself.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Look, things have escalated an insane amount in the last three days. I'm forced to trust you now, even though I'm not entirely sure that I do.”

It was convoluted. It was also a wholly correct summation. “Ditto.”

“You're using us to get your spell ingredients, even if you're upfront about it. Stop putting up walls and throwing blame grenades and *really* use me. Kiss me. Again.”

Temptation and anticipation swirled in the air as heavy as the scent of fennel and garlic. “Why should I?”

“It's fun.” Gideon dragged his knuckles across her nape, moving her hair out of the way. Goose bumps shadowed his touch. “It feels good.” His lips whispered along the path cleared by his hand. Her goose bumps multiplied. “And we could all die tomorrow.”

He'd found her weakness again.

Logic. No statistician could ignore such impeccable logic.

So the only logical response? Was to, indeed, kiss the man. Eva barely turned halfway around.

It was clearly enough for Gideon to figure out that she'd agreed. Capitulated. Whatever.

His strong arm encircled her waist, turning her the rest of the way to put her flush against his chest. His other hand tunneled up into the hair at the base of her skull. And his wings lifted them off the ground so gently that at first she'd thought it was the skill of his lips that caused the floating sensation.

This time, Eva was greedy. She *writhed* against all his hardness. Her legs tangled with his. Now that they were in the air, Gideon was able to notch himself directly into the juncture at her thighs that pulsed with every twist and swipe of his tongue.

But surprise/chagrin/utter disbelief had made their first kiss too one-sided. Eva was determined that wouldn't happen again.

No, if Gideon truly wanted her—despite the vast array of other women he'd no doubt worked through—then she intended to make him *really* want her. “Fun” wasn't good enough. Not by a long shot, for the risk they were taking.

So she bit his lower lip. Drew her teeth slowly along the fleshy part until he groaned.

Then she did it again. Followed by an aggressive curlicue barrage with her tongue.

One that he met. Every curl, every lick. Like it was a choreographed dance they'd rehearsed a hundred times.

They were so in sync that they were breathing—heavily—together. His chest pushed against her breasts. More specifically, her nipples, already poking hard against the confines of her bra.

Eva slid her splayed hand down Gideon's back—the utterly chiseled back—until her palm contracted around his ass.

Because closer was exactly where she needed his hips to be.

So she rocked against him from the front, and pulled him in from the back.

The next thing she knew, he'd flung her against the hallway wall. Gently. But putting her in position so that he could press even harder against her.

“Are you having fun yet?” he asked, hot breath fanning against her ear.

“It's a start.”

Gideon barked out a laugh. “Indeed.”

Reality crashed through her as she spotted the empty pie dish over his shoulder. “One we can't finish now, with my promise to feed eight of you within an hour.”

“One we can't finish now because you skated up to Death's door today. I won't push you, Evangeline.” That wicked,

knowing smile that was pure Gideon flashed again. “I will, however, be persistent.”

Just when she was on the brink of melting from his consideration of her scare today? Her knees were forced to wobble not to melt from the thought of what form his “persistence” might take.

“I’m not sure if that will be annoying or distracting or pleasurable.”

Gideon shrugged as he lowered her to the floor. “Probably all three. The guys tell me I can be a pain in the ass.”

“Great salesmanship.”

“Nah. I know the pleasure I’ll provide will more than make up for the other two.”

“Cocky, much?”

“*Very* much.”

What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter Eight

Another day, another argument with his best friends.

The only difference was that they were in the armory below the Metafora offices. Easy to get Evangeline down here unnoticed, since she was officially contracted as their actuary. She was somehow finding the time to grind out that work, too. It impressed him. How she'd compartmentalized almost being killed and still put in a solid six hours on spreadsheets.

A *lot* about Evangeline impressed him...

They didn't usually weigh in on each other's solo missions. No micromanaging, since they knew one another, and their fighting styles, so well.

This one had turned into an exception. Probably because 1) Evangeline was his partner; 2) freaking attacking angels were suddenly in the mix; and 3) they had no clue *how* the Keepers were being murdered and it might be dangerous.

Whatever. Gideon wasn't worried. And his partners should stop being so annoying with their unwanted advice.

Gideon slid a Kalis into his ankle sheath. The double-edged Filipino dagger had a wavy portion near the hilt that prevented it from getting stuck in the bones of an opponent. "Look, when you go out on a solo mission, I don't tell *you* what weapons to take. Driver picks the music in a car. And the one flying into fucking danger gets to pick his own weapons."

"We don't know what or who you're up against." Rhys handed him what looked like a business card. "Take this. I picked it up in Colombia."

"Not only do supernatural beings not advertise with business cards, but we're a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century. Everything's digital." He stuffed it into the pocket of Rhys's button-down. "Don't make me look out of touch."

"Because it's more important to look hip than be alive?" Evangeline snarked from her stool at the lab table. Whose side was she on?

“Sometimes.”

Rhys sighed. Crossed his arms. “It’s a patch. Infused with the Devil’s Breath.”

Eva’s gray eyes widened. “No, it certainly is not. That’s not a real thing.”

Handy having someone related to the actual Devil to back him up. Also...just plain weird. Had she met Lucifer? Did they do movie nights once a month?

“It’s a street drug. Made from the borrachero plant, found in Columbia.” Rhys rolled one hand in the air, as if trying to get Gideon to remember something as basic as oxygen. “Similar to scopolamine.”

“That’s for motion sickness. Are you messing with me?” Fighting with a sticky patch. Vomit-reducing drug. Was this a massively delayed April Fool’s prank?

“No. It’s far more concentrated and potent than what’s in a motion sickness patch. It’ll rob your opponent of their free will. Plus give hallucinations and amnesia, which was the selling point to me. *They* won’t know that *we* know who *they* are.”

“You sound like an idiot.” Gideon walked down the wall to the “defense against humans” section. Tasers, stun guns, revolvers. Their whole mission was to protect humans, but sometimes countermeasures were called for. Especially when breaking into a facility. He grabbed a stun gun. Shoved it down the back of his waistband.

Zavier finally added his two cents from over by the biometric door to the belowground chasm with its waterfall. “It’d buy us time to come back and research the shit out of whoever they are. Or dump the ID into Caraxis’s lap.”

“I’m supposed to say, ‘Hey, mind rolling up the sleeves of your fighting leathers so I can slap this patch onto you, and then stand still and chew the shit with me while we wait for it to work?’”

Rhys sighed. *Again*. “It’s fast. Yes, you need access to bare skin. The back of the hand would be enough.”

“I told you he wouldn’t go for it.” Z shook his head. “That’s low-level defensive bullshit. Give it to Maisy. Or maybe Liss.”

Good to know only one of his partners was behind this idea. Which wasn’t horrible. It just wasn’t right for highly trained *Nephilim* soldiers. “Or we could sell it to Aradia and her coven at a steep markup.”

“It’s a new kind of tech.” Rhys waved the card in the air. “Easy to use if you’re partially incapacitated. That’s a possibility if you end up fighting a full-blood angel.”

Evangeline clasped her hands over her heart. Specifically, just below her breasts, pulling her black tee taut. Oh, he noticed. He wanted *his* hand to be there. “What a touching moment. You’re worried about him. And they say men can’t show emotion.”

Rhys whipped around, a snarl on his face. She didn’t even flinch. Just beamed at him with that inner peace radiating like sunshine off of her. The peace Gideon noticed—and was drawn to—more and more. Rhys plucked three throwing stars from the wall and handed them over. “Why do you have to push back so hard?”

Uh, because Rhys would do the same to him? Because his friend was being uncharacteristically and way the fuck overly cautious? He attached the stars to his belt. “Because our destination’s a morgue. After hours. The next Keeper’s already been killed. No one’s going to stick around after the victim’s offed. Couldn’t be safer while we try to identify what killed him.”

“Take this.” Xavier thrust a...God above, it looked like a purse...at him.

Had *both* his partners lost their minds? Gideon held up both hands and backed away. “I’m not carrying a fucking purse.”

“Not you. Evangeline.”

She startled at being pulled into their bickering. “No thanks. I don’t plan on freshening my lipstick in a morgue. I hear the smell is terrible. No plans to linger.”

“You were poisoned. Yesterday.” Xavier shook the purse.

Glass vials tinkled against one another. “There’s seventeen different poison remedies in here.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Seventeen?” She hopped off her stool. He’d told her to wear all black, since they were technically breaking and entering. But Gideon hadn’t counted on her looking so coolly adorable in black capris and ankle socks with sneakers. More like she was on a cheerleading team ready to do a hip-hop routine than blend into the shadows of a Turkish morgue. “How would I know which one to use?”

“Gideon would know.” Z held out the purse.

Evangeline pushed it back toward him. “If Gideon’s alive, he can fly me out of danger, back here. Where we can mix and match remedies in safety.”

“What if he’s not?”

“Thanks for that.” He didn’t deserve that insulting lack of faith. Gideon stalked over to get right in Zavier’s face. “When was the last time *I* lost a fight? And when was the last time *you* lost one?”

Shit.

The moment it came out of his mouth, Gideon regretted it.

They never talked about *that* mission, that fight.

The one that had scarred Zavier, inside and out.

The one that had cost him so damn much. It was one of the most painful memories they all shared. Not a weapon to be brandished in a stupid argument.

“Damn, man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

The armory was silent. If Zavier took a swing at him, Gideon wouldn’t duck. He deserved it.

After a few long breaths, during which Zavier didn’t even blink, his friend finally broke eye contact. “You weren’t wrong. Your track record *is* one better than mine.”

Tension continued to thicken the air. Gideon didn’t know

how to fix that he'd poked at that deep wound.

Evangeline pushed between them. "You're ignoring Gideon's point. Whoever killed this Keeper won't be at the morgue still hanging out with the corpse. And if there are any demons, *I'm* the one who will protect *him*. We've got this."

Her confidence, her assertiveness? *Huge* turn-on. Probably more so now that he'd had a taste of her. If the guys hadn't been in the room? Gideon would've ripped off her shirt and started kissing those breasts it showed off so well.

Well. He would've wanted to. But Evangeline struck him as someone who needed a slower approach. Which was fine. He liked sex however he could get it. He liked everything about it, including, sometimes, the super slow seduction.

And Gideon was already certain that she'd be worth however much time it took.

Rhys cleared his throat. "Look, we don't know if we're going up against another *Nephilim* or an angel. We've never fought an angel. It's...concerning, is all."

Yeah.

Not knowing made a fight exponentially more dangerous. But they still had to keep moving forward.

It was the only way.

"Agreed. But if I thought this trip was that dangerous, I'd be bringing you guys with me." *Especially* with Evangeline in tow. She'd proven that she could keep cool under pressure. But as backup in a fight? She was deadweight.

Rhys shook his hand, clapping his forearm. "Good luck."

Zavier shook next. He leaned in to whisper, "That patch was all Rhys."

"I know." Zavier was addicted to actual tech. Things with computer chips, timers, GPS. Not a glorified dope-filled bandage.

Gideon gestured for Evangeline to join him at the waterfall door. "You ever been to Turkey?"

“No. I’ve never been anywhere besides Buffalo and Rochester, where I did my undergrad.”

He breathed on the biometric signal to open the door cut into the rock wall. “Really? No exploring once you came topside?”

“I told you. All I’ve done is lay low. Live simply.”

“That’s hardly living.” Gideon lifted her into his arms. They’d be flying for a half hour in Turkey. Easier to cradle her against his chest. It’d also give her a better view than just staring into his wings the whole time. The position had nothing, *nothing* to do with the basic pleasure of curling his fingers into her thighs.

As they launched straight over a deep chasm, Evangeline gasped. “I think I’m making up for it now.”

“I’m taking you to a building full of dead bodies. Set yourself a higher bar.” It took only one powerful thrust of his wings to push them through the thin, high fall and emerge into the darkness of the Turkish night.

Evangeline looked over his shoulder at the waterfall they’d portaled through. It was of the low, wide variety, stunning with its tree-studded rock formations near the base. Even in June, the fine mist that hit them was shockingly cold. It was fed from the snowy mountains. A few hundred feet later, that coolness was smothered by the evening humidity.

“This...this is more than enough for me,” she said. Wonder widened her eyes. Her open mouth was turned up at the corners.

It made Gideon want to show her the whole world.

Which was stupid. That’s not who he was. He dabbled with women. No different than bopping around to various restaurants. He did *not* connect with them. He did not think about a future with them.

He’d done that, once.

It’d gone badly enough he’d sworn never to do it again. Avoiding that crippling pain of losing someone was easy. You

just didn't get close enough to care. Remembering the *why* made it simple to stick to the plan.

So he'd lock down any instincts...*urges*...that headed him in an angle that was anything more than the shallowest skim along Evangeline.

It'd be better for both of them that way.

Forty minutes later, they were at the front door of the morgue. It was a typical, governmental concrete block of a building surrounded by a sea of asphalt. Down the side was the hearse and ambulance drop-off bay, covered with an oddly perky green and white awning. No cars were in the lot. Beyond it were rows of red-tiled roofs and the jagged darkness of the Koroğlu Mountains.

Eva had added a black scarf to her ensemble, to cover her bright hair. Gideon tugged on a ballcap. But he knew they wouldn't be in the open long enough to be noticed.

"Shouldn't the break-in be stealthy? A side window, or through a back alley?"

"Nah. You hide in plain sight by acting like you belong. Confidence is like a skeleton key—gets you past a whole slew of obstacles."

"But won't we be super obvious just standing at the door while you jimmy the lock?" To her credit, she wasn't nervously scanning the area or jiggling a limb. Her tone, however, trembled more than a pile of whipped cream in a gale.

"My first try at picking a lock? Back in, oh, 1951? Took me less than two minutes." Gideon opened the door and ushered her inside. "I've improved my time over the decades."

"That was it? That didn't take any longer than using a key!"

"That's the whole idea." He did a quick visual assessment. Only one security light illuminated a small reception area filled with filing cabinets. No guards. No ceiling cameras or alarms to disable. "Guess the good citizens of Mersin aren't worried about corpse stealing. We're all clear."

They both flicked on flashlights. No need to draw attention.

“If it wasn’t for the overhead signs being in Farsi, I wouldn’t know this wasn’t in America. So far? Travel isn’t very eye-opening.”

“That’s because this isn’t travel. It’s just the next step in a mission. Find the dead Keeper, figure out what killed him. Run-of-the-mill op. No different from you opening a fresh spreadsheet on your laptop. No souvenirs, no selfies.” They pushed through a set of swinging double doors.

It put them in what was clearly the autopsy room. Several tables with moats of drains on the floors and wooden blocks to hold the heads. Instrument trays were lined up at each one. Along the long side wall were rows of small hatches with big metal levers. The room held a strong tang of formaldehyde.

“So...we just start looking? Opening each one?”

A good mission required prep, so as not to waste time on-site when there was a high-ish probability of being caught. “Of course not. Z hacked into their files.”

“Then you already know for sure he’s been murdered? Why did we bother coming out here to look at the body?”

For someone raised in Hell? Evangeline still had a massive amount of naïveté. “Like bureaucracies always tell the truth? Hardly. Keepers live extra-long lives, just like *Nephilim*. Yet we’ve had more than a dozen die in the last six months. Many under unclear circumstances.”

“Right. You told me that when you said our first task was to come check out a corpse. I just figured you knew a little more than you were actually revealing, in order to drag me halfway around the world.”

That whole need-to-know-basis thing had always just pissed him off. “Sorry to disappoint. I don’t know much. Autopsy says it was a natural death.”

“You don’t believe it?”

Not even a little. Keepers didn’t just fall like dominos. “I believe what I see with my own eyes. I believe most

government workers can be bribed. And I believe humans have no idea what they're dealing with when it comes to beings like us."

Evangeline looked at him. Hard. Like she was trying to bore into his head with those gray eyes. "Your life's been very, very hard, hasn't it?"

Some of it. Sure.

To an incalculable level.

Better to focus on the good stuff. Or, at least, *try* to. Some days went better than others. "Nah. I have a mission that gives every day meaning. A roof. Xbox. Rhys and Z, and the beauty and wonder that is women filling my life. It's good."

Then Gideon remembered that the one thing she'd asked him not to do was lie to her. "*Mostly*," he amended. "The Keeper's in row two, drawer seven. But hang on a sec."

Okay, maybe the guys had gotten into his head. Because there was clearly no one else here. Still, Gideon took a sort of time-out; standing stock-still and listening. Just in case. After all, angels could go fully invisible on Earth.

There was still a part of him that refused to believe an *angel* was behind the murders.

The far bigger part of him had strategized and scrapped and fought and defended enough over the decades that he wouldn't take any supposed safety for granted.

Not with a woman along who couldn't defend herself.

The only sound was the low drone of the refrigeration units. So he backed up to the wall of drawers.

Evangeline yanked on the handle. There was a whoosh of cold, vacuumed air. Together they pulled out the heavy drawer.

"Guess we have our answer," Gideon murmured.

The body in the coroner's drawer was very much *not* a natural death. Weird, five-pointed star-shaped pustules—almost like the blisters left behind after a branding—were stamped across all the exposed skin.

“We should check it all.” Eva’s face had paled, but she didn’t hesitate to draw back the sheet.

More pustules. Plus the addition of similarly shaped rashes in a line from his heart to his dick. If you could call a pattern on the skin that was a sickly green a mere *rash*.

The smell was...bad. Gideon had smelled Death over and over and over. This was worse. This was Death left out to rot for a few days, with manure dumped on top of it. Nah. That didn’t come close to describing the reek.

“The autopsy report put the cause as old age,” he said dryly.

Evangeline jerked her head up to look at him over the corpse. “Do you want a medal for being right, that humans are fallible?” Her words were as sharp as tacks.

Huh. She was still touchy. Still overly reactive at any suggestion he might be poking at her. Gideon thought that would’ve vanished with all the kick-ass kissing they’d indulged in last night.

“No. I simply meant it was obviously false. So we don’t need to bother looking for a less obvious cause of death, like strangulation or poisoning.”

“Great. Since I doubt either of us knows how to run blood or urine samples for traces of drugs or poison in his system.”

“I don’t even know how we’d get that *out* of him.” Nor did he want to guess. “Your turn. As the resident Hell and demon expert. Those marks look familiar at all?”

Pinching her nose shut, Evangeline said, “No.”

Too fast. Gideon was suffering from the noxious smell just as much as she was. But he couldn’t let her shirk the whole reason she’d come along. “You want to take another five to ten seconds and mull on that? Be certain?”

“No need. The shape is distinctive. The strange color, as well. I’m positive I haven’t seen it before.”

Yeah. It would’ve been too easy to figure this whole thing out from one dead body. Still, it was more intel than they’d had an hour ago. “That’s a start.”

“This doesn’t rule out the influence of Hell or Heaven.”

Seriously? Gideon didn’t want to come off as a bigot, but come *on*. “The stench indicates one more than the other.”

“You’re biased.” She shook her head, her braid flipping. “You have no idea how sweet the ghost flowers smell in the spring. Hell has foliage, you know.”

“You’re very hard to get a handle on. You escaped from Hell as soon as you could. Doing everything to not go back and live there. But I make one snide comment about the obvious sulfur odor and you take offense?”

“The flowers grow on the surface, as well. In Japan. Known as red spider lilies up there. It just...it isn’t the flowers’ fault. They aren’t inherently evil. They’re beautiful. And stuck in Hell.”

Ah. Gideon immediately saw the commonality. Saw why Evangeline was pushing so hard for him to recognize Hell’s beauty. “Like you.”

After a short nod, she said, “That’s overstating it. But maybe. A little.”

“We need to take pics. We can shoot the photo over to our resident semi-friendly witch and see if she can come up with anything relevant, too.” Gideon didn’t mention that he’d slept with Aradia on and off. It wasn’t pertinent.

Plus, he knew enough about women not to name-drop one while with another. Even though there was nothing going on with Evangeline.

Probably. Because that’d be stupid.

A few kisses didn’t mean anything.

They *shouldn’t*.

She pulled out her phone. Looked at the screen and moved it closer to the body. “Can you turn on the overheads?”

There weren’t any windows in the room. It’d be safe to do so. Even though Gideon was...reluctant to leave Evangeline alone by the corpse. He crossed to the door and flicked them

on.

Then he reared back, pretending to shield his eyes with his arm. “Light isn’t improving the situation.”

“No. This poor man’s covered in absolute disgusting awfulness. I feel dirty just looking at it.”

“Hurry up, so we can shut it back in the drawer.” Gideon picked up the edge of the sheet, ready to re-cover it. Didn’t need anyone to notice that there’d been things disturbed in the morgue. Not like the Turkish authorities could find them, but it made things simpler to leave no trace of their breaking and entering.

Once Eva snapped photos from every angle, she slid her phone back in her pocket, but left one hand hovering over his forehead. “I...I hope he’s at peace. After dying such a violent, horrible death.” She touched her fingertips just above one of his dark eyebrows.

And then it just...disintegrated. The entire body crumbled in on itself.

Evangeline’s hand flew toward the ceiling as she jumped backward. “Oh my goodness.”

Automatically, Gideon did a quick scan of the room to be sure they were alone. To be sure nothing sneaky and semi-invisible had tossed some weird disintegration grenade from across the room. Which sounded ridiculous even to his mind. “That’s new.”

With an arm that trembled just a bit, Evangeline pointed at the residue. “Maybe that’s proof that a demon did cause the... illness? If my un-power reacted to it?”

“It’s a stronger clue than the stench, that’s for sure. Have you turned anything to ash before?”

“No. This has *never* happened. Usually it’s simply like turning off a light switch. The whole light is still there. I can’t possibly have done that. I don’t have the power. I don’t *want* that power.” Her voice was shaky, unsettled. She hustled over to the deep sink to scrub her hands and arms as if coated in bacteria.

He couldn't blame her. "I've never seen anything like it." But he also wasn't so sure that Eva hadn't been the cause.

Powers grew. Sounded as if she hadn't really used hers for years. Maybe they were like bread dough. Covered up, in a warm dark place. Just growing.

"Where does that leave us?" she asked over her shoulder. "Do we...vacuum it up?"

Gideon spun around to the long, sloped table. A tray of instruments yielded a test tube. "I'm taking some to study back at our lab. Leaving the rest. Can't hide that a whole corpse has disappeared. Let the humans work on some convoluted excuse for why it turned to ash."

There were at least half a dozen paper towels in Evangeline's hands. She scrubbed at her red arms. "I don't want a single speck of whatever that was left on me."

"Hey." Gideon snagged her wrist. "Don't hurt yourself. I've got a better idea. I'm taking you to a pool." He slid shut the drawer and hustled her out of the building.

"This is no time for a vacation with umbrella drinks," Eva said while he jimmied the lock on the entry shut again.

"Agreed. It isn't far." They walked to a cluster of Turkish pines at the edge of the still-dark and empty lot. From behind their cover, he launched into the air and headed for the waterfall portal. Her chest heaved in a too-fast rhythm against him. The disintegrating body had clearly thrown her for a loop. Hard to tell if she was more freaked by what actually happened? Or the thought that she might have *made* it happen.

The night air smoothed over them like warm satin. He should probably talk to keep her from worrying about the bits of body left in the morgue. Gideon was great at small talk over drinks to flirt a woman into bed. Great at hanging with their employees and making them laugh in the middle of a stressful day.

What to say to Evangeline had him stumped. She'd been along as an investigative partner.

But they'd kissed.

And she was reacting with fear—although controlled well—like an almost innocent, confronted with power and its consequences for the first time. Evangeline was clearly no stranger to power. Not being raised by a Fallen. This must be the first time she'd seen her *own* power have such consequence.

He'd keep it simple. Positive. "We made progress tonight."

"How? All we have are more questions."

Of course she wouldn't just go along with his platitude. "*Specific* questions. We're narrowing things down."

"Right." She angled her head away to look up at the stars. "Now we know that this is very scary, very bad, and we need to stop whatever caused it. Major news flash right there."

If her sarcasm were made solid, it would've flayed his skin like a cat-o'-nine-tails. "This is new to you. Frustrating. Doesn't always move as fast as a TV police procedural."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No. I'm saying for all that you learned living in Hell—including plenty of things we don't know jack shit about—there's much you don't know about *Nephilim* and how we work in the shadows of human life up here."

Slowly, her head pivoted until she looked at him again. Without any rancor pinching her lips or tightening around her eyes. "Cultural dissonance."

"If you have to put a fancy crossword answer phrase on it, then yeah."

They crossed the falls and reappeared over four hundred miles away, in Pamukkale. The falls were little more than a trickle over the white limestone pools. Their terraced outlines were highly visible in the moonlight.

"Where are we?"

"Still Turkey. Mineral pools from underground thermal springs." Gideon pointed up. "The Holy City of Hierapolis was up there, in Cleopatra's time. Marc Antony built her a private pool here. The whole place is a sacred spot. And the

minerals in the water will rid you of any residue—physical or metaphysical—remaining from that corpse.”

“I’ve read about this place. In travel magazines. Wow.”

He hovered an inch above the nearest turquoise pool. “Do you want to go in, clothes and all?”

“Are we alone?”

“It’s the middle of the night. The park’s closed. Just us.”

“Then I’d like to undress. To thoroughly cleanse myself of...whatever that was.”

Gideon set her down on the slippery bank. “Me too.” Because he was also disturbed by the inhuman green pustules and the poofing of the body. With all of the limestone and water, there weren’t any insect noises. Only a quiet burbling from the springs and the rustle of their clothes.

The whole time, Evangeline kept her eyes locked on Gideon’s. He wasn’t complaining.

Unstrapping his weapons took longer. But once he was done and in just boxer briefs, she’d only toed off her shoes and removed her tank. “Change your mind?”

“No. My hands are shaking.” So was her voice. “I can’t get the buttons undone.”

“Let me help.” Gideon didn’t need to look down to make quick work of her shorts. He didn’t want her to think he’d take advantage of a moment like this. As soon as she was down to basic black bra and panties, he lifted her again and flew them into the pool.

Evangeline’s entire body trembled.

So he gently cupped the warm water in his hands and sluiced it over her body, inch by inch. Inch by inch, her muscles relaxed, as did the hard set of her jaw. After a few minutes, she let out a sigh. And began to rinse him off.

Her hands followed the same basic path his had taken; shoulders to wrists, sternum to belly, across the back and down his legs. Gideon found himself being soothed. Odd, since he

hadn't realized he needed it. But yeah, the poofing to dust had been jarring. Evangeline's presence, let alone her soft touch, relaxed him more than a four-hand massage with a bottle of Pappy Van Winkle.

This mutual bathing wasn't sexy.

It was *tender*.

Intimate.

Unlike anything Gideon had done in decades. Hellfire.

This whole situation was very, very dangerous *indeed*.

Chapter Nine

Evangeline felt cozy at her home, safe on her big turquoise couch with its squishy pillows and three fleecy throw blankets...along with the protective threshold spell Aunt Charmaine had bribed a wizard to cast over every window and door.

That same level of coziness was also present when she was tucked into her office at work. The glorified closet fit her credenza and three-monitor setup just fine. She kept an aromatherapy diffuser going along with a little burbling fountain. It was far from the constant daily anxiety and discomfort she'd felt back in Hell. Coziness had been one of her main goals upon coming to the surface.

Having Maisy and Liss flanking her in the mall, though? It was every bit as good as having velvet pillows tucked along her sides. It was an emotional coziness Eva had never experienced before. Sure, she'd made friends at college. A few. But she'd always had to lie, to hide an enormous part of herself from them. Lying wasn't anywhere close to being one of the ten elements of Hygge.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate the shopping help."

"Are you kidding?" Maisy shifted the stack of cargo pants draped over her arms so she could elbow Evangeline in the ribs. "We're struggling, poorly compensated teachers. Or we *were*, before the districts axed our programs. We adore a trip to the mall. Shopping is a treat for us."

"For *me*," Liss corrected. "Maisy, you live in leggings and tees. Even the Amazon bots are probably sad that you don't expand your core wardrobe."

"Forgive us. This is an old argument. One that neither of us ever wins, or compromises. Because my best friend is a fashionista, with the glamorous looks to pull it off." Maisy flicked at Liss's long, dark locks.

Apparently true to form, Maisy *was* wearing sand-colored

leggings covered in flip-flops and beach umbrellas with a hot pink tee. Whereas Liss wore a tight and busty red sundress with a Grecian design and strappy sandals. The teen handing out pretzel tastes had almost dropped his tray when she'd walked by.

"Then I feel worse for having you paw through all these utilitarian outfits." Because Evangeline had been *sent* on this shopping trip. Gideon didn't approve of her "field investigation" wardrobe.

She'd started to mount a halfhearted argument about how no man could tell her what to wear.

Until she realized the logic of it. That he was, yet again, merely protecting her. If she'd been wearing so-called appropriate clothes for their trip to Turkey, her worry about corpse ash landing on her would've been greatly diminished.

He was right.

Evangeline could admit it. She was more annoyed with herself for *not* thinking of it. For getting complacent over the years in Buffalo.

"This one's got sunscreen woven into the material. You'll thank me for that." Liss dumped another shirt over her arm. "Shopping *and* hanging with girlfriends? Why would you think there's a better way to spend a Saturday?"

"Clearly spoken as a woman between boyfriends," Maisy teased with an added hip waggle.

"Don't get all smug about your half-angel sex machine of a boyfriend. I have a few men I'm keeping on the hook. That's what the night's for." She wrinkled her nose at Maisy, then turned back to Eva. "Did you know that *Nephilim* have more-than-human staying power? That they're basically orgasm-giving machines?"

"No. I, ah, did not." Hell had its own sex machines in the form of Incubi, but it'd be nice to have all that *without* the part where they sucked your soul dry during the experience.

"Liss!" Maisy bonked against Eva's back as she reached around to pinch her best friend. "That was a secret."

“She’s a dark angel. I assumed she’d know already. Do you have something...similar?”

“I’ve got a plug-in vibrator so there’s no risk of batteries crapping out at an inopportune time,” Eva said with her tongue planted in her cheek.

“Figure that out day one of being an actuary? You did a risk assessment of your bedroom toys?”

“Little tip I gleaned from my freshman year roommate, actually. When our TV remote stopped working because our other roommate had stolen its batteries in a, well, time of need.”

“Wow. Considerate.”

To Eva’s surprise, the two stuck with her as she turned into the row of dressing rooms. “We didn’t ask for details. We also didn’t ask her to room with us the next semester.”

“Good for you.” Maisy gave her arm a fast squeeze. “And so far, you’re being a stellar roommate. You’re tidy. Quiet. And I love the bouquet of pink ranunculus you brought. Really brightens up the living room.”

The house Maisy had inherited from her uncle screamed “old bachelor” with its dark wood paneling, dark furniture, and depressingly dark carpet. Eva itched to do so much more. To paint and spruce and—but then she remembered that Maisy had moved in only a month ago. With her new job/boyfriend/powers/life, no wonder she hadn’t had time to cozy up the place, aside from painting the master bedroom a soothing, pale blue.

Still, it took all of Eva’s self-control not to offer (okay, *force* her) to pivot from clothes, and shop for paint, wallpaper, and upholstery fabrics. “I enjoy flowers. Making a home feel cozy. Puttering...or is it nesting? I like to do normal things. Like this group shopping trip.”

Maisy piled her armful of possibilities on the stool. “That all sounds so ordinary and boring compared to life in Hell.”

“It is.” A blissful status quo of nothing exciting happening. Aka nothing terrifying or horrible or potentially fatal. “That’s

why I love it.”

“It’s so normal.” Liss said it with a tone that equated normalcy to six-day-old raw meat left to rot in the sun.

“That’s all I want. A normal day at the mall. Nobody treating me like a pariah.” And that’s when it occurred to Eva that not only was Liss not avoiding her, but she was also treating her as if she were just a normal human. “Why aren’t you scared of me?”

“Maisy explained the whole dark angel thing to me. How you chose to be good instead of evil. There’s no reason to be scared.”

“That...that’s great.” Eva actually choked up a little. The guys had questioned her up and down, not accepting her simple explanation at first. Which she understood. They came at it from a military mindset, judging everything as a potential danger.

So Liss’s easy acceptance of *what* Eva was...well, it was a gift. Maisy, too. These women were the first humans to know all about her. And they liked her. Good thing she had the task of trying on clothes. Or else Eva would be tempted to just sit down and have a good cry at her good fortune.

“Unless you have some cool, decapitating power?” Liss actually looked excited at the prospect.

Ha! That was just what she needed to swallow down the burgeoning tears. “Nope. All I can do is, well, *undo* an evil power. Not showy at all. Or fun.”

“But what about being a dark angel? Don’t you miss doing”—Maisy circled her arms wide in the air, almost knocking Liss in the head in the small space—“those things?”

“There’s nothing to miss. *I’m* as ordinary and boring as a blade of grass, to everyone else down there.” They didn’t appear to be leaving. Guess this would be a group vote on what looked good.

Nobody had ever helped Eva pick out clothes. Aunt Charmaine had provided whatever she needed. And when she first got to Earth, Eva had been too worried about accidentally

showing her wings to let anyone see her undressed.

Even though they didn't show, at all, on her skin, unless she willed them into view.

Yes, she had a few issues to work through. A whole *lot* of paranoia. Soooo much mistrust.

Well, she had zero excuse not to get naked in front of these two humans. They already knew what she was and accepted her.

Sure, she'd almost been taken out by an assassin two days ago. But still—this situation had its perks.

Liss clasped her hands over her heart. Lowered her voice to a dramatically hushed tone. “You've got *wings*, Eva. There's nothing boring about wings.”

Ha! She struggled to get her arms into the right holes of the tight hoodie. “How do you feel about your appendix?”

“Great. It almost popped. Emergency surgery. I got to miss two finals in eighth grade, Ronnie Zaro came to visit me in the hospital and gave me my first kiss. I was a star in homeroom 8C—until Kaylyn Cook's dads got divorced.”

That was the opposite of what Eva needed for her analogy. Victorious, she shoved her head through and back into the light. “Maisy? How 'bout you? Thoughts, musings, emotional turmoil about your appendix?”

“No.” Maisy pursed her lips. “Which I feel like is what you were going for. It's totally useless. Never so much as twitches to make its presence known.”

“That's how I feel about my wings.” If anything, they were a mockery she was forced to carry around. A little permanent shame backpack, full of the reminder that Eva didn't have any of the powers of the other dark angels.

No. If anything, Eva hated her wings.

Liss handed over pants with enough pockets to hold the gear for an entire Girl Scout Troop. “You never use them?”

“To what? Scare off a mosquito who lands on my shoulder?”

Which, sure, she'd tried. Once. Failed. Gave up. Because if her wings couldn't even bestir a freaking mosquito? Talk about useless.

“To fly.”

Hating the tightness, Eva gestured for Maisy to grab the cuffs and help her out. “If you're trying to get a rise out of me by poking at a wound, it won't work. I accepted my lack of powers years ago. I can't fly.”

Whoops. The matching looks of shock on their faces told Eva that the men hadn't filled them in about her deficiency.

Liss's hand flew out to squeeze her arm. “Oh Eva, I'm sorry. I didn't realize... I didn't mean to poke. It's just that I'm the only one without any powers, so I'm fascinated by any glimmer of them. Plus, you told us not to be intimidated and talk to you like a normal person. So that's what you get. Me running my mouth. For better or sometimes worse.”

“No worries. Truly. I shouldn't have assumed that you knew.” She moved on to the red long-sleeved tee. “Is this supposed to be camouflage? For the fires of Hell?”

“It's the only color they had in your size.” Maisy cocked her head. It was the classic *what is going on with you* head tilt.

Eva deserved it. “Sorry. I'm used to Gideon snarking at me all the time.”

Liss handed over oatmeal-colored utility pants. Fewer pockets, more material that'd give her freedom to move. “I'm sorry. Can I ask what color are they?”

Wow. She was parked on this topic like a homesteader on the frontier. “Ombre. White to silver.”

“Can we see them?”

Maisy rolled up a tee and flicked her sharply. “Liss, how would you like it if Eva asked to see your boobs?”

She looked down. The horizontal neckline of her dress shelved her breasts as well as any pair on the *Bridgerton* set. “They're pretty spectacular today. I'd be good with it.” Then she leaned in close to stage whisper near Eva's ear. “Have you

shown Gideon your wings?”

“No.”

“Are you going to? Assuming, of course, that showing them does equate to a boob reveal.”

“Oh.” Did it? Was that a whole semi-angelic sex thing Aunt Charmaine hadn’t told her about? Eva had only had sex with humans. But...but...she wasn’t going to have sex with Gideon, so it didn’t matter. “Well. No.” But...did he *want* to see them? Her mind vaulted back to how magnificent his had looked spread out. “I don’t know.”

“There’s a Häagen-Dazs kiosk three stores down. You tell me how you really feel, instead of waffling, and I’ll buy you a double scoop when we’re done.”

Angel or human, the female love of ice cream was the same. She slithered into a matching gray ensemble. “We’re not... doing anything. We’re definitely not dating.”

“Good.”

“Really?” Because this had sure felt like a buildup to Liss slingshotting Eva toward Gideon.

“Yes and no.”

“*Now* who’s waffling,” Maisy teased.

Liss gave her a haughty sniff. “Speaking purely as a female of the species, I would run *into* a building burning if it meant I’d get a night in Gideon Durand’s bed. The experience is rumored to be exquisite. Life-changing. One woman in Niagara even blogged about it. Sadly, he friend-zoned me from day one. Or worse—little sistered me.”

Eva considered that sloppy and stupid on Gideon’s part. Celestial beings were supposed to avoid attention. Not as stringently as she did, but still. An attempt at not having a light shined on him would be appropriate.

So her response came out snarkier than perhaps Liss deserved. “Color me skeptical. Sex is sex.”

“I know you’ve got this ‘embrace the ordinary’ motto, but

no. You're wrong. You're clearly speaking as someone who has had only ordinary sex. Who has yet to have an orgasm render them speechless. Incoherent with pleasure."

Please. It was five really good seconds. Which she was perfectly capable of talking through. "You're exaggerating."

"No. Merely operating on excellent hearsay from my bestie."

"No," Maisy agreed solemnly. "She's not exaggerating. But that's a conversation for another time. Maybe over the ice cream."

"Correct." Liss mimed taking off a hat and putting on another. "Speaking as your friend, I would, in fact, warn you *off* Gideon. Warn you to keep your lips and legs locked and remain in the upright position around him at all times."

Liss didn't come off as the chastity belt type. Her comments surprised Eva. "Because...?"

"Because he's such a player that a woman wrote a blog post about it! Nobody complains. Nobody calls him a jerk. He must tell them up front there's no hope of a relationship. But you don't have that luxury. Because of the very small and mystical circles in which you run."

"I don't have the luxury of a relationship. I'm getting rid of my powers and then cutting myself off from the paranormal world. Completely."

Liss and Maisy exchanged glances. Eva didn't bother to try to interpret them. She just rehung the clothes and sorted them into keep/reject piles.

Maisy tapped her finger against her lips. "I think there's a third option, under those circumstances."

"Great. As you can see by the seventeen items I have to try on, I adore options."

"You *should* sleep with Gideon. Immediately."

"Agreed. You don't want to cut yourself off from this world before jumping on that sex stick."

Evangeline agreed. In part. That part being her entire body, aside from her head and her heart.

Her head, because she *knew* it was still too dangerous/stupid.

Her heart, because she'd already started to really like him. Because they already worked well together as partners. Because he was kind and tender with her, as well as funny and charming, and had saved her aunt's life, and had spectacular muscles, and devoted his life to keeping the world safe.

To sum up? Because her heart couldn't be trusted.

...

Gideon was on his seventy-fifth Google page, trying to find any image that remotely matched the rashes and pustules on their disappeared Turkish corpse.

There were...a *lot* of disgusting things that happened to skin.

None of them were remotely similar, though. And he kind of wanted to step off the ledge *into* Niagara Falls to wash the images out of his head.

"Fuck!" Zavier dropped the spatula he'd been using to brown the sausage. "It spattered me."

He didn't bother to look up. "You've been stabbed. Shot. Bitten. Impaled. Yet you're bitching about a drop of hot grease?"

"I expect pain in battle. When lives depend on it. Not in the kitchen. You're the better cook. Why aren't you doing all this?" He gestured to where Gideon *had* already laid out the three kinds of cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, marinara, and the pizza dough.

"Because I'm the one who saw the disgusting death blisters." Yeah, he wasn't putting up with this whining. He pulled up a pic of a horribly infected bump under a tongue and shoved his tablet in front of Zavier. "Would you rather be looking at these?"

“Fuck, no.” Xavier pushed it away. “How can you still be hungry after that?”

“It’s our job. Still gotta eat.” Although stopping for a while sounded good. What would he find on page seventy-six of results that he hadn’t found on the previous seventy-five? It’d still be there after dinner.

Rhys hustled in, dress shoes gleaming and clicking against the tiles. “Thanks for doing this call tonight without me. The time difference with Australia’s a bitch.”

“Yeah, but the rate of exchange is massively in our favor.” Xavier rubbed his fingers together gleefully before turning back to the sausage.

Gideon wasn’t sad about another excuse to stop staring at the tablet. Arguing with Rhys was always worthwhile. “Just because you enjoy shoving your nose into every little thing we do doesn’t make it necessary. We’re capable of handling an intro call with a werewolf pack.”

“I know. I trust you.” He finished fastening aquamarine cufflinks. They matched his open-collar shirt beneath a sport coat. “Just feels like I’m letting you down. Making you cover for me.”

“Oh, you are. Since when does nose-to-the-grindstone Rhys Boyce pick a date over locking down a very lucrative prospective mission?”

“Since I ruined Maisy’s birthday.”

Zavier handed Gideon the rolling pin. “If you’re not working, finish the dough. And technically, the *Aldokriz* demon ruined her birthday when it tried to kill her.”

“Well, he can’t fix the ruined celebration, but I can. It’s exactly one month since her birthday. So I’m taking her out.”

“Where?”

“Bacchus. That wine bar with tapas.” Rhys looked down. And by God, was that a blush creeping across his face? “So we can share everything.”

It was tempting to needle him. To mock his overly focused

friend. But after decades of Rhys working too hard and never taking time for himself? Gideon could only applaud what a transformation love had worked on the man. “It’ll blow her away. Well done.”

“Hope so. I want to make her feel special.”

“Holy hell, stop talking about it and go enjoy your woman.” Gideon clapped Rhys on the back twice. “We’re good with it.”

His friend’s dark brows drew together into an almost single line. “Are you? Really?”

What the heck?

He shot Z a WTF look and got back an equally confused shrug.

He’d only been teasing. Sure, he and Z had been cautious when the two got together, but now that they knew her, they were fully behind the relationship. And Gideon thought they’d made that clear to Rhys. “Yeah. Maisy’s great.”

“No.” Rhys toed out a stool from the island and half sat. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this.”

Gideon backed away, hands up. Had Rhys lost his mind? “I never touched her, I swear. There’s a code. Once you claimed her, she was off-limits.”

“No kidding. I’d chop off your hand if you touched her.” Rhys’s delivery was as placid as if telling him the printer was out of paper. “This is awkward. We don’t talk about this stuff.”

“And we’re all doing fine, so let’s keep that record intact,” Xavier said.

“Sorry, Z. This is too important.”

“Shit. Then I’m pouring wine.” He grabbed the Chianti Gideon had *also* already set out and opened to breathe.

“Does my relationship with Maisy bring back bad memories for you?” Rhys paused. Braced one hand on the island. “Of Colette?”

Gideon froze. *Every* part of him. No blinking, no sucking in air, and definitely no heartbeat. It felt like he was suddenly in a

vacuum. Empty. Hollowed out. Still.

Because none of them had spoken her name in decades.

Gideon had forbidden it. And, since he'd broken Z's nose for daring to mention her once back in the eighties, they'd followed his wishes on the matter.

Until now.

No wonder Rhys was braced. Out of his peripheral vision, Gideon noted that Z had frozen, too, with the bottle half-tipped over the decanter.

The obvious thing—aside from doling out another broken nose—was to make it clear that she was still off-limits. “Bold move. Risking getting blood all over that shirt before picking Maisy up,” he threatened casually.

“I had to ask. Do what you need to do. But I don't want to hurt you every day, flaunting my love for Maisy.”

Damn it. He couldn't punch the guy if that was his motivation. “You don't flaunt. You're enjoying it. And you should.” That ought to be enough to shut it down.

Rhys still had a death grip on the island. And the rest of his body was just one big clench. “So seeing us together doesn't bring back memories of her?”

Hellfire.

They were really talking about this.

It had been fifty years since he lost Colette. Since he fell in love with the most beautiful, sweetest woman in all of France and then watched her die. And since then? She'd been his last thought before falling asleep.

Every. Single. Night.

So, yeah, watching Rhys light up from the inside out every time he looked at Maisy? It'd been tough going. That should've been blazingly obvious. So obvious that Rhys shouldn't bother asking such a fucking rhetorical question.

He opened the mental tap to release a single drop of his ongoing anguish. That was more than enough to wrap his

words like the spikes of a knuckle-duster. “Of course it does.”

Rhys lurched off the stool toward him. “Shit. I’m sorry. Do you want me to not bring Maisy here—”

Gideon cut him off. “It doesn’t matter.” And he kept moving around the island to prevent Rhys from doing anything as horrific as a hug to “fix” it.

Zavier finished pouring the wine but rubbed his nose. “This bump I’ve got says it *does* matter.”

Talk about holding a grudge. “Demons have broken that thing at least a dozen times since I punched you. I’m not solely to blame.”

“True. Just saying. Mattered a hell of a lot to you then. Sounds like it still does. Maybe we all do have to take off our balls and talk this through.”

Fuuuuuck. “Definitely not.”

“Gideon, what can I do?” Rhys asked.

Looked like this torture wouldn’t stop unless he actually explained. Good thing he had the dough to roll out as a distraction.

“You can be happy. That’s why it doesn’t matter how I feel. Because you and Maisy get to be happy forever. Which is fucking beautiful and makes it worth getting up every day. That kind of love trumps everything else.”

“It shouldn’t. You’re my brother in every way that matters.” Guilt poured from him, making his usually invisible aura into a fuzzy black blob around Rhys.

Gideon thwacked the marble rolling pin into the dough. “I’ll be happy, too. In shorter spurts. I’m fine. I swear, I enjoy a sunset over the ocean. A cold beer in a frosted mug. An orgasm with a willing blonde.” Blonde? His go-to type was a brunette. Was this about Evangeline, worked into his brain like an earworm? “Winning a battle. I get a lot of good moments. Not great, like you have now. But good enough.”

“You deserve more.”

“I *had* it. That’s how I know you can’t miss a second of being with Maisy. We’ll both be fine—in different ways.”

Rhys stared at him. *Nephilim* weren’t telepathic. The thousand-yard stare wouldn’t reveal anything. Besides, Gideon wasn’t lying. He was fine. Often. Took it day by day by day.

There were plenty of bad ones.

Plenty more good.

If sadness twisted around him like a boa constrictor for ten minutes every night? It didn’t invalidate the previous solid sixteen hours of fineness.

He’d just keep doing everything in his power to make sure he never fell in love again. So he’d never risk getting close to that level of pain again.

Something he’d said must’ve gotten through Rhys’s thick skull. After another look, searing enough to crisp the dough beneath his hands, he nodded.

They were done. What a relief. Gideon took a long pull from his glass.

Rhys sank back onto the stool. “If Z could maybe pull his head out of his ass and stop sulking twenty-four /seven, we’d all be happier.”

“How is this situation my fault? I haven’t said shit about the hearts flying constantly out of your ass around Maisy.”

“I’m in love. Gid’s good enough. That leaves you.”

“Not talking. Gideon embraces that vulnerable stuff. Not me.”

Rhys had a point. *Zavier had* been more of a prickly PITA than usual for the past twenty-five years. With good reason, though. Plus, it turned the spotlight of Mr. Sensitivity off him. “Fine. If you won’t talk, feel free to use Rhys as a punching bag. I mean, sparring partner. That oughtta leach off some of your...”

“Despair? Anger? Devastation?”

“I was just going to say shitty attitude.”

“I’ll get right on working on that. Prepare yourselves to start with a dad joke-a-day. I’ll load the app right now.”

“You’re a monster,” Rhys said simply. Then he extended his wings and leaped over the island to pull Z’s phone away.

Yeah.

They’d all be fine. At least for tonight.

Because tomorrow? For all they knew? Some serial assassin out there would train his sights on one of them.

Or Evangeline.

And then the shit would really hit the fan.

Chapter Ten

Eva knew she'd have to put her foot down with Gideon regarding their next mission. She waited until Maisy waved them goodbye (Rhys hadn't bothered to come out of the training area. Flying-around-the-world missions were evidently run-of-the-mill to him). The fact that they were both getting what they wanted from one iconic spot didn't mean that hers could be sloughed off in priority.

"My spell ingredient *first*," Evangeline insisted as they flew through the waterfall portal. This one dumped them onto the Greek island of Delos. The Aegean sparkled a bright blue in a border around the sandy ground. "You only have the intel about the Book of Keepers being hidden here because my aunt told you."

"True. She's been incredibly helpful."

"So you owe me. To let me go first. In case things go poorly in your half of today's mission. I don't want another assassin to pop up and stop me from getting my mermaid scale."

"Relax." He absentmindedly ran a hand down her hair. Which Eva did not mind at *all*. "I'm not arguing."

"Then why are we hovering?" They weren't moving any closer to land or deeper toward the open ocean.

"Because I'm getting my bearings. This isn't an amusement park. There's no arched gateway spelling out MERMAID LAND in pastel bubbles."

"That's a shame."

"Didn't think you were that...fanciful."

Not generally. But...c'mon. "We're talking about *mermaids*, Gideon. The stuff of legends, myths, fairy tales. Tell me you aren't excited to see one."

"Been there, done that."

"You are uncharacteristically snippy." Then, as Eva twisted to settle more, she felt his biceps. His well-developed, sexy

biceps. And it hit her. “You’ve been with a mermaid, haven’t you? Are you worried about running into an ex?”

After a few long moments when the only sound was his wings punching through the air, Gideon said slowly, “Is there any answer that would be acceptable to you?”

“Dodging an answer is, in itself, an answer. Gideon, I don’t care who—or what—you’ve dated.” Mostly true.

Eva didn’t care in the sense that she logically knew she had no claim on him. They weren’t dating. They were partners. For a single —well— dual mission, and then they’d go their very separate ways.

On top of that, she knew he was a player. Why wouldn’t he have slept with a mermaid...and a witch, and a werewolf, and other *Nephilim*... The list had no end. But if his inability to keep his pants zipped created a stumbling block to her getting this spell ingredient, then she’d have a lot more to say about it.

“Okay, then. Yes. Not here. Coralia and I hooked up over off Naxos.”

“A whole other island.”

Gideon was looking past her, scanning beneath them. “Yeah, but this is Greece. It isn’t far. She may not even be swimming here. I just...didn’t want to rub it in her face by flying down with you in my arms.”

That was his concern? Not her jealousy. Was the playboy version of Gideon merely the shallow surface? Eva was coming to understand that she’d judged him by initial appearances. There seemed to be much more to the depths of the man.

To confirm, she asked, “You’re not worried about her yelling at you for leaving? You just don’t want to hurt her by appearing with another woman?”

“Right.”

It was so easy to get annoyed at Gideon. And so hard to *stay* in a snit with him. “You’re a very honorable and decent guy. Go ahead and land. We can walk.”

“That takes longer.”

“Land and get your bearings, and then we’ll see how far we’ve got left. Oh. OH!” she shrieked.

“Hellfire, woman, don’t scream in my ear.”

The splash of the iridescent tail was unmistakable. No dolphin sparkled like a rainbow. “I see one! I see a mermaid!”

“Where was this level of excitement when you spotted me flying over Niagara the first time?”

“Uh, you kidnapped me against my will. Meanwhile, I’m spotting a mermaid in the Aegean Sea. It’s so romantic!”

“Right. They pee in the ocean and then swim through it, but—sure. Enjoy the romance. Oh, and they’re handsy.”

She’d read that, as she studied every conceivable fact—and quite a bit of fiction—about mermaids. “Is it really true that in their culture, touching is as integral as breathing?”

“I was about to warn you. Not just each other. Everyone. Do you think you can handle that?” Gideon gently set Eva on her feet.

“Letting him touch me? Anywhere?”

Gideon’s neck cracked. He puffed a hard breath from his nose. “Yeah. But he’ll respect you, too. It’s just how they are. That stuff is sacred to them.”

Good to know. She could roll with it for the sake of getting her spell ingredient. Like the French and their double-cheek kiss of greeting, right? “How do I get their attention?”

Gideon arched one blond brow. “Hello’s always good. Dark angels speak all languages, just like *Nephilim*, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Then yeah, I’d go with ‘hello.’”

That was a response she’d expect from Xavier. Scant on information and explanation and charisma. “Are you deliberately not helping me?”

“You want to say ‘ahoy’ because we’re on an island?”

It was 50 percent tempting, and 50 percent ridiculous. With a pointed scowl at Gideon, Eva took off her shoes and rolled up her pants. Then she waded out into the warm surf.

“Hello?” How did you address a mermaid?

It looked like the mermaid did the butterfly stroke (albeit with a tail propelling twice as far). In seconds it was bobbing right at the break in the waves.

It was a *merman*. And all that swimming sure...ah...did things, *good* things, for his chest and arms. He looked like a handsome Grecian—dark, curly hair, dark eyes, tan skin broken by the *T* of black chest hair—but the most pumped-up version. Absolutely droolworthy. If the entire species looked like that? No wonder touching everyone was a thing. How could you resist?

“Hello. It is a pleasure to have a visitor who seeks out the merkind. Greetings, fair one. And *Nephilim*.” His deep voice dropped almost an octave when he addressed Gideon. The disdain...or...dislike was palpable.

Okay. This was special. For all the creatures she’d encountered in Hell? A merman was different. She had the same nervous belly as humans described when meeting movie stars. “It is an honor to meet you. I’m Evangeline. This is Gideon.”

“I know of him.” With a flick of his powerful tail, water somehow sprinkled all over Gideon. Then he turned a full-voltage smile on Eva. “Call me Iosonas.”

Now what? She’d been so distracted recently that she hadn’t bothered to ask Aunt Charmaine the proper protocol. Stepping closer, she asked, “Forgive me. Do we shake?”

“I would be mightily pleased if you shook all over for me.” And that wasn’t a shaky grasp of the language. No, the flirtatious grin backed up the invitation in his eyes. “But it is not necessary.”

“The lady seeks a favor,” Gideon said, far more gruffly than his usual ooze of warmth and charm.

“Then we have no need of you, *Nephilim*.” He extended a

tanned arm with a bracelet of cowrie shells encircling a wrist. “Come, Evangeline, I will hear of your favor in private.”

“Like Hell. It’s not that kind of favor. She’s not yours for the taking.”

“I think, neither is she *yours, Nephilim.*”

That escalated quickly. “It is the twenty-first century. Shame on both of you for even hinting that a woman could belong to anybody.”

“Forgive me.” Iosonas gave a half bow, then angled back toward Gideon. “I merely mean to swim with her around this rocky promontory. For privacy. No ill will befall her.”

“Hang on.” Gideon grabbed Eva by the waist and flew her back to the sand.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t just yank me out of a conversation because your ego’s been pricked.”

“Listen to me. Mermaids like to collect beautiful things. Iosonas spoke truthfully—he wouldn’t keep you against your will. But he’s already tempted to have you. He could swim off with you in the blink of an eye. Hundreds of feet down where I couldn’t rescue you. Be careful.”

Oh.

Gideon wasn’t being a posturing jerk.

He was truly concerned for her safety.

Well, probably with a bit of ego salvaging beneath it all, like the tea leaves that muddied up the bottom of a mug.

Patting his shoulder, Eva said, “I hear you. I will stay alert.”

“I’ll give you ten minutes. Then I’m coming for you.”

She still held on to a smidge of annoyance. Why did Gideon get to set the acceptable length of her conversation? But if he was right and there was an inherent danger? It was smarter to listen now and snark later.

“Then I’d better be persuasive and to the point.”

After a searching look that Eva wished she could interpret,

Gideon flew her back into the water. “Don’t try anything, Iosonas. You don’t want to make an enemy of me.”

“True. I want nothing to do with you.”

Men. Apparently, no matter what species, everything always came down to a dick-measuring standoff.

“I’m not a great swimmer,” Eva mentioned as she took his hand. The water around the rocks didn’t look deep—but what did she know about Grecian currents and riptides?

“That’s because you have two legs. Beautiful legs. Legs I look forward to touching.”

“You can’t skip a handshake and go straight to—” Eva stopped talking.

Because Iosonas had banded her against his chest. The pull of the water and whatever he did with the lower half of his body thrust him between her legs. And then he swam, keeping her head and shoulders above the water.

If Eva had to come up with a single word, she’d call it gliding. That wasn’t enough to describe the sensation, though. It was a combination of being powerfully propelled through the water, but with such ease it was as relaxing as a massage.

One hand spread along her ribs. The edge of his thumb sat just at the bottom curve of her breast. Every surge forward moved it against her in an insistent caress. Eva suddenly understood how easy it would be to let a merman take her on a long, long swim. Especially since every time she hitched up and down against his abs? Something large pressed against her ass.

Now, she could see his tail moving over his shoulder. It seemed illogical to call the object a penis. Didn’t he have to morph into legs for that to be present? But it was also impossible to ignore the bobbing, steady prodding.

His breath was warm in her ear. “The *Nephilim* barely gives us time to get to know each other. Would you like to come back without him? I could swim you to any island. Lie with you on any beach. Show you the delights of the sea.”

“I’m...well, I’m tied up for an indeterminate amount of time on a, well, secret mission.” It sounded ridiculous. When in doubt, though, Eva tried to respond with the truth as much as possible. *Aka* the opposite of how many in Hell behaved.

“Merkind are not tied to a calendar like humans. You do not need to return tomorrow. Nor in seven and twenty passings of the sun. Know that I will embrace and welcome you whenever you choose to come back.” He brushed a kiss at the crook of her neck. His lips were cool from wind and sea mist. A shiver raced through Eva, despite the warm water.

She didn’t want to sleep with the merman.

She wasn’t entirely immune to his, ah, sensuality, however.

Iosonas slowed and turned, using his tail as a rudder. Probably. She wasn’t up on boat terms. But Eva could see it flatten and arc in the opposite direction.

“Do you know what gives Delos its significance, lovely Evangeline?”

As a child, Eva had been entranced by Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology. The name had pinged in her brain the moment Xavier announced it as their next stop. “It was the island where Leto hid from Hera to give birth to Artemis and Apollo.”

“Yes. A sacred place in the old world. Today it still resonates with sacred power.”

The island behind him was such a different vista than the lush Turkish waterfall of two days ago. It was barren. Painted in shades of gray and brown. Rocky. Sure, there were broken remains, columns from ancient temples. But it didn’t look special. Nothing more than an archeological site.

And then Eva remembered that she was clinging to a mythological creature.

“It...wait, *what* power? Are you telling me that the Greek gods were real? Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite—the whole lot of them?” It was too absurd. Too...radical.

Eva was Lucifer’s granddaughter, for crying out loud. She

knew things—apparently—about Heaven and Hell of which even *Nephilim* were unaware. If there was a whole other pantheon of gods, shouldn't it be common knowledge? Wouldn't Aunt Charmaine have mentioned it?

“You came with the *Nephilim*. I assumed you were of our world.”

“I am.” She didn't want to lead with her street cred as Lucifer's granddaughter. Name-dropping wasn't her style. “I very much am. In fact, I've looked forward to meeting one of the merkind my entire life.”

“Then I should be sure to make it memorable.” Iosonas slid his hand up beneath her clinging, sodden shirt.

He was unutterably sexy. His abs *rippled* against her inner thighs.

But those were all clinical observations. Eva just didn't get the clutch of lust that happened every time Gideon touched her.

She'd always remember being propositioned *and* felt up by a mermaid, though. Talk about a bucket list item coming true.

“No. No, thank you. I'm honored. But that's moving a bit fast for me.”

“The ones with two legs always put barriers in place.” His tone was dry with disappointment, but he did immediately move his hand back to on top of her shirt. “There is so much residual power in Delos. That is why the merkind live off its coast. It protects us. The power of the island also enhances our natural abilities. So whatever favor you ask, I'm sure I will be happy to grant.”

“Great. Now I feel awkward. I'm a total stranger, asking you something personal.”

“You do not feel like a stranger.” His hands shifted again, to cup her butt. Then they squeezed.

Evidently mermen were *persistent*.

The touchy-feely stuff didn't make it less awkward. Eva wasn't asking for a kidney. But now that she was on the verge

of asking him to give up a part of himself? It hit her just how out of line the request truly was.

If she wasn't so desperate to ditch her useless power, she'd give up. Right now. Apologize for wasting his time and not even ask.

And she'd been so caught up in helping Gideon that Eva hadn't considered how much to reveal. *How* to even ask.

Oh yes. If this didn't go well? Eva was absolutely heaping the blame on Gideon.

"I don't want to bore you with details. The day is too beautiful to darken with my troubles." There. That seemed flowery enough for a merman. "I have been...bullied my entire life. To extremes. I escaped from the worst of it, but the bullies can find me. My life is in danger. Unless I give up the thing that makes them bully me."

A crinkle formed between Iosonas's thick, dark brows. "I don't understand. A *Nephilim* brought you here. An elite celestial soldier. He can't fight off these tormentors?"

Maybe being evasive wasn't the right call. It didn't explain that the entire Underworld would/could potentially bully her. The scope wasn't getting across.

But she wouldn't leave Gideon hanging out there as insufficient or unwilling. "It isn't his job to be my bodyguard," Eva said, her words as sharp as the sun's glint off the water. "I need to work a life-changing spell. One that will free me from these bullies. Forever. One of the ingredients I require is a mermaid scale."

"Ah."

"Whatever payment you ask, I'll provide." Somehow.

"That is a simple thing. We must exchange like for like."

It was *so* simple that Eva had to confirm they were on the same page. "You'll do it?"

"Yes. I would do it simply to put a smile on your face." The backs of his knuckles stroked down her cheek. She'd never been touched this much during a conversation with a stranger

before. It was kind of fun. A peek into a different culture. “But to put an end to suffering? There is no choice to be made.”

He was generous. “Wow. I’m very grateful. So you just want a strand of hair?”

“No. That is not like for like. There’s no sacrifice in giving up hair. And for your spell to work, you need it infused with the power of sacrifice.”

“What, then?”

“I give you a scale. You give me a toenail.”

Eww. Eva had not expected that. It wasn’t the tip of a pinky or anything that would lay her up in bed for a day. But it was definitely worse than hair. “What will you do with it?”

“Nothing. Let it float to the bottom of the ocean. It is the exchange that matters. The gift is that you are *willing* to give of yourself.”

“Okay.” No point thinking about it, or stalling. “How do I get your scale off?”

One agile-fingered hand squeezed her waist. “Can you stay afloat without my aid?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be right back.” Iosonas slid out from between her legs. Her body felt heavy, leaden without him to buoy her.

But he returned almost as soon as she watched his tail push him down. He held a white and brown shell with a sharply serrated edge. “Dig this in at the base.”

“Will it hurt you?”

“It must, or there is no sacrifice.”

Eva wasn’t a person who dithered. Decisions were always very black and white to her. Quick to make.

So it was unthinkable for her to second-guess a decision. Until right now. In the turquoise Aegean Sea, chatting with a merman while a half-angel waited for her.

Guilt at causing Iosonas pain flipped her stomach. “I’m

sorry.”

“Do not be, if your need is that great.”

“It really is.”

Iosonas gave a nod. It was either “go ahead” or “I understand.” Eva hoped it was both.

He swam up behind her. Gave support as he pulled her against his chest. With the tail wider than two male thighs between her legs, it was almost like sitting. The tail lifted and bent so she could reach it. Each scale shimmered. The iridescence was so complete that she couldn't say for sure what the base color was. They were more like prisms.

And the feel, ohhhhhh. Her nerve almost gave out again at the velvety softness. The closest texture she could think of was a manta ray. It was a crime to carve one off.

Eva hesitated. Stroked along a row of rounded scales.

If she bumped into a demon on the street, she'd nullify its powers. It would know. The people around would know, because whatever glamour it used to hide its true features would drop.

There would be panic.

Then there would be vengeance. The demon would come after her. Sometimes they beat her. Usually they postured and screamed and then slunk away, because they hated being powerless.

But others threatened more.

One day, they wouldn't stop at a threat.

To be safe, she had to rid herself of this power. It was the only way.

Eva pushed hard with the shell, wanting it over with as quickly as possible. A thin line of blue blood trickled onto her thumb.

As she yanked the scale free, a sharp pain lanced through her big toe.

Swallowing a yelp, Eva looked down. A crab had pulled off her toenail. That hurt more than expected.

Just...not as much as the last time a demon had kicked her for nullifying its powers, breaking two of her ribs...

Iosonas lifted her hand. Closed her fingers around his scale, and then kissed each knuckle. “My gift to you. May it help keep you safe.”

“Thank you.” Before she finished the words, he’d already begun swimming them back around the point.

“My offer stands, beautiful Evangeline. Come back any time, and we will find pleasure in each other.”

“You honored me twice today—with the gift of your heart and your scale.”

He stopped when the water was shallow enough for her to walk the rest of the way. “May the tide be in your favor.”

With a flash of his tail, Iosonas disappeared beneath the waves.

Gideon lay on the sand, braced on his elbows. He didn’t fool her for a minute. No doubt he could tell her precisely how many seconds were left until his ten minute limit ended. “Did you get it?”

“Yes.” She stubbed her toe on the edge of the sand shelf and pitched forward to her knees.

Before the waves ebbed away, Gideon had her in his arms and flew her to the shore. Which gave him the vantage point to see the blood on her foot. “What happened? What did that son of a bitch do to you?”

“Nothing serious. A toenail-ectomy.” It *was* bleeding more heavily now. Banging it on the sand hadn’t been a good move.

“Nothing serious?” Gideon pulled her discarded sock from her shoe and wrapped it around her toe, pressing down hard enough to stop the bleeding—and to make her wince. “Back in the Dark Ages, pulling out nails was the warm-up act of every professional torturer. I’ll find him. I’ll alert the Watchtower here in Greece. Get other *Nephilim* to help. Iosonas won’t get

away with this.”

Anger flushed his cheeks. Darkened his eyes. Pinched lines into place bracketing his mouth and eyes.

He. Was. Furious.

It was *amazing*.

Nobody had ever stood up for her before. Oh, her aunt had protected her in general. But the other dark angels all sneered at her for being worthless. For being weak. All but human. They laughed when demons tormented her.

They truly were nothing more than bullies.

And here, after all this time, was a man ready to wreak vengeance on her behalf. A man whom she hadn't known two weeks ago. A man whom she hadn't *liked* one week ago.

Eva was blown away. 100 percent unsure what to do about that feeling—any, *all* of the feelings she was developing for him.

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Gideon. It was consensual. And necessary for the spell. Iosonas did nothing wrong.”

“Are you sure? You were raised in Hell. You probably have a higher bar for necessary revenge than most.”

“Perhaps. But all he did was give of himself. Look.” She uncurled her fingers. “Touch it.”

“No.”

“I'm not touching another man's scale.”

Ah. That's right. He already *knew* how soft their scales were. The Eva of two weeks ago would've worried at that thought. That if Gideon had been with beautiful, seductive, soft mermaids—in addition to all the eligible women in Buffalo and probably many other places around the globe—he couldn't possibly mean it when he kissed *her*.

But today's Eva?

Knew that his first instinct was to mete out revenge for her. What was more romantic than that?

Plus? A freaking *merman* wanted to have sex with her. Also proof that perhaps she really was enough to at least intrigue Gideon, if not entrance him.

The question was...what did she plan to do with this newfound realization?

Chapter Eleven

Question of the day—could you really trust a Fallen Angel?

Gideon didn't want to come out and accuse Evangeline's aunt of lying. Misleading. Or even misremembering. On the one hand, she *was* an angel. On the other? She'd been sequestered in Hell for literally eons.

So when she'd volunteered that she knew exactly where the book of potential Keepers was kept, there'd been a round of eye-rolling skepticism traded between Gideon, Z, and Rhys. Couldn't ignore intel, though. Just had to verify if it was good or not.

Which meant hoofing it across a gravelly hillside under the blazing Grecian sun. He glanced at Evangeline. Her step had a noticeable hitch in it. Fucking merman. "Are you sure you're okay to keep walking?"

"Will you relax? You can't fly me. It's broad daylight. Delos is a major tourist attraction. We'd be noticed. Although the tourists would probably assume we're some super fancy aerial stunt duo *simulating* mythological creatures for their enjoyment."

He noticed she'd avoided saying if she was in pain.

"Not a bad backup career plan. As long as we convinced them it was all rigging and jetpacks, the tourist board would probably pay us a fortune."

"Well, when you're ready to retire, remember this day. And give me my ten percent cut."

She was joking...but she was still limping. God, he wanted to scoop her up and stop her pain. "We could come back at night."

"We're here now." Evangeline squinted those mist-gray eyes at him. "Plus, you don't know what you're looking for. Better to do this in daylight."

Gideon kicked at the gravel to scare away a lizard ahead of

them.

And to let out a microscopic amount of his frustration.

“Yeah. A secret Temple of Iris. That somehow survived thousands of years without being discovered on a small island where every single inch has been archeologically excavated. A temple supposedly revered by angelkind, since she was the ‘messenger goddess’ with wings in Greek mythology. That I’ve never fucking heard of.”

“How long were you at the *Nephilim* school? Maybe it gets covered only if you go back for graduate levels?”

He held back a low-hanging olive branch for her. “The Right and Holy Seraphic Order of the *Nephilim* has a training center, not a school.”

“Don’t get huffy.”

“Sorry. The whole Hogwarts comparison gets thrown around at us by demons, werewolves, witches, you name it. I’m sick of it.”

“Understandable. It would be fun to fly on that Ukrainian Ironbelly dragon, though.”

Gideon couldn’t let her romanticize it. Not even though he wouldn’t mind riding on a dragon.

“It’s not like Oxford. Or Harvard. *Nephilim* are brought there at the age of four. They’re trained. Trained to be soldiers. Trained to fight through injuries and pain. Trained to know all the different paranormal creatures—their powers, their weaknesses. Trained in warfare and the history that affects *our* world. There’s no going back for advanced courses in angelology. You learn. Then you leave to fight.”

“My point is, with such a, well, focused curriculum, there are probably things you didn’t learn.” Her whole face was red with heat and exertion. Gideon should’ve told her to bring a hat.

But he wasn’t used to looking after someone. Plus, he didn’t think Evangeline would appreciate his effort to do so. She had that iron core of survivor. Which was getting her through this

tough hike on a bleeding toe.

All he could do was attempt to distract her with conversation. “Eons of history? Yeah, we didn’t cover it all. Their library’s enormous. But if we’re supposed to revere this supposed goddess? Feels like something I’d know. Something they’d cover on day one.”

She placed her index finger against the side of her nose. “There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio.”

“What? Who’s Horatio?”

“It’s a quote from *Hamlet*. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

Yeah. And what he didn’t know could get them killed. Or just dehydrate them and waste a few hours wandering around the island.

They had about two hundred feet before they crested the hill. “Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

Why’d she need a reason? Women generally fell all over themselves to be touched by him.

He tried to ignore the pinch to his ego from her reticence. “Your aunt said we have to be ‘conjoined’ to access the Temple. The light and the dark as one.” Gideon doled out a slow, seductive smile. “Or we can find some other way to ‘conjoin.’”

Evangeline’s arm stopped halfway over to his. She stopped walking, too. “You don’t mean...we can’t...how would we even walk like that?”

Laughter rolled out of him. “First of all, I can walk ‘like that.’” Gideon made air quotes. “I can fly ‘like that,’ too.”

“Really? That’s...well...that’s certainly intriguing.”

As was her response. Maybe she was guarded, not reticent. Evangeline wasn’t one who had to work to find words. Maybe her curiosity was overcoming her caution.

Drenched in sweat on this desolate rock was not the time to

go down that path, though. This was a mission.

He took her hand and interlaced their fingers. Did a shitty job of ignoring how right it felt. “Secondly, I was only offering to pick you up and carry you. But now I know where your mind goes, given half a chance.” Gideon gave her an overly big, open-mouthed wink. “You’re part succubus, aren’t you? Feel free to admit it.”

“Stop.” Her other arm came around to whack him in the chest. “We’re approaching a sacred temple site. No talking about sex.”

“You started it.”

“I didn’t. I misconstrued. I thought you started it. I wouldn’t.” Her words tumbled over one another. It had Gideon laughing even harder. It was so fun to wind Evangeline up.

And she *definitely* appeared distracted from—oblivious to—the pain of her toe.

“For the record? If you feel like you can’t get enough? That’s because you haven’t been with me yet.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I thought people stopped using that word when drawing rooms and cravats went out of style.”

“You seem well versed. Secret binger of *Bridgerton*?”

Like he’d admit it. The blizzard weekend they’d decided to mockingly watch one episode and turn it into a drinking game...and they’d ended up watching a whole season. Rhys and Zavier had made a solemn vow—in blood—with him to never reveal the humiliating truth to anyone.

Luckily, he didn’t have to answer. Because they hit some invisible border. Electricity crackled in his feet with the next step. And then it was gone.

But the temple was revealed in front of them where the hilltop had been barren and empty seconds ago.

Gideon let out a long, low whistle. “That’s one hell of a trick.”

The temple looked similar to the Temple of Apollo on the other side of the island. Except that this one wasn't in crumbling ruins. Typical Greek columns, pointed roof, gold-covered scene depicting Iris flying somewhere. The colors were vibrant. As if it was built a year ago, rather than back in the fourth century BC.

The most noticeable feature of the temple to the goddess of messengers and rainbows? An *actual* rainbow spearing out of the roof and arcing into the sea.

As a *Nephilim*, Gideon had some control of the elements. He could chill a bottle of wine or start a fire. He had no freaking idea how it was possible for a rainbow to be permanently affixed to a structure.

“So we're in the right place.” Evangeline's words were hushed. “Now what?”

They climbed the steps. Gideon positioned himself slightly in front of Evangeline. There was plenty of trickery by the gods in those ancient tales.

They stopped on the top step and peered between the columns into the shade. The quiet was absolute.

“There's nobody here.”

Evangeline went on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. “A pair of light and dark angels guard the path to Hell's prisons. Another pair guard the entrance to Heaven. Doesn't it seem like there should be a pair here, guarding the Book of Keepers?”

“Yeah. It really does. Especially if the only way to access this place”—he raised their still intertwined hands—“is as a combined unit.”

“Do you really think it's been here as long as the ruins on the rest of the island?”

“I don't see anyone spending the time or money to do this today. Not when they could buy a seat on a rocket to the moon. Plus, there's the whole magical reveal thing. This place hums with power.”

“Should we start looking around?”

The emptiness made Gideon wary. “Yeah. We shouldn’t linger too long, though.”

Straight ahead was a golden statue of a female with widespread wings. They stepped across the threshold.

Light flashed, so searingly bright that Gideon’s eyes slammed shut instinctively. He thrust Evangeline behind him. Extended his wings to shield her.

When he forced himself to look, the light had dissipated. It wasn’t gone, though.

No, it streamed out in all directions from the angel in front of them.

A full-blooded angel, from the omnidirectional glow and the halo. He was more vibrant energy than solid flesh.

Gideon slammed his wings down. Didn’t feel like a good move to be in a fighting stance when greeting an angel. Especially with the long-standing, well-known disdain/loathing that angels had for *Nephilim*. Ten to one he got called a half-breed at least once in this conversation.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noted that Evangeline had her hands covering her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s an angel.”

“That’s not okay.” And another time, he’d remember to tease her at how she squeaked out the words. “I’m from Hell, remember?”

“You are partly of me, child. I will not harm you. I am Nidbai.” The deep voice thrummed inside every cell of Gideon’s body.

Gideon patted his chest. “Gideon Durand.” Then he grabbed Evangeline’s hand. Figured she might need some reassurance. “This is Evangeline Thayer. Nice to meet you. This is some temple you’ve got.” When in doubt, lead with a compliment.

“Why do you intrude in the sacred Temple of Iris?”

For fuck’s sake. They hadn’t helicoptered in on a zip line. Plus, whatever test there was, they’d passed when they *made* the Temple appear.

Or maybe he was just extra prickly—justifiably—due to knowing that all angels saw him as dirt.

“There’s no doorbell. Hell, there aren’t any doors. So yeah, we walked right in. Did we skip signing a guestbook?”

“You must be admitted.”

Was there a Temple cat that had to raise its paw in acceptance? This was starting to piss Gideon off. “By whom?”

Eyes the same yellow as the sun flashed, like the wink of a laser. “The guardians of the temple.”

“Look, we’re the only ones here. I don’t know what else to tell you. Obviously we’re not human tourists who made a wrong turn. We followed the instructions to get here.”

Nidbai flashed away. The wake from his powerful wing thrust—even only half materialized—whooshed Evangeline’s hair to blanket his face and chest. By the time gravity did its thing and it cleared, Nidbai was back.

“We are alone here.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake! “Yeah. I said that. Why would I bother lying to an *angel*?”

“There are supposed to be guardians. A pair of angels, light and dark, to guard the Temple and the Book.” He became a little more solid as he paced away from them toward a podium just past the statue. “This is unheard of. This is unacceptable. The Book must be protected.”

Aha! At least now they knew the Book of Keepers was real.

“Do all you angel guardians have a clubhouse? Could you maybe take a roll call? Nudge the ones who are slacking off?” Evangeline projected her voice along the length of the Temple. It echoed a bit off the marble of the floor and ceiling. “Because this is getting ridiculous, with Hell’s path unguarded and now the Book.”

One of the things Gideon really liked about Evangeline was her fearlessness. Or, more likely, her ability to push through fear and do what needed to be done.

Nidbai flashed back to stand right in front of them. “Another pair is not at their post?”

“Not as of three days ago.”

It didn’t pay to play only defense. In soccer and in life. Gideon switched to offense. “How did you know we were here?”

“I was alerted by your combined light and dark energy when you entered. I am the scribe of the Book of Keepers. I am connected to it, and sense when there is a surge of power around it.”

Gideon squeezed Evangeline’s hand hard. Hoped she got the signal not to ask Nidbai, “Why didn’t you sense that the Book was abandoned?”

“Well, we’re glad you popped on down. Because we’re here for the Book.”

“No.”

He raised his hands, palms up. Placatingly. “Not to take it. Just to look at it.”

“No.”

He’d circle back to that one. “Anyone else snuck a peek at it recently? Seeing as how you sense all those who get close?”

“I do not know. I sensed you two because you are different. The combination of you...it is special. Something I haven’t felt before.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard that. But it’s never been phrased as a compliment before.”

Maybe a *Nephilim* and a dark angel didn’t team up on a regular basis. But if Charmaine had told them that was how to access the Temple, that meant it *had* happened before.

It didn’t make sense. And anything that didn’t make sense on a mission usually turned out to be important. Or dangerous. Or both.

“Why are we special? How?”

That light pulsed in Nidbai's eyes again. "It is not for me to say."

Annoying.

Gideon did some mental calculations. There'd be no coming back unnoticed. Nidbai would sense them. Plus, no doubt he'd scoot back to Heaven and kick some butt to make sure this place wasn't left unguarded again. That left the truth as their only option.

"Look, Keepers are dying before their time. They're being murdered. Some of their *Nephilim* protectors, too. The only way that can happen is if someone's accessing the Book."

"Impossible."

"Is there another list of Keepers lying around anywhere?"

"No."

"Then it's not impossible. It's happened. Repeatedly. But we're going to catch whoever's doing it. The only way is to see who's next in line to become a Keeper. Watch them. Protect them."

"It will not be easy. The power and cunning to execute such an abomination of a plan—it will be the fight of your life."

It was one thing when a mouthy demon snarled that threat at them before a fight. It was entirely another to hear it from an all-powerful celestial being. Like an *anti-pep* talk.

Giving up wasn't an option, though.

Gideon shrugged. "Yeah, well, we've heard that before. Me and my partners? We can handle ourselves."

"Can you?" Nidbai touched Evangeline's cheek.

"I'm big on not tolerating injustice. Murder seems like the ultimate injustice. Whatever it takes for me to help stop this? I won't back down from it."

"You are unique. May I see your wings?"

That was personal. And weird. Nidbai was a full-blood angel. Surrounded all day long by other angels with wings.

Eva's eyes widened, as if stunned by the request.

"This is nothing compared to the last request you granted," Gideon said, jerking his chin at her toe. "Just show him."

After putting a few steps of distance between them, she flared her wings. Gideon unabashedly stared.

The rounded tops were pure white. Then, so slowly that he couldn't point to exactly where it started, the coloring merged and bled into silver. Not gray, like her eyes. But an actual shiny silver, like mercury. A thin line of black edged the bottom.

Gideon had never seen feathers *shine* before.

"May I have a feather?" Nidbai asked as he floated closer. He'd dialed back the reverberation in his voice, but Gideon's nerve endings quivered when the angel spoke.

Evangeline whisked her wing away from him. "If we get to look at the Book."

Atta girl! Gideon barely held back a whoop.

"This information is never shared. There is to be no foreknowledge. But your combination of light and dark is so compelling—" The angel broke off. Flew to the podium, then brought the Book back with him. "You may look at the two pages where it is open. No more. Use your device to record it, for there will be no second granting of this request."

Whipping out his phone, Gideon snapped a half dozen photos. Even shot a quick video for safety.

When he finished, Evangeline held out a feather. It was from the exact center of her shading—neither white nor silver. "Thank you, Nidbai. We understand the enormity of this gesture."

"You may come back, once you are whole." The angel shifted his celestial-bright gaze to Gideon. "You may not return unless you discover the evil and destroy it."

Funny how that mirrored the threats made by Caraxis every time he gave them a mission. Did these guys really think he needed the extra motivation? Like catching a supernatural

serial killer wasn't enough reason for Gideon to buckle down and try real hard?

"That's the plan."

"What do you mean by—" Evangeline gasped.

They weren't in the Temple anymore. They were just on the brown, empty hilltop.

WTF? "Guess he was done with us. Or realized I was about to ask for a cold beer and some snacks."

Evangeline dug her fingers into his arm. "Why was he harping about my being unique? Because I don't have any real dark angel powers? Why'd he act like that was a good thing? And how am I not whole? How am I supposed to *get* whole? What am I lacking?"

"Whoa, whoa. I don't know anything more than you do. Nidbai's cryptic. And he clearly liked you *way* more than me."

"Check your phone. I don't care that he kicked us out. We're not budging until we're certain those photos are viable."

"Good call." It took only a few taps to confirm. Then a few more to immediately email them to the guys.

Eva huffed out a breath. "I think I'm going to need, oh, about a week to process what just happened. It was incredible."

"It was infuriating. Uh, we're *already* trying to stop the next murder. It's why we're here. Where does he get off making it sound like his own command?"

"He helped us. That's all that matters."

"No. He made us *bargain* for his help. That's very different." That'd leave a bitter taste in Gideon's mouth for a long time. What was with the males on Delos taking things from Evangeline's body?

He wanted to hit someone. Exact a toll like they had from her. It wasn't right.

"It was a feather. That I never use. It cost me nothing, Gideon." She gentled her grip. Slid her hand down to interlace

with his once more. “This is our best lead so far.”

He cycled back to the torrent of words she’d just unleashed. “You’re not lacking anything, Evangeline. Not one damned thing. Don’t let him put that in your head.”

“Now who’s the one giving commands?” she teased. But she also rested her head against his chest.

From there, it was only natural to gather her into an embrace. For her comfort and for his. It wasn’t every day Gideon met an angel and zipped into another dimension—and then *back*.

“How about we take a damn minute?” he murmured into her hair.

“I’d like that.” She wrapped her arms around his waist, hands clutching hard at his lats. “Isn’t it selfish, though? What if the next Keeper’s murdered while we’re catching our breath?”

“We’ve got time. Did you really look at those pages?”

“Not really. Gold handwriting. Oh geez, do you think it’s real gold?”

“It could be written in cherubim spit, for all that it matters. I couldn’t read it.”

“You can read and speak every language on earth.”

“Yeah. On *earth*. The Book’s written in the language of the angels.” It hadn’t even looked like letters to him. Some letters, some shapes, even a few glyphs and kanji-esque characters. “It has to be translated. Think your aunt could do it?”

“As a Fallen? I don’t know.”

That was his concern, too. “Guess that means we have to reach out to Master Caraxis again.”

“But Rhys or Zavier would figure that out, right? We could stay here for an hour, play tourist. Eat some feta and olives and drink retsina?”

“You know how humans have the Tooth Fairy? Kid gets a buck when he loses a tooth?”

“Yes.”

“I think a long lunch in Mykonos on a shady patio on the edge of the sea is the going rate for losing a feather and a nail.”

“Mmm. That sounds right.” She plucked another feather. Waved it under his nose. “What do I get for losing a second feather?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to offer her anything.

Anything.

Chapter Twelve

“I didn’t like how today went,” Gideon grouched.

Wow. The man needed to lower his bar for what constituted a good day. Eva squinted at him. “Seriously? We met an *angel*.”

Gideon had also explained to her, on their long trudge back to the waterfall portal, that the Temple hadn’t pulled a house-landing-in-Oz move and almost squished them. Celestial beings—the ones not condemned to Hell, anyway—had the ability to switch between dimensions.

Eva didn’t know the name of where they’d shifted to. Or how it was any different—aside from housing the Temple of Iris—from *this* dimension. But she knew it was utterly cool that she’d been elsewhere.

It’d been a stellar day.

Especially after their wine-drenched, waterfront lunch. Gideon had settled her. Kept the conversation light. Teased her. Complimented her outrageously through the flight back. It was exactly the bubble of comfort she’d needed to come to terms with everything that had happened.

Now she’d moved through the shock and could appreciate the events of the day.

Guess it was her turn to do the same for Gideon. It was... chivalrous of him to postpone his own freak-out to help her through hers.

“You’re a dark angel.” He desultorily waved a lemon crinkle cookie in her direction. Apparently, Maisy and Liss baked to celebrate good days *and* to wipe away bad days. There were always cookies in this kitchen. “Emphasis on the word ‘angel.’ Why are you fangirling all over Nidbai?”

“In comparison to him? My so-called nothing of an angelic power? That’s like comparing an earthworm to a monorail, because they both move and are tubular.” He really *was* in a mood. *Nephilim* weren’t allowed in Heaven. It had to be a rare

meeting for him, too.

Was that it?

Was Nidbai representative of the itch he couldn't scratch? The barbed pebble in his shoe? The reminder of all the things he couldn't be or do because of his human side?

A grumble stirred, deep in his throat. "Point is, I was worried about you. In the ocean."

Tossing her head, Eva said, "I can swim." Sure, she'd only learned in college. Today was her first time in an ocean. But she could float and tread water and Gideon could just put a muzzle on his unnecessary and unmasked-for worry.

He dragged in a long breath. Whooshed it out. "You can't breathe underwater like Iosonas."

"Neither can you," she snapped back.

"It would've been simple for him to hold you under until you blacked out."

"Why *would* he?" And why was Gideon harping on about it?

They were sitting in Maisy's backyard. Twinkle lights were strung from the eaves of the porch. Crickets and cicadas made a hypnotic background white noise. Tiki torches flickered along the fence. It was pleasant and peaceful and Gideon was splatting his ridiculous hindsight concerns all over it.

Even if he was now rerunning the day in his head, they couldn't go back and change anything.

Plus, today had been *a lot* for her. But for a *Nephilim* who battled untold creatures on a daily basis? It didn't make sense that he was this shaken. Or, what shaken looked like on the male of the species who revealed emotion only by being a grouch.

Copping a 'tude. A dated phrase. One she'd picked up from old movies. But it fit Gideon to a T tonight.

He thwapped two fingers, repeatedly, on the wooden arm of the bright green Adirondack chair. "You can't protect

yourself.”

Her patience with his mood went only so far.

It was about to dead-end.

“And yet, I’ve kept myself alive and in one piece for thirty years—more than half of those spent in Hell. I must be doing something right.”

Because she wasn’t *helpless*. Eva was smart. Savvy. Things that could be far more useful in the long run than pepper spray or being a black belt.

Gideon’s shoes scraped restlessly along the wood of the porch. “What can you do?”

A crazy amount of long division in her head, according to her professors. Whistle the harmony line to any song she’d heard at least once. And apparently enthrall a merman with just one look. Oh yes, she’d be smug about that forever.

Probably not what he was angling for, though. Eva nibbled at the edge of her own cookie. “What do you mean?”

“To protect yourself.”

For crying out loud! Gideon had signed up to *be* her bodyguard as long as they worked together. Was he attempting to figure out how he could just dial those services in? “Technically, nothing. Aside from screaming loudly. Oh, and making sure to stay out of dicey situations in the first place.”

“What about your gorgeous wings? Do you use ’em?”

Eva was still peeved at him. But something low in her belly fluttered at his description of her wings. “No. Never. I live fully as a human.”

The tapping restarted. “Explain why again?”

The last vestiges of their lovely, flirtatious lunch disintegrated at his question. Eva dropped her cookie back to the plate. Dusted off her fingers. And leaned forward to stare at the flickering lantern on the porch rail.

That’s what she’d felt like, down in Hell.

Full of light, but barely able to hold firm. Merely flickering in all that darkness. All too easy for someone or something to extinguish.

“Your people see me as a dark thing not to be trusted. My people see me as useless—but dangerous to them. And thus not to be trusted. Humans see only *me*.”

“I see you, Evangeline.” His smooth baritone was quiet. No longer argumentative.

Right. She refused to fall for his easy flirting, rolled out so she’d stop arguing. He saw a *pawn*. “As the help I can be in the fight against evil? As an important tool in your search for this murderer?”

“No. Well, yes, but those are the last pieces I see of you.”

Eva wanted to believe him. But life had proven, time after time, that nobody wanted the real her. It was easy to guess what Gideon saw her as.

“Mmm. As another woman you’d like to dally with naked for a few hours?”

“Damn it.” He slapped his entire palm against the chair. “You’re not just insulting me with that assessment. You’re insulting yourself.”

That had truly not occurred to her. “Fine. What do you see in me that nobody else in Hell or on Earth does?” Did that come out as a sarcastic challenge? Probably. But that was what she and Gideon did. They snarked. They sassed. They pushed.

Of course, they’d also begun laughing. Teasing.

Flirting.

Trusting.

Gideon’s eyes were simply dark smudges in the depths of the night. But the connection they held with hers was as intense as anything she’d ever felt. “You’re so brave and strong. Like a soldier, but without the training to give you a reason to be brave. You simply are.”

What was she supposed to do with a *serious* Gideon? His

compliments stole her breath away.

And this moment was equally intense as when she'd gone toe to glowing toe with an angel just a few hours ago.

"I...well, thank you."

"You chose to be alone rather than be bullied. Gave up everything you knew for uncertainty. You followed your heart. Like we did when we left the Order." Gideon came around to kneel before her. He sandwiched her hands in his. "Your inner spirit—it resonates with me. Like I'm looking in a mirror. It's uncanny."

She almost laughed out loud. There could not be two more different people. Literally. Gideon was of the light, she was dark. He was a consummate flirt and playboy; she was a loner with little romantic experience. His literal mission in life was to use his powers and abilities for good. To stand and fight evil in every form.

Whereas she had no power and was too scared to stand up against darkness. She'd simply run away from it.

But Eva caught herself.

Stopped the dry laughter from escaping.

Because he'd slipped in a humdinger of a sentence that she could use to pry open the door to his past. "Hang on. Why *did* you leave the Order? How are you like me?"

Letting go of her hands, he rolled back on his heels and stood. "It's a long story."

Did he actually think that would make her *less* interested?

Aunt Charmaine had told her that no one else had ever—in all of celestial history—left the Right and Seraphic Order of the *Nephilim*. Except for Rhys, Gideon, and Xavier.

The story as to *why* had to be compelling.

And Eva very, very much wanted to peel back the polished outer layer and see to Gideon's core.

"We've got a plate of cookies to work through. Maisy's back at the Watchtower with Rhys. Liss is bartending until the wee

hours of the morning. Aunt Charmaine's sleeping off the mega-migraine she got trying to read the language in the Book." She leaned back, crossing her ankles. "Let's hear it."

"It's not that thrilling. Your standard yarn about stubborn people. Neither side backs down. So one side walks away."

Men.

He was avoiding truly answering. Avoiding just as hard as Eva avoided sugar-free maple syrup. "That's not even as long as a tweet. You don't give up your literally God-given job without good reason. Please, Gideon. Tell me."

He raked one hand through his thick golden hair. Then he held it at the base of his skull as if the very telling gave him a headache. "Being in the Order isn't a calling. There's no choice. You're removed from your family. Period. You train. You're told this is what you *will* do with your life, the same way you're told that the sky is blue and rain is wet."

"That's unconscionable."

"Feel free to go up against the entire celestial order and see how far you get with sharing that opinion. Remember, to them, we're disposable. Like paper towels. We clean up messes. If one shreds, you grab another."

It was common knowledge in Hell. The way the full-blood angels looked down on the half-breeds. But it was a whole different thing to hear it described by someone who'd suffered from its injustice.

This was a mistake.

Eva was *so* selfish for pushing him to reveal the story. She shouldn't force him to relive something that was no doubt painful. "You know what? I was wrong. I shouldn't pry into your life. You don't have to continue."

"Don't like the looks of what's at the bottom of the box, Pandora? Tough." His usual smirk ghosted across his face. "We're expected to go on every mission. No questions. Not enough soliciting opinions from those of us out there doing the fighting. You know what that leads to? Dead bodies."

“Did you have a friend die?”

“We’re not encouraged to, ah, cultivate deep friendships. Theory is that it keeps you from making strategic choices in the field. The brotherhood I’ve got rocking with Rhys and Xavier is rare. So, yeah. We watched a lot of other *Nephilim* die.”

The sun-bright charmer had slipped away. The raw, seasoned warrior at his core was the one sharing. His honesty about the painful past rocked her. “I’m sorry.”

Gideon jerked a shoulder. Twitched one side of his mouth up. “You grew up in Hell. I’m sure you saw as bad happen ten times every Tuesday.”

“Sometimes. More often on Thursdays,” she deadpanned.

“Well, we started getting sick of it. You fight, in this eternal war, of course there’ll be casualties. The avoidable ones? Those got to us. We pushed back harder. Sometimes it worked. Often not. The final straw was—”

He broke off.

Eva didn’t know how many years ago it had been. Not recent, for sure. And it still affected him. She could see his Adam’s apple working in profile.

She got up. Stood beside him at the rail and reached out with just her pinkie to brush against his hand.

Gideon grabbed onto it like a lifeline.

“It was one of the worst weeks of my life. We *told* Kerr and Dimitris not to go on the mission. Not yet. We needed more time to work on counterspells, arrange more backup. But the orders were given. They obeyed. They were good soldiers—who died for it. For nothing.”

It didn’t take a telescope to see where this was going. “You had to go get them, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. The next day. When we finally had the backup. We killed the demons, collected what was left of their bodies. Mangled. Half-eaten.” His hand spasmed around hers. “Then the three of us quit.”

“Just like that?” From the way he’d described it, the Order was worse than a cult. Or the Hotel California. You could enter, but you could never leave.

“We didn’t—what is it Maisy says?—just flounce. The idea had been brewing for years.”

“I’ll bet.” Sounded like they’d lived as almost indentured servants. Well, soldiers.

He stared off into the darkness. “There’s a chance of not coming back on every mission. That’s the cost of fighting demons. We accept it. We’re ready for it, to save humans. But we can do more good, protect more, fight longer, if *Nephilim* are strategic. If we take calculated risks, instead of every damn risk.”

“If you’re treated with respect. Like *your* lives matter, too.”

“Yeah.”

Fury blazed through her. “That should be the bare minimum.”

Gideon did a snap/finger-gun combo. “You just passed the entrance test. You can be on *our* team, Evangeline.”

“No thank you. I’m trying to remove myself from the playing field, remember?”

“We’ll see.”

Oooh. She hated it when people acted like they knew her mind better than she did. Her aunt, who’d told her she’d regret leaving Hell. A college professor who insisted she’d deeply enjoy the freaking one-thousand-five-hundred-page paperback of *Les Miserables*. And now this smugly stubborn man.

But now wasn’t the moment to argue with a man revealing such torturous truths.

Didn’t mean she wouldn’t remember to circle back around to it at a later date...

“I’m still confused. How could you just walk away? Remember, I’ve lived with someone who committed celestial insurrection. Aunt Charmaine and her friends didn’t like the

treatment up in Heaven—not that she’s ever laid out the reasons *why* like you did—and when they objected, they were banned. Shunted to Hell. Stripped of many powers.”

“See, you forgot the part about how we’re not full angels and don’t so much matter to anyone.”

Like demons. Except she’d really expected better of Heaven. “Seriously? They just let you walk? Like leaving a movie theater after you head bob ten minutes in?”

“There was a negotiation, sure. We didn’t break any celestial rules. Just...opted out of the game. Which, to this day, stands as the most calculated risk we’ve ever taken.”

Talk about an understatement. It might be a rude question to ask the seasoned warrior, but Eva couldn’t hold back. “Were you scared?”

Gideon turned back around to lean against the railing. He let out a hollow laugh. “Hell, yeah. It’s no secret what happened to Lucifer Morningstar and his band of conscientious objectors. But being brave? That’s being scared and doing the right thing anyway. Hence my original point. You’re the queen of that move.”

“Some would call that stupid.” Including her. Often.

“Sometimes that’d be true. Turns out they valued us enough as their top soldiers to let us go, as long as we agreed to maintain contact and work for them on a contract basis. And staff the Watchtower.”

“The one perched in the frozen Canadian wasteland?” she teased. Because it turned out to be quite difficult seeing this side of Gideon. Eva needed to make him smile again. Even if only a little. “Were they perhaps sending a passive-aggressive message of their disapproval?”

“Yeah, nobody offered us the prime falls in Congo or Argentina. Just Canada. At least there are no snakes falling out of trees here.”

“Cold comfort. Literally.”

Even that cheesy joke didn’t pry a smile out of him.

“Usually the Watchtowers are assigned to injured or old *Nephilim*.”

That brought to mind every old joke she'd heard on the topic in classic, black-and-white movies. Like trying to find a virgin in a whorehouse. An honest man in Congress. “This sounds crass, but...there can't be many *Nephilim* who survive to be very old or handicapped. Not with the life you lead.”

“Not with the choices the current leadership makes,” he corrected. “*We're* careful. Strategic. The three of us intend to stick around here for a good long while. But, yeah, the Order was happy to pawn the Niagara Watchtower off on us.”

“It's immensely better than my two-bedroom condo. I'd say you came out of the negotiations well, overall.”

“We tell ourselves that we're saving other *Nephilim* when we feed Master Caraxis intel on our missions. That it isn't about helping the Order, but keeping our friends alive. And we choose what jobs to accept when they desperately need our help. Xavier shamelessly overcharges them. We call the shots.”

“You really did follow your hearts when you quit.”

“We've got a dagger that belonged to Dimitris and a sword that was Kerr's. Stripped off their bloodied corpses before the Order's armorer could get them. One's mounted at the Watchtower, one at our house in Buffalo. We won't ever forget them.”

“Their deaths gave you the strength to push back. To save yourselves.”

“Yeah.” Gideon shifted to cup her face with his hands. “We left what we knew. We risked everything. For a better life. Just like you did.”

Well.

With all that backstory in place? Eva agreed. They did share similarities. And it made her feel closer to him. Like their lives were connected on a deeper level.

It was nonsense.

Except for when she looked into the darkness of his eyes,

saw the softening of his mouth as he gazed back at her. “I...I guess you’re right.”

“You’re amazing, Evangeline. I haven’t told that story to, well, anyone. Ever. Didn’t know if I’d be able to.” Gideon tilted his head until their foreheads touched. “I needed to let that all out. Thank you.”

“Thank you for trusting me with it. I understand better why you weren’t so thrilled with meeting Nidbai. You don’t know what you’ll get with an angel.”

“Nope. To be fair, he did us a solid, showing the pages.”

“You’re not prejudiced against all angels.”

“Just until they show their true colors. Like you have.”

“I’m about as colorless as they come.” Literally, with her pale blond complexion, and metaphorically, with her powerless, small life trying to remain anonymous.

“Hard disagree. You’re fiery as hell when you’re pissed off. And I know a way to tease some color into those cheeks...”

She thought he was swooping in for a kiss. Instead, he rotated her arm to plant a kiss in the center of her palm. Gideon licked his way slowly up to the crook of her elbow—an unexpectedly erogenous zone.

Evidently the sharing was over. Which was okay. He’d given her a lot to consider.

Namely, that Gideon was deeply loyal, brave, and caring.

And that those traits were far more representative of him than the playboy façade.

The trouble was that she knew how to flippantly fight with the playboy. It was easy to keep him at arm’s length.

This Gideon? The man who was so upset that she couldn’t protect herself? He was burrowing under her skin.

Toward her heart.

Eva had no shield against that.

Chapter Thirteen

“I can’t believe we’re in Iraq. If we’re spotted, this’ll turn into a geopolitical nightmare.” Rhys dropped their bag of gear behind an abandoned hut. He had to dodge the fat sheep loitering in its shade. “I don’t think the State Department would support our unsanctioned secret mission.”

Zavier finished chugging from the CamelBak and passed it over. “If there’s really a *Lamatsu* here? And it’s spotted by anyone? That’ll cause a hell of a lot more panic than three Americans wandering around Iraq.”

“Tell yourself we’re in Babylonia,” Gideon suggested. “Sounds way less scary.”

“Babylonia hasn’t existed for centuries.”

So damn literal. He snatched the water away from Rhys. “You’re a pain in the ass. Just trying to help.”

“Sorry. This is going to be a tough one. I’m wound a little tight.” It was rare for Rhys to admit to nerves before a mission. Maybe being in love really had softened him.

“If you were a golf ball, you wouldn’t be any tighter. We’ve got this.” Gideon looked across the rolling green hills of Northern Iraq, dotted with black goats and poplar trees. They were definitely alone, which meant their biggest unknown of any mission—protecting humans—was out of the picture.

Zavier peered around the corner of the hut. Even though they’d thoroughly checked the perimeters before landing, oh, thirty seconds ago. His shoulder brushed the dry palm fronds covering the sides, and the sound made him twitch. “Maybe.”

“Not helping, Z.”

Because the bitch of it was that finding the murderers for Caraxis had to be pigeonholed as a *side* gig. They still had to protect humanity on the daily. So, when they were called to get rid of a horrible scourge killing humans all over the Iraqi countryside? They had to fucking show up and do the job.

Zavier unfolded a big-ass tarp. Anchored each corner with a fat candle. “We’re summoning a demon god from the first century B.C. to drag an equally ancient demon goddess back to Hell. It’s like throwing two beta fish into the same bowl and watching to see who wins.”

Gideon appreciated the analogy. Knew it wouldn’t do anything for Rhys, though. Reminding him of the logistics was a better way to get him in the right headspace. “We have a contract with *Pazazu*. He won’t get his payment if he doesn’t drag her bitch ass back to Hell. It’s a simple transaction.”

“Again, first century demon gods,” Xavier commented as he spun two daggers before re-sheathing them at his wrists. “They haven’t lasted this long by being stupid.”

They already knew the danger. They’d talked through all the possibilities as they built the mission. Gideon’s role was to get all three of them on the same page. “No, but you know what does happen after this long? Demon gods get lazy. Assume nobody would dare try to bring them down.”

“What’d he end up charging us, anyway?”

Hellfire. Xavier was usually the one mentally counting the money, not Rhys. “You don’t want to know.”

Rhys jerked his head up from where he’d been texting Maisy to let her know they’d arrived safely. Like a freaking salesman dutifully doing the airport text after a commuter flight. “I do. Now more than ever.”

Before Gideon could figure out a way to avoid telling him, Z offered up, “Every Scarlett Johansson movie on Blu-ray and a vat of strawberry and aloe juice.”

“I don’t...I just... *Hellfire*.” Rhys winced and tugged at his hair.

Gideon agreed. There were no words for what they assumed might happen with that payment. “Yeah.”

“Let’s get this over with. I fucking hate it when we have to play nice with demon spawn.”

Quickly, they drew a chalk circle on the tarp, large enough

to hold the three of them. Crushed the aloe and witchweed in a pestle far *outside* their circle. Dropped in the emailed contract they'd made with the creature. Placed handcuffs and rope around it, to symbolize the way that *Pazazu* would be imprisoned by them until he finished their agreed-upon task. Then they sprinkled dried blood on top.

Gideon carved a triangle in the dirt around it with the tip of his katana. "The good news is that when I was shopping for this blood, the butcher gave me a tomahawk steak the size of Kentucky."

Rhys pushed out his hands to keep him at bay. "If the *Lamatsu's* as revolting as legend says? I won't be in the mood for dinner."

"Obviously."

Zavier hovered right at the roofline, looking over it at the rest of the village. This hut was on the outer rim, but by the path with the most traffic in and out. The path the locals swore the *Lamatsu* took every twelfth night. "We should save it to celebrate completing the next step in our mission for Caraxis."

"What next step? We're still waiting for a translation on those pages from the Book." Rhys shook his head. "Reaching out to the angel from *Maisy's* transition—she treated her fairly. Feels like we can trust *Eliohu*, but—"

"How weird is it that we're talking about not trusting angels?" Gideon broke in. Because this was a seismic shift in everything they knew about celestials. "We don't like 'em, since they hate us. Not trusting, though—that's a whole different ballgame. They hold grudges and give us attitude and can be sneaky, but we've always assumed celestials were freaking trustworthy."

"Agreed. *Eliohu's* the safest bet. If she'd wanted to murder Keepers, she would've let *Maisy* die during her Testing. She'll help. But angels don't get the urgency of how time moves down here. She could get back to us in minutes or in a week. We're dead in the water until then."

Z landed and vanished his wings with a sharp snap that

whooshed dirt over the tarp. “Yeah, those pages aren’t enough.”

The man got up on the wrong side of the bed. *And* needed to get laid. *And* probably needed a threesome to truly unkink his mood. *Z* was always dark—well, since his near-fatal incident—but today he was downright depressing with it.

“Pretty sure it lists the next ten Keepers. We’ll catch whoever’s behind these murders before they can plow through eleven of ’em.”

“You’re not seeing the bigger picture. Caraxis said they’ve been killing the Keepers *and* the *Nephilim*.”

Gideon flipped a lighter in the air. “So?”

Crossing his arms, *Zavier* said, “So, we need to know which *Nephilim* are set to be matched with the Keepers.”

Okay, it was a good point. It was also impossible. “You want to look at the Scroll of *Nephilim*? There’s no way.” It was like a family tree/birth certificate/yellow pages of all *Nephilim*. It was the only listing of all those who’d died in battle.

It was sacred.

Almost on top of him, *Rhys* added, “They won’t give it to us.”

A slow smirk, paired with the crossed arms, gave *Z* heist vibes of a guy about to rob every Swiss bank simultaneously. “Who says we’re asking permission?”

There were rules upon rules upon more rules in the Order. Just because they disagreed with them didn’t mean there were ways to get around them. That’s why they’d quit.

“How else would we see it, without a formal request?”

The smugness of his smirk increased to an intolerable level. “Wasn’t planning on asking for it to come down through an interlibrary loan.”

Gideon paced around the tarp. What reeds remained on the roof shivered in the hot wind. “Well, we can’t ask Master Caraxis.”

“Why not?” Rhys challenged. “He asked for our help.”

On the surface, anyway. “Unless that was a cover. A sleight of hand to keep us from looking at him. What if he’s in on it? We won’t know until we’ve put more pieces together.”

Assuming Caraxis was aboveboard would be stupid. It’d be simple for him to set them up as fall guys. The known rebels.

“How else are we supposed to do this, without asking him?”

Z shrugged. “We just happen to be in the area and happen to get a look.”

Gideon looked at Rhys, to be sure he’d heard correctly. A WTF look widened his friend’s eyes. Together, they turned to glare at Zavier. “You *happen* to be out of your damn mind.”

“Hey, it’s a plan. Didn’t say it was great. But all you two came up with was to sit on our hands and wait.”

Right. They were just “waiting.” That was like accusing a cancer patient of “waiting” for a tumor to disappear after they’d had surgery, done six rounds of chemo, and started radiation. Whatever had crawled up his ass clearly had thorns. And poison-tipped scales. And a barbed tail.

“For fuck’s sake, Z! We’re not on a Costa Rican beach drinking beer. We’re about to trap an ancient demon goddess. Sometimes you have to be patient for intel to roll in.”

“Yeah. And sometimes you have to nail your balls back on your body and go after it yourselves.”

How was he ignoring the biggest obstacle? “They keep the Scroll at the training center for the Order. In the library.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve seen it. Signed it. My plan, remember?”

Gideon gestured to Rhys. It was time for him to jump in and take sides. The side of reason.

“We quit the Order. It was a huge deal.” Rhys threw his arms wide. “Everybody knows. Even the newbies. We’re either a cautionary tale or legends, depending on who you ask. Either way? We can’t just stroll in without being noticed.”

That smugness reappeared, curling Z’s lip. “Sure we can.

Use the women.”

Rhys stomped right up to jab a finger a millimeter from Z’s face. “I don’t even know where you’re going with this—and my answer’s already *no*.”

Yowza.

Bringing Maisy into this discussion was ballsy. And stupid as fuck.

Rhys and Maisy had been together for only a couple of months. But they were in love. Powerfully in love, as it hit a half-angel for the first time after eighty-seven years. If Z didn’t tread carefully, he’d be unconscious during this whole demon god thing because Rhys would beat him senseless.

“Hear me out.”

“No.” Which Rhys punctuated with a straight arm to Z’s chest that staggered him back until he braked with a flare of his wings.

Amazingly, that didn’t shut him up. “You don’t need to worry about Maisy. She can take care of herself. She’s always up for trying something new.”

“Yeah, she wanted to see the latest Marvel movie. She never said she wanted to go visit someplace where we’re despised and disrespected by at least half of the residents.”

“Not just Maisy. Evangeline, too.”

It surprised Gideon, how much his knee-jerk reaction was also, “Hell, no.”

Then he was equally opposed...to his own opposition. Why should he care if they take Evangeline along? If anyone was used to being sneered and stared at, it was her. There wasn’t any need to protect her from that. It was literally business as usual for the always-shunned dark angel.

He *wanted* to protect her, though.

Which was strange. Annoying.

Zavier glanced at his watch. Then at the sky. “We have about three minutes until the moon and the stars are in

conjunction and we do this thing. So listen up. It's like going back to high school."

"Like you have any idea about high school."

"I caught *Grosse Pointe Blank* last night. Cusack's an assassin in it. Great movie. No matter what you do, there's this drive to reconnect with the past. People buy into that, you know?"

"Not *Nephilim*."

"Sure they will. They'll just make cracks about how we've been among humans too much. That hanging out with our employees is fading our angelic light, or some crap like that."

Huh.

He could be right.

"They *want* to believe we made the wrong choice, quitting the Order," he said slowly. "So they'll see what they want to see. That we've been sucked into human traditions. That the mighty warrior, Rhys Boyce, just wants to show off to his very human, easily impressed girlfriend. They'll laugh. But that laughter will prevent them from asking why we're really there."

"See? Gideon's on board." Xavier sliced his finger, then dripped the blood at the edge of the chalk circle. He waited for them to join him inside it, then passed the dagger. They repeated the slice and drip, sealing them safely within it.

"I didn't say I was on board. It's possible. That's all I'm committing to right now." Gideon flicked the lighter. Focused on connecting with the elements of heat and air to push the flame across to the marble bowl. Then he lit the contents on fire.

"For the record? This still feels like a pansy-ass way to fight a demon."

"She's a demon *goddess*." Rhys was the one who'd come up with this plan. Naturally he defended it before Gideon could even get his two cents out. "Better we set ourselves up for success. Do you want a win, or do you want a fight?"

Baring his teeth, Xavier said, “Yes.”

Rhys growled right back. “Hellfire. You’re impossible tonight.”

Yeah. It was time for Gideon to do his thing as peacemaker. They couldn’t summon the demon if they weren’t a unit. “Cheer up, Z. Things could spiral out of control. We might have to leave the circle and fight her ourselves, while also staving off the *Pazazu*. Or maybe our magic won’t hold him.”

“Fingers crossed. With the current plan? There’s no fight. I’m not even breaking a sweat.”

“You’re in fighting leathers. In Iraq. In July. I can smell your sweat-reek already.” Gideon was done bickering. Which, yeah, they’d all probably slipped into out of a healthy, uh, wariness about trying to trap an ancient demon goddess.

“Here we go.” Rhys pulled out his phone. Held the screen so they could all read from it.

Demon from the depths of hell

We call you to rise, on Earth to dwell

Under our watch

Until the one you seek is captured

Only then do we release this spell.

The summoning spell was uber basic. But they’d already hashed out terms in the email contract negotiation. Gideon remembered doing this sort of thing—not that they’d ever summoned a demon god before—before the Internet. It’d been a massive pain in the ass. Lots more blood required to lock ’em in place while hammering out details.

Fire streamed up from the mortar into a six foot, writhing column of orange and red. Then it widened, too. Stretching like a balloon until it finally popped.

The fire disappeared. A near hurricane-strength wind gusted. They all threw up their arms to protect themselves from the stinging sand. Should’ve anticipated that. The thing supposedly ruled hot desert winds. In the olden days, it used to

be prayed to for the gusts to protect, to clear out disease.

When it dropped off, there was the *Pazazu*.

Aaaand the chalk circle didn't seem like nearly enough protection anymore.

It was tall. Close to eight feet? The color of the Arabian sand it used to tread. Instead of feet, it had the sharp talons of an eagle. Along with the broad, clawed paws of a lion instead of hands.

If that didn't bring down an enemy, there was still a massive scorpion-barb of a tail. A foaming mouth on its dog's head that made it look rabid. And *four* wings. It snarled. Gnashed its teeth as it spun around. Until it spotted them.

"I greet you, warriors."

Guess they shouldn't be surprised that a competent emailer could also talk. But there was a disconnect between hearing the voice and watching the dog jowls flap. Gideon was more than content to let Rhys lead the conversation with it.

Rhys crossed his arms. Dipped his head once. "We appreciate your willingness to undertake this hunt. Several villages have been devastated by the *Lamatsu*. You have vanquished her before."

"Three times. It should have been only one." He slashed a paw through the air. "She is to be imprisoned in Hell forever. She cannot escape. Her crimes are reviled by all."

Yeah.

The *Lamatsu* caused disease. Spread it. And—the thing that pissed off even Hellspawn—killed pregnant women.

For kicks.

They weren't completely sold on this being true. A lot of ancient legends blamed the spread of disease on angry gods, hungry demons, or curses. Most of that was probably due to rats and a lack of hand washing.

The description, though, had matched eerily well.

They *hadn't* known that she was supposed to be locked up

for eternity. Demons had a shocking amount of free rein when it came to zipping around up here.

Did her appearance mean she'd slipped through the Gates when they'd weakened from the murders of the Keepers?

Shit.

Gideon realized that *Pazazu* had no doubt checked her prison. Found her missing. It was why he'd been so willing to help.

“Do you know how she escaped?”

A keening wail echoed across the valley floor. Showtime.

There was a scratching, dragging sound as she came around the corner into view. Uh...Gideon didn't want to be called out for body shaming. But this bitch was hideous.

Her nudity proved her gender. Barely. Her whole body was covered in hair. Tiny bird feet didn't look like they could support her body's weight. Dried blood trails coated her body, and her ultra-long fingered hands were stained completely red with it.

The head of a lion made Gideon doubly glad they'd enlisted *Pazazu* to bring it down. Snakes writhed around her legs. And while Gideon hadn't seen any food trucks dotting the landscape as they approached? She'd gotten a small pig somewhere and held it to her mouth, sucking and gnawing big pieces from its belly.

Aaaaaand it was still alive, spasming and squealing.

“You dare defile this land? Again?” Huge gobs of spit flew from the *Pazazu*'s mouth.

Her head jerked up. The pig was flung aside.

Gideon immediately threw a dagger to put it out of its misery.

As she charged forward, one snake dropped to the ground. The other three slithered up *inside* her. That was wrong on so many levels. Disgusting.

Zavier threw a dagger to impale the snake. It shouldn't be

able to breach their circle. But, yeah, why take the risk?

The two demon gods began to fight. Rhys held up his phone.

What the fuck? He and Z were all but quivering with holding themselves back from joining the fight. And Rhys was calmly acting like he was at a rock concert? “Are you seriously filming this? You want to scare the shit out of everyone on YouTube? Upload it as a Halloween prank?”

“I’m filming for two reasons. First, to prove that the *Lamatsu*’s vanquished. I doubt we’ll be tossed its head to make sure we get paid.”

They’d been hired by an alliance of witch doctors. Who, yeah, might or might not take the word of half-angels.

Okay, he felt a little bit shitty for yelling at the guy who was ensuring their fee came through.

“Bits” were already going flying. With the amalgamation of human and animal parts between the two of them, it was hard to tell which was coming off who. The blood spray made it near impossible. Basically, they were attempting to rip each other to shreds.

Gideon couldn’t look away. He had to keep watching in case they came near and somehow penetrated their circle of protection. Or worse, if a human accidentally showed up who he’d have to then go protect.

But he really, *really* didn’t want to see any of this grotesque mess. Not now, and not in the guaranteed-to-occur nightmares to come.

Rhys hovered two feet off the ground as he filmed. Better angle? More optimal capture of the moonlight? Latent lust for a cinematography career being fulfilled? “Secondly, I want the Order to see this. A long-gone Babylonian demon goddess suddenly reappearing? They won’t believe that without proof.”

Arm up, hand clenched around the sword hilt strapped to his back, Zavier said, “Someone in the Order might’ve facilitated her escape.”

“True. But the other *Nephilim*—they need to know that bad things are slithering out of Hell. Worse than usual. They’ve got to be on guard. Prepared.”

“You’re not giving the video to Caraxis, are you?”

“Hell, no.”

Shit.

Gideon saw exactly where this was going. “Your big plan is for me to hack into their system and upload it onto the general Teams channel for all *Nephilim*?” *Obviously*, they had a super glitchy software to stay in touch with all their warriors. Celestial beings liked technology as much as Hell spawn did.

“It’s not hacking when you’ve been in their system as a shadow for the past decade.”

“Yeah, but *they* don’t know that I’m in there, watching everything. If we do this, they’ll know we have access.”

“There’s no sound. None of us are in the shot. They won’t *know* anything.”

“They can guess. Who else would be able to set up a throwdown like this? And then thoughtfully apprise the entire Order? We’re the only likely candidates.”

“Then we take the hit.” Rhys dropped to the ground. They followed suit—barely missing being hit by something shaped like a donkey ear. “They up their security, and you hack in again in a month or two. Everyone needs to know how the danger’s scaling up.”

“Better idea.” Xavier paused as *Pazazu* let out an unearthly howl. He had the *Lamatsu* hogtied and strangled. She wasn’t dead. But she’d stay out long enough to be dragged back to Hell by him. “Upload it when we’re *at* the Order. No hacking. From the computer in the library. When you’re on the weirdest double date ever.”

Pazazu gave a full-body dog shake. Blood and...other things sprayed off him. Their protection circle did not protect against bodily fluids. Gideon wiped at his face. It was one thing to be coated in it during a fight. It was another to be

splattered as a spectator/orchestrator of the near-fatal takedown.

Rhys wiped blood off the phone screen. “You really want us to take a dark angel and a human into the Order?”

“A powerless dark angel and a powerful Keeper of a human,” Xavier amended.

“She’s not powerless,” Gideon snapped. “Evangeline’s nullifying power isn’t flashy. Or universal. But it’s plenty offensive to some.” It felt important to stand up for her. She only *thought* of herself as powerless. In the right situations, up against creatures of evil, she could do plenty.

She was smart.

Streets-of-Hell smart.

Strategic.

The woman wasn’t powerless.

And as stupid as it might be? Gideon kind of *did* want to show Evangeline the Order.

Pazazu faced the camera, holding up the struggling and howling *Lamatsu*. “In case you had any doubt, this is the *Lamatsu*. The diseases she’s spread will no doubt be fatal to all.”

Rhys gave a sloppy salute. “Thanks for the heads-up. Your payment’s waiting for you at the crossroads to Purgatory.” Because they sure weren’t lugging all that through Hell for him.

“Thank you for the glorious fight.” The long dog tongue slid out to lick...something off his shoulder. Gideon’s stomach turned. “Know this, *Nephilim*: she should not have escaped Hell’s prisons. Something is very wrong.”

“Yeah,” Xavier ground out through a clenched jaw. “We’ve gotten that message. Loud and clear.”

The question wasn’t why were *they* the only ones who realized the severity of the problem?

Nah.

The real question was: what the hell were they supposed to do about it?

Chapter Fourteen

Evangeline poured herself into her assignments as an actuary. It was calming to disappear for hours into the numbers and formulas of her work. By the end of the day, though, her brain was running on empty. She forced herself through a workout four days a week (never knew when something scaly and awful would chase her and she'd suddenly need to be able to do a four-minute mile), but then couldn't manage more than collapsing on her couch and binging through shows.

Those were the good old days.

The pre-*Nephilim* days. Now she had a second job. Somehow. Chasing after a mysterious serial killer (maybe/probably) or more than one *or* one and a puppeteer pulling its strings. With celestial or Hell powers.

How was this her life?

When she'd done everything possible for years to avoid any contact, let alone involvement, with beings of power?

And yet here she sat. In Maisy's backyard, at a long picnic table, listening to an argument/negotiation with an honest-to-God witch for a truth spell to use in the *Nephilim* training compound.

The witch—Aradia—tossed her head, sending long black hair cascading around her shoulders like a shampoo commercial. “I thought you guys had been at this a while. Aren't you all older than my grandfather?”

Evangeline liked her immediately.

The woman—the *human*—wasn't at all intimidated by the three uber powerful *Nephilim*. Technically, her witch powers might or might not hold up against the half-angels. But she had the confidence that said she didn't care who'd win a fight because she already knew she was right.

Liss snickered. Another woman in no way overawed by the men. “Nice burn. They'll never admit it, but I think they're secretly worried about how they're holding up. I caught Xavier

checking out his eyes for crow's feet the other day.”

He was still in his office wear—crisp gray shirt, loosened matching silk tie—but that didn't lessen the impact of his crossed arms and glower. “You did *not*.”

“You were staring in the mirror in the lab, pulling at the skin around your eyes. Every woman knows that gesture.”

Wow. Liss was really poking the bear. With a flaming stick. Eva noticed that Maisy had her hand over her mouth, probably trying to hide a grin.

“The potion I'd mixed had acrid fumes. I was checking to see if my eyes were red and needed rinsing.”

Liss leaned across the table, squinting at his face. “You're eighty-seven, right? When you turn ninety, how about I get you a special eye cream? You'll have to use it every night, but it'll work wonders.”

Zavier half rose from his seat, murder darkening his eyes to pure black.

Gideon jumped in. “Why does our age matter, Aradia?”

“Clearly, I'm contemptuous of you for not having acquired more knowledge over your considerable lifetime.”

Gideon had mentioned, prior to her arrival, that their relationship with the head of the local coven was only semi-friendly. More of a mutual back scratching without actually liking each other deal. Eva couldn't tell if this was a routine they always went through before settling into business, or if Aradia actually had a problem with the *Nephilim*.

She could tell that the three men were a wall on one side of the table. Eva remembered how that first night, seeing them as an unbreachable unit had been more than a little daunting. Now she was on the inside of all that focused integrity and passion and spirit.

Poor Aradia.

“Don't question our breadth of knowledge,” Rhys bristled.

Something...compelled Eva to defend them. “You know,

they can speak every language in the world. I doubt you can do that. To each their specialty.”

Aradia’s eyes narrowed. As if assessing to see how much of a problem Eva would be. Then she slowly unrolled a smile at each one, in turn. “Sure. Just fun to bring them down a peg or two. But to cut to the chase, yes, I can make a truth spell. But you can’t handle it.”

Frustration evident in every taut line of his body, Gideon said, “It’s not for us.”

“No, you can’t physically handle it. Any non-human energy will interact with it. Any *power*.” She held up a hand. “Maisy, before you ask, that includes you, even though you’re mostly still human.”

Gideon gave two vicious tugs to his two-toned lavender striped tie that loosened the knot past his collarbone. “So you’ll make it for us, but there’s no delivery system?”

“Sure there is. A full human.”

“Oh!” Maisy shot out an arm to pat Aradia’s hand. As if she’d solved a game show question and expected to win a boat. “Not a problem. We’ve got Liss.”

Across the table, Liss recoiled. “No you don’t. I’m not going to the *Nephilim* stronghold. Isn’t there some old saying about throwing a lamb into a den of lions?”

“Scaredy-cat?” Xavier mocked, in clear payback for her earlier dig.

Evangeline had no idea of the history between them, but it seemed neon-blazingly obvious that they needed to sleep together to clear the air. Like tonight, when Liss had volunteered to make a pitcher of drinks, since one of her jobs was as a bartender.

The snarly *Nephilim* had shot down her suggestion and grabbed bottles of wine. Eva had been close enough to hear him mutter that Liss deserved a night off. Did he say it loud enough for *Liss* to hear? Of course not. Impossible to miss that he cared for her. But given Xavier’s always black mood and knowing Liss only a week? She’d keep that suggestion to

herself.

Liss held up her hand to tick off points on her scarlet-tipped fingers. “You’re essentially breaking in. Pissing them off. And I very much don’t belong. I’m scared because I’ve got a brain in my head.”

“We’re not breaking in. Nobody forbade us to return. Not that a locked door could stop us.” Gideon winked at her. Eva swallowed hard. There was something so rakish and appealing about his wink. “They just...don’t expect us to. If you’re with us, Liss, you’ll be fine.”

Maisy came down the length of the table to hug her from behind. It was a hug that showed their ease and long friendship, and for a moment, Eva was suffused with a yearning to be a part of it. To stay, not necessarily a part of this world, but with this amazing group of people. But she knew it couldn’t be.

“Plus, *Nephilim* are the protectors of humankind. So even if they’re really, really, really mad that you know they exist? Not a single one of them would harm a hair on your head.”

It was understandable for Liss to be wary. Eva wasn’t turning cartwheels of joy to be headed to a mystically hidden stronghold in Turkey, either. Both because of the way she now knew the Order treated its warriors, and because she’d been raised to see them as...not the enemy, but definitely something to be avoided.

Nonetheless, it was the best solution.

“It’s more believable if this is a triple date situation,” Eva gently cajoled. “Since the cover you’re going with is that you want to show the place to your girlfriends. Zavier, there’d be no reason for you to tag along *without* a woman on your arm.”

“I’m not an actor,” he grumbled.

“And I’m not Gideon’s girlfriend.” Did that sting a little? No. Had to be an errant post-sunset mosquito biting her. “I’m not pouting about the part I have to play. I suck it up and do the thing. We’re trying to solve a mystery. Plus, I hear this whole scheme was *your* idea.”

The logic of it seemed to settle Zavier down. He swiped his glass off the table, then waved it at the witch. “Fine. Aradia, as soon as you bring the potion, I’ll send your usual fee.”

“Don’t assume you know what I want. This time, I don’t want money. I want a return favor.”

Gideon gave himself over to a full-body shudder. “Can’t we just pay you? Double, even? The word favor makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.”

“You need my special talents.” Aradia pointed back and forth between them. “I need yours. My fee will be you taking down a *Labartu*.”

The name was unfamiliar to Eva. She met a bunch of blank looks across the table, too. Funnily enough, they were all looking at her. As if she were an encyclopedia of all things hellish. Didn’t they realize she turned herself inside out to stay away from demons?

Gideon passed the white wine. Sweating condensation frosted over as soon as he touched it. Such a cool trick. “Without including another assault on our knowledge, you’re going to have to give context.”

“This one’s pretty rare,” Aradia acknowledged. “It’s an ancient Mesopotamian demon hag goddess that’s inducing miscarriages at Buffalo General.”

“What makes you so certain that’s what it is?” Rhys shook his head. “No disrespect, but miscarriages are common. Women are talking more openly about them now.” A shocked silence fell, broken only by the sputter of the tiki torches. “What? I pay attention. I can’t walk around *acting* like I’m eighty-seven. Gotta stay current.”

Aradia angled herself to him. “A nurse in my coven figured it out only because her boyfriend’s getting his master’s in mythology. She’s been listening to him deep dive into the subject for a solid year.”

“If it’s true? That sounds a lot like the thing we got vanquished yesterday.” Zavier drilled a finger into the table. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Wish I did.” Rhys sucked in a deep breath. Double thumped his palms against the wood. “But we’ll grant your favor.”

Eva stood up. Abruptly. “I’ll help.” She didn’t know why she stood. Except that it felt like a gigantic declaration that deserved everyone’s attention. Guess her carefully nurtured habit of staying in the background was shedding itself faster than a snakeskin in spring.

Stroking his chin, Gideon said in an unreadable tone, “I thought you didn’t want to join our team.”

In general, that was still true.

Joining Gideon’s quest to solve the murders was triple the excitement and terror that she wanted or needed. Simply the necessary evil to get her spell ingredients to finally embark upon a safe, powerless life.

This particular situation, though, appeared to be a no-brainer. Eva didn’t see how she could live with herself if she *didn’t* pitch in.

And now, standing felt awkward and overly dramatic and seriously uncomfortable. Slowly, she sank back onto the bench. The other six people were all still goggling at her. Clearly waiting for an explanation.

It felt right.

If that was all she said, they’d probably worry she was drunk. There hadn’t been a lengthy pro/con list that she worked out in her head. The idea just popped out.

“I’ve never expressly used my power for good before. Only defensively. This sounds like a worthy cause. A way to make having it worthwhile, for once, before I relinquish it.”

Gideon came around to crouch next to her. Then he squeezed her hand. It was as though the rest of the group had vanished and they were utterly private. “It could be dangerous. These things almost always are. We won’t force you to risk yourself on our behalf.”

That was so sweet of him. She wasn’t at all sure that Rhys

and Xavier would agree with his decision. Eva wrapped her other hand around his. “Don’t you see? It’ll be far *less* dangerous for everyone if I’m there. Especially for the patients. I’ll thwart her powers. Then you can do your thing. Safely.”

Aradia raised her glass. “My coven won’t owe you a debt for your aid. But you will have my appreciation and respect.”

After all, Eva wasn’t pregnant. Technically, she had nothing to fear from the *Labartu*. Even as doubts set her legs into nervous bouncing, she stuck to her offer. “Then let’s do this.”

Less than an hour later, they were in the hospital. Shift change and visiting hours were over. The wards were quiet, aside from the mechanized beeping coming from every room. Eva, Gideon, and Xavier had already changed into scrubs to look like they belonged.

“Are we going to have to stake out every night?” Gideon asked.

“No.” Jenny, the nurse who’d figured the whole thing out, was blond and warmly caring. She didn’t look at all witchlike, compared to the heavily made-up Goth look Aradia wore. She’d snuck them into the hospital. “We don’t always have high-risk maternity patients. But for the last month, every time one does get admitted? They lose the baby by dawn.”

“So you’ve got one?”

“Elena Yalanskaya. Admitted this afternoon. We’re watching her for preeclampsia and placenta previa.” She led them down the antiseptic-scented hall. “I put her in a double. We can draw the curtain around her but can’t sedate her or anything. You should try to take whatever you do into the hallway as fast as possible.”

It sounded risky to Eva. “You can’t hide her in a different room?”

Xavier barked out a laugh. “The *Labartu* isn’t consulting the patient directory. She senses the fetus. Like a wolf sniffing out a rabbit.”

“Oh.”

In hindsight, it had been a silly question. But this wasn't Eva's world. She predicted risks and futurecast to keep companies solvent. She didn't strategize against ancient—why ancient again?—demon goddesses who sniffed out their prey.

“This time of night, the hallway should stay empty. The room's as far as possible from Labor and Delivery, where action can happen at any point.” Jenny paused in front of the glass wall of the nursery. “This is why you're here. To ensure this is a safe space where new life can begin.”

Evangeline looked down at the double row of bassinets. At the pursed lips and button noses. Helpless. Swaddled. Pure of spirit and brimming with possibility. Adorable beyond all telling.

The thought of that mother not seeing her baby in here soon made her ill. The fear that had settled like a rock in her stomach dissolved. In its place burned a righteous anger. If she could help stop this demon, she *had* to. Sitting by complacently to keep herself safe was not an option. Not when it came to protecting the most vulnerable humans on the planet.

In the gentlest voice she'd ever heard Xavier use, he said, “Jenny, you should go back to the nurses' station. Monitor the patients like normal. We'll take it from here. We'll let you know when it's over.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” Unshed tears glimmered at the corners of her brown eyes as she thrust a big wad of bright orange vinyl at Xavier before she hurried off.

“What's that?” Gideon asked.

He unrolled it a bit until a zipper was visible. “Body bag. Smart thinking. It'll keep all the fluids contained and help us get her down to the incinerator unnoticed.”

Eva hadn't even thought about disposing of the demon. It wasn't anything she'd *had* to think about before. “So we just hang out until she arrives? How will we know it's her?”

Xavier held up his phone. “Rhys texted me what he found in a quick and dirty search. There's not much on her, because she

disappeared so long ago. But all the descriptions call her a hag goddess. It's doubtful she'll have updated her look to the latest Kardashian collection and a fresh blowout."

Zavier knew about the Kardashians? They really did work hard to blend in with each current decade. Still, that little piece of trivia would have Eva giggling once tonight's plan had succeeded.

Even though it was summer, the men wore long sleeves beneath their scrub tops. Eva assumed it was to hide their myriad weapons. All she knew was that Gideon far outshone any TV star on a medical drama in them. His golden hair glinted under the harsh fluorescent lights. And the breadth of his shoulders was very evident in the scrubs.

Ogling seemed just as useful as anger to keep her nerves in check.

Gideon stopped outside the patient's room and leaned on a crash cart. "Here's the thing—Jenny said none of the mothers died. That means she doesn't physically attack them. It's got to be an energy transfer that kills the fetus."

A fresh wave of horror roiled through Eva. "The mother wouldn't even know what was happening."

"Right. We can't waste a second. Her attack could start before she's even in the room. You've got to thwart her immediately."

That was the easy part. "Like I've said, there's no on/off switch. As soon as she gets close enough to me, her powers will be thwarted." Eva didn't have to concentrate, or aim, or do anything but just stand there. All in all, it was very anticlimactic—just like everything about this one, mostly useless power.

"*Stay* close, too," Gideon cautioned. "Don't worry about getting in the way, or us accidentally stabbing you. We're precise. We're experienced. You're safe with us."

Eva believed him.

She also believed it didn't matter. She wasn't letting this hag claim one more life. No matter what the cost to herself.

“You stay in there.” Zavier pointed to the next room over. “Keep the door cracked and keep watch.”

“By myself?” Eva was proud she hadn’t squeaked. Because her throat had closed up and dried out.

“Yeah. You’ll thwart her as she approaches the room.”

“Z and I will come out from Elena’s room and stop her before she gets in. It’s the smartest play.” Gideon brushed the back of his hand down her arm. “If you want to back out, you can. You could go wait with Jenny.”

Nope. It’d been a momentary blip of panic. She wasn’t the hag demon’s target. She had two of the best *Nephilim* to protect her. And she’d been raised in Hell.

Being *not* in Hell was what made it so strange and new. Terrifying.

Here, though, she was safer than she’d ever been in Hell, with Gideon and Zavier. And Elena deserved for Eva to pull herself together and do her damn job.

“I’m good.” Deliberately, she forced a flirtatious smile. “I’d be distracted if you were in the room with me. You’re looking extremely fine in that outfit.”

“I know I do.” Cocky as always. Which Eva now got a kick out of, rather than being annoyed. Because she knew there was so much more to Gideon beneath the sexy swagger. His soothing caress changed course. Moved back up the inside of her arm, over the sensitive inner curve of her elbow, and brushed along the side of her breast. “How about you and I play doctor after this?”

Eva giggled at the outrageous absurdity of the suggestion as they were about to commit violent destruction to save a plethora of unborn lives.

“For fuck’s sake.” Zavier stepped between them and scooted her into the empty room. “This is why we never bring women on missions. Can’t you keep it in your pants until the ugly-ass demon is vanquished?”

“I could. But where’d the fun be in that?”

Zavier's annoyance disappeared. He took Eva's shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "You've got this. Because you're good at heart. And when we're in the mix, good always wins."

"I've no doubt." She touched her forehead briefly to his before he clomped out of the room in his steel-toed boots.

And then there was Gideon. Rakishly handsome, still radiating sexy arrogance. Yet so very protective of her that his hands cradled her face as if she were made of spun sugar. "You're the bravest woman I know."

"You know a *lot*, I'll bet."

"I'm serious. I'm not going to tell you to lock the door if you get scared. Because that's not who you are. You're going to officially help us kick some demon ass. It will be officially righteous. And I'm already crazy proud of you for volunteering to help."

"I will require kisses afterward." In case she was about to die, it was better to be honest and upfront.

"Ditto."

Then she was alone in the sterile room. Waiting. Just out of curiosity, checking...nope. Hospital room doors did *not* have locks.

Eva cracked the door. Assumed the *Labartu* would come from the stairs, rather than risk exposure going through the entire ward. But...assuming was always risky, so she turned her head left to right with a quick snap back like a lawn sprinkler.

A dragging, slapping sound came from the left. Even though the exit door hadn't opened. Ah. Demons didn't need to use doors. Inter-dimensional Hell portals were, well, much more direct.

Hag demon pretty much summed it up. The thing *looked* like she'd been alive since ancient Babylonian times. White wispy, scraggly hair barely covered her scalp and hung in strips past her naked and wrinkled breasts. Her skirt—what was left of it—was caked in centuries of dirt. Nails longer than

those on the newest hip-hop star curved inward. Everything about her was faded. Except her eyes. Those burned black—no whites to her eyes at all—as tar.

Every step she took spread god knew what germs. So Eva threw open the door and confronted her.

“Stop right there.” Eva rushed to stand within a foot of the demon. The closer the better to thwart it for sure—since she’d never really measured her range of ability.

An outraged hiss spewed from her mouth. It turned to a flow of dust.

Instinctively, Eva covered her face. While thwarted, it couldn’t be poison or gas or anything actually harmful to her. But it was very, very disgusting.

The thud of boots alerted her to Gideon and Xavier suddenly flanking her. “Go on. Do your swordsmanship thing.”

“No need.” Gideon tugged her hand down. And he kept a tight hold on it. “Look.”

Similar to the incredible CGI at the end of Avengers (why pick a favorite Chris when she could ogle two of them simultaneously?), the body was literally dissolving into dust, inch by inch. It then swirled into a black miasma that hovered in place until the last bit of body was gone.

The darkness burst into nothingness.

Holy hell.

In slow motion, Eva turned her head to ask Gideon, “What just happened?”

“The *Labartu*’s old. Massively old. Usually worship or sacrifice is the only thing that sustains a creature like that. She escaped back to the surface but was nothing more than evil power. Once you nullified it, there was nothing left of her.”

Not even a speck of dust darkened the gleaming white linoleum.

She’d done that? With her little non-power? She’d utterly destroyed a being of pure evil? “Are you certain she’s gone?”

Not just zipped off to some other maternity ward?”

“After that disappearing act?” Xavier snorted. “Yeah. I’m sure. We can double-check with your aunt, but I’d stake Gideon’s life on it.”

“Thanks, man,” Gideon said with fake sincerity.

Zavier pushed up his sleeves to resheath the daggers that had been in both hands. “I’ll go tell Jenny that all her patients are safe.”

“Don’t forget to give her back the body bag.” Gideon thumbed to where they’d been waiting. “You don’t want Elena waking up and seeing that in her room.”

Eva backed away from the unseeable spot that she’d see in her nightmares for a good long while. Once she hit the doorway, she stumbled quickly backward until the backs of her thighs hit the gurney.

“Are you okay?”

“In general? I’m fine. As long as you don’t need me to stand.” Adrenaline had her heart racing. It also had evidently severed the nerve connections to her arms and legs. The *only* thing Eva could feel was the outsized thumping of her heart.

“Your first vanquishing?”

“Well, yes. It’s rather frowned upon in Hell. I didn’t even know I was capable of such a thing.”

Gideon pushed himself between her dangling legs. Then he stroked her hair back from her face. “Oh, you’re more than just ‘capable,’ babe. Like I said before—you’re as brave as the fiercest warriors I’ve ever met.”

“It feels good. Not the vanquishing. That’s the necessary-but-awful part.” Eva rubbed over her heart. Would the extra vibrations stimulate feeling back into her fingertips? “It feels so good to *save* someone. To know I protected that patient and her unborn baby. To not just sit on the sidelines, helpless, for once.”

“I’ve never seen you as helpless, Evangeline. I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m proud of me, too. I’m just...numb.”

“Aww, that’s no good. I can fix it.” Gideon tilted her chin up and kissed her.

On the forehead.

Then at the outer corner of each eye. Both cheekbones. The hollows beneath them. As if her face were a paint-by-numbers set that he was flooding with color.

It worked.

Sleeping Beauty’s Prince Charming had nothing on Gideon Durand. The tingling began at each spot where his lips connected to her skin.

It raced down her limbs. Down her chest and belly and back. By the time he got to her lips? Eva tingled everywhere—and not from adrenaline or fear.

This was all Gideon.

Then they were kissing.

Hot.

Hard.

Passionate.

Noisy.

A little bit frantic.

They knew they had no time. Jenny and Xavier would be back momentarily. But Eva desperately needed this affirming kiss, and it sure seemed, from his enthusiastic delivery, that Gideon did, too.

This was the other side of their partnership. He’d focused her strength beforehand, and now he was celebrating it.

How wonderful was that?

Chapter Fifteen

Gideon put his arm around Evangeline. Savored the way they fit together for a brief moment. Especially the feel of her through the thin, lacy sundress. Then he cleared his throat, looking out at Niagara Falls from the lip of the Watchtower. “I get that this is supposed to be a cutesy stroll down memory lane triple date. But before we run into anyone, I’d like to pay our respects at the Wall.”

Rhys, who already had Maisy clamped to his side, nodded. “Agreed.”

Zavier was still at the weapons wall, loading up. But he gave a brisk nod.

“What is it?” Eva asked. She’d already looped her arms around his neck in preparation for their flight.

It was the thing he most missed about the Order’s stronghold. Aside from the kitchen’s life-changing double chocolate rum cake, it was probably the only thing Gideon missed. “Where we commemorate the *Nephilim* who are gone.”

“I’d be honored to see it.”

Liss finger-combed her hair for the umpteenth time. Guess she was still nervous about going along. “But...you said you guys don’t go back. Won’t you be challenged at the entry gate? Feels like a hue and cry’s going to go up, worse than when the Wildlings tried to invade Castle Black in *Game of Thrones*.”

“Excellent show. Which house did you support?” Zavier’s lip curled. “Stark, I suppose? Jumped right on their bandwagon?”

“No. House Lannister. They were wily. Shrewd. Scrappy.”

He plucked a broadsword. Caught Rhys’s headshake and put it back with a frown. “They were, by far, the most exemplary fighters.”

Liss bit her top lip. “Plus, I’d do Jamie Lannister in a

heartbeat, with or without his hand.” Well, she took her fandom seriously.

Rhys beckoned with two fingers for Xavier to join them at the edge of the Falls. “There aren’t guards, except at the ceremonial entrance. None can enter without a *Nephilim*. That mitigates the need for security.”

Tugging at her hair again, Liss asked, “What about a hat? Or a veil? You have to cover your head at the Vatican. Feels like a place full of half-angels would be even more solemnly sacred.”

“Not even close. It’s a training school. We fight, all day, every day. Blood and feathers are lost. There’s no dress code.” Gideon winked at Evangeline. “Although I like this dress on you very much.”

“They’re flirting again,” Xavier complained.

“You’d better get with the program and do some of that yourself, if we’re going to be convincing. Go on. Scoop her up and let’s go.”

With a glare sharp enough to cut glass, Xavier picked Liss up in the traditional romance-couple carry, instead of just holding on at her waist. He bared his teeth as her black skirt flowed over his arm. Then he twitched his head to escape her cloud of hair. “Happy now?”

“You bet I am.”

Chuckling, Gideon took off. It was good to have the laughter to distract him from being tense about their homecoming.

Because he had no idea how it’d go.

If they’d be thrown out.

If “shitshow” was an underwhelming description of the reception they’d receive.

Despite his snarls, Xavier would 100 percent take care of Liss. Maisy could take care of herself. Gideon was most worried about Evangeline.

She'd been shunned her entire life. For nothing she did but exist.

His ex-brotherhood could take out their anger on him all they wanted. But none of them had better so much as double blink at Evangeline.

Or he'd make sure they regretted it.

When they breached the waterfall, they were at the outer perimeter of the stronghold. Essentially in Northern Turkey, except a minisculely different dimension of it. Just enough so that it couldn't be seen by humans. It was desert on the other side of the mountain range. But now they were flying over the rapids-filled river that led directly into the castle.

More of a fortified town than just a castle. Anchored by two different arenas at the north and south. It backed up to the mountains at the west. And the main castle structure filled the eastern side.

So it wasn't far at all to drop down the mountain to land. Because the Wall was built against the side of the mountain.

Nobody spoke a word.

Past the stone columns, twined with blooming white and black flowers. Walking under the trellis, dripping with heavily fruited grapevines. Past the seating areas built around fire pits that burned constantly in remembrance of the flame of each warrior's spirit.

The wall itself was pure obsidian granite. Not a flicker of color in it.

Except for the pairs of white angel wings burned into the stone, with each *Nephilim's* name beneath.

Gideon knew exactly where the wings were situated for each friend, each teacher, each fallen comrade. But before he could go to the first, Rhys sucked in a breath.

"There's so many. Too damn many."

He looked down the length of it. Sure enough, the rows of wings extended far beyond the curve by the fig tree where it used to stop.

There were a *shocking* number of wings beyond the fig.

“What the fuck has been going on?” Xavier stalked down to the farthest set of wings. Anger radiated off him, but he at least remembered to keep ahold of Liss’s hand. She had to semi-jog to keep up with him or else be dragged along.

“You think this is proof that *Nephilim* are being murdered?” Evangeline asked in a hushed tone.

“We’re professional soldiers. There’s always a toll.” Gideon walked her along it, barely pausing to trace a few names. “This wall, though—it’s for all *Nephilim*, since they first came into existence. When you compare that to the years since we last saw it...” Gideon’s voice trailed off. He shook his head. Even seeing the proof, it was hard to believe.

“Yes,” Rhys answered for Gideon. “It’s grown in size significantly. Like someone is, indeed, picking them off. Deliberately.”

“You can’t react now.” Evangeline stood on tiptoe to make it appear she whispered in his ear. But she spoke loudly enough for all the men to hear. “I’m sorry, truly. But we could be watched. Pay your respects as though nothing is different, then move on to the library.”

There was the savvy of someone who’d evaded trouble for half a lifetime by being more cunning than all the creatures in Hell. Evangeline had just prevented them from letting their surprise lead them into a big mistake.

“You’re right.” Gideon made a big show of playfully kissing the top of her hand. “Thanks for thinking strategically.”

“We’re a team, right?” She hip-bumped him. *Not* so much playfully. “You drop the ball, one of us women invariably has to pick it up.”

Hellfire, but he wanted to bump her back.

He wanted to bump Evangeline so hard that she tumbled to the ground. He’d catch her at the last second and twist to protect her from the ground. And then he’d grab those hips and rock her back and forth—

Fuck.

Gideon had to do something about this. The woman infiltrated his thoughts. Constantly.

It was untenable. Today, of all days, in this, of all places, there could be no distractions. Especially not beautiful blonde distractions that made him wonder what he'd do when this mission ended and she walked out of his life...

Thoughts like that pissed him off.

“Do not turn this into a sexist manifesto,” he snapped. “Liss is here doing what literally none of the rest of us can. We all respect the power of women.”

Awkward silence reverberated as sharply as his tone. He squeezed her hand in apology and, to his relief, she immediately squeezed back.

Maisy stroked the edge of Rhys's wing. She'd dressed up for today in pink leggings with white hearts, a matching hoodie, and a white tee with silver glitter hearts. Claimed she was “leaning into” the role of adoring girlfriend with the outfit. “I'd like to look for the name of the *Nephilim* who was paired with my uncle. If your theory is right, they didn't just murder Uncle Harold.”

“Smart thinking.” Rhys pointed to *Chazaqiel*, on the top row in front of them. “There he is.”

“Is it allowed for me to touch it?”

Zavier's lips twisted. “Don't think there's ever been a human—or a Keeper—up here. No rule against it.”

She traced along the edges of the wings. Then Maisy pressed her lips to the name. “Thank you for loving and protecting Uncle Harold.”

They could keep it quick. But they couldn't proceed without a nod to the soldiers who were the whole reason for them leaving the Order.

Gideon walked Evangeline back to their names. “Wait here.” With a fast pump of his wings, he was at the firepit, scooping out a burning branch. When he returned, all five of

them were grouped together in front of the names they had come to visit.

“Will you pull out two feathers?” he asked Evangeline. It felt right to include her. “From underneath, in by my spine.”

Eyes wide, she nodded. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other two women doing the same.

Rhys and Zavier touched their feathers to the branch. The feathers immediately turned to ash. Once Gideon did it as well, he dropped the branch. They faced the wall. Rubbed the smoldering ash between the fingertips, then wiped it along the names.

The three men intoned the ritual words together. “Kerr Morrison and Dmitris Tsvila. Your bravery honors us. Your strength inspires us.”

Gideon let the thread of memory unravel through him; the way Kerr always brought an extra beer to the table for whoever might need it. How Dmitris would laugh maniacally when things were looking grim in a battle right before doubling down and turning the tide.

What he remembered most, standing here, was that last day, arguing with them in this spot. Angrily pointing at the wall and saying they’d end up there by nightfall if they didn’t ignore orders and wait.

Fuck if he’d let that be the memory swamping him. Gideon took Evangeline’s hands. “Flare your wings.”

“Why?”

“One, because they’re gorgeous and you should show them off more often. And two, because we’re not hiding who and what you are.” They were already labeled as rebels. Why not flaunt it?

Rhys nodded. “If you’re noticed? It’ll put them off-balance.”

“The only thing less likely than a human to be spotted here is a dark angel. Nothing I like more than stirring up trouble.” Zavier swept a bow. “Let the fun begin!”

Of course, the goal was to still go mostly unnoticed. They stuck to tunnels. Doubled back twice when voices echoed toward them. It took a solid fifteen minutes to make their way to the library. At least the stone walls were clean. Big enough they didn't have to hunch down but did have to disappear their wings. And well-lit with brightly glowing wisps of celestial clouds anchored to the ceiling.

As they passed the twelfth triple fork of the tunnel, Evangeline asked, "If this is a citadel that can't be breached, why are there so many secret tunnels?"

Gideon stopped walking. Because he'd never thought about it. When you grew up someplace, you accepted that there were five hallways between your dormitory and the dining hall. You accepted the duty to tend the gardens around the Wall.

Now, though? Evangeline had basically just told him that the emperor, was, in fact, quite nude.

He dropped a fast, hard kiss on her lips. "Good question."

"Really good question." Rhys shook his head. "Maybe we underestimated all of this. Who'd need to be hidden from the rest of the Order? Celestials? Full-blooded angels? Or has this been a slow-played conspiracy with Hell for eons?"

Maisy crinkled her nose. "Gotta warn you. If I take you on a tour of *my* old stomping grounds, there will be no tunnels and no conspiracy theories to work through. Just a really stinky gym."

Rhys's smile was smug *and* cocky—one of his specialties. "Then I win this round."

Gideon put an arm up to stop everyone at the end of the tunnel. Remembered that the women had zero training in combat tactical gestures, so he put a finger to his mouth to shush them. Carefully he pushed down on all three hinges.

The door swung open—revealing that it was the back side of a bookcase. They were on the uppermost floor of the Library. Funny how they'd remembered exactly how to get here, after all these years.

The angel Hariel sat in the middle of the round room,

directly beneath the glass dome. Wings of the Library spoked off from the central research area.

Some had gates. Gideon had no idea what was hidden behind them. Or who the truth was being hidden *from*.

“Is there a silent alarm, like in a bank?” Liss asked. “Will that guy press it as soon as he sees you troublemakers?”

Rhys winced at her description. Gideon couldn’t see why. It was accurate. “No. And as much as we can trust anyone, we trust Hariel. He’s far more on the side of knowledge than good or evil.”

“You can’t see it, but he lost a wing. In a messy battle about six centuries ago.” Xavier must’ve mustered his 2 percent of empathy and clued in to how nervous Liss was. He rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles as he spoke. “He almost gave up. He had no place in Heaven. Until he discovered he could *help* the *Nephilim*. Arm us with every speck of knowledge that could give us the upper hand on a mission.”

Evangeline widened those smoky gray eyes. “You like him. I didn’t realize you liked anyone but Rhys and Gideon.”

“He’s brave as fuck. That demands respect.”

Liss fumbled for the potion in her pocket. “Do I pour it on him from up here?”

Maybe she *was* too human to deal with all of this. “It’s not a water balloon. Did you not hear him mention respect?” Or, if truth be told, perhaps Gideon was the one who was nervous. Lashing out because of his respect for Hariel and his worry of what the angel might do or say to Evangeline.

Zavier motioned for Liss to lower the vial, making certain not to touch it. “Let us talk to him. We’ll offer it, like civilized people. See what happens.”

Liss poked him in the chest. “You are, I kid you not, the least civilized man I’ve ever met.”

Eva tsked. “Trust me when I say he’s nowhere close.”

“You can’t top everything I say, every story I tell, by invoking your experience in Hell. That’s like bringing a gold

medalist figure skater to out-axe someone on a backyard pond.”

Lips twitching, Eva murmured, “Sorry.”

Liss sidled to the edge of the doorway, peering down at the angel with the pure white hair that streamed behind him like a train. “He can’t hurt me? If he refuses to take the potion and I push it on him anyway?”

“He *won’t* hurt you.” Xavier unfurled one wing and curled it around Liss. “He’ll see you’re under my protection. Our protection.”

Gideon looked over Evangeline’s head at Rhys. This was a development. Xavier not being brusque. Xavier comforting freaking *anyone*.

What was going on with him? Was he finally coming out of the decades-long funk he’d been in since the Incident?

Because of a *human*? That didn’t track at all.

They dropped down to the marble floor streaked with actual veins of gold, only putting out their wings to slow six feet from the ground. Landed in a triangular formation. Just to be certain Hariel couldn’t cut and run on them.

The librarian startled. His hands jerked wide, knocking six books off the desk. “This is a surprise.”

All three of them wore full fighting leathers. Sword scabbards visible on their backs. They weren’t going for subtle. Rhys took the lead, as usual. Legs planted wide, arms crossed, he said, “That’s what we’re counting on.”

“Does Master Caraxis know you’re here?”

Gideon thought about how many eyes might’ve spotted their entrance, their time at the wall. They weren’t banned—but they’d never been back before. They were news. And *Nephilim* gossiped just as much as mermaids and demons... and *almost* as much as humans. “Possibly. We didn’t request an appointment. Caraxis isn’t why we’re here.”

Hariel swiveled on his stool to look at all of them. Including the women. As a full-blooded angel, could he sense what

made each of them different? Yellow eyes that blazed with the sun shifted back to Rhys. “Why have you returned? After all this time?”

As if on cue, Maisy tucked her hands around his biceps. Flashed her standard smile that was so warm it’d make a pile of puppies look like serial killers in comparison.

Rhys looked down at her pointedly, then back at Hariel. “Would you believe we’re showing our girlfriends around?”

“Not at all.” A crafty smile brightened his craggy face. “But if that’s what you want me to believe, then so be it.”

Zavier stepped forward. “We’re on a mission of great import.”

“That’s not news. You might as well announce that the bathroom has toilet paper.”

After smirking, Z continued. “We mean no disrespect. But there are too many lives at stake to take chances. We need to ask you some questions, and we’d like you to take a truth potion first.”

“So one of these lovely women is a human? Interesting.”

Gideon slapped his thigh. “How does everyone know about the necessity for a human with a truth potion except us?”

“You get very defensive when challenged.” Evangeline’s lashes lowered as she gave him an appraising once-over. Again, Gideon was pulled out of the moment by imagining her doing it with him naked. “Perhaps you’re not open enough to continually refreshing your knowledge base.”

Hariel jerked his chin. “I like her.”

“I’m a dark angel.” Evangeline flared her wings to punctuate her assertion. They were as stunning as ever. Gideon didn’t know if she’d planned it, but their colors were mirrored in her white top and black jeans.

He patted the belly visible beneath his draped toga. “Feisty and proud. I like her even more.”

Evangeline stepped closer to the wide doughnut of a desk. It

was pale, like ash, and rumor had it that it'd been carved from a tree in the Garden of Eden. Gideon thought it likely. The Garden was a failed experiment. Sort of like *Nephilim*.

Head cocked to the side, she asked, "You genuinely don't mind that I'm from Hell?"

"It's just an address. I don't hold anything against people from Mauritius. They chose the dodo—a slow, flightless, *extinct* bird as their national animal. How stupid must they be to let that represent the character of their nation?"

Gideon swallowed a chuckle. When you manned an information desk for centuries, random information spilled out in the oddest ways. "Hariel, will you take the potion? It'll wear off in half an hour."

"I would prefer to turn it down. Because I think you know I will willingly answer your questions. Clearly, you wouldn't have come back to the Order unless it was vitally important. I don't want to risk you not believing my answers. So yes, I will take it."

Gideon nodded at Liss. For all her nerves? She didn't hesitate to step out from beneath Z's wing and through the slit in the desk to stand in front of the angel.

"Tip your head back. And don't bite me. Not because Zavier would punch in your teeth. But because I'll knee you in the nuts first."

"I would expect nothing less from the mate of a *Nephilim*."

Hariel's phrasing pinballed around in Gideon's brain while Liss administered the potion. How could the angel think that?

"We should test it." Zavier waved his hand back and forth. "Aradia's only seventy-five percent trustworthy."

Good point. What would be an obvious lie for an angel? "Hariel, do you believe that we mean no harm to you or to the Order?"

"Yes."

That was something, in and of itself. Now for the lie. "Tell me you don't miss your wing."

The sunlight that was his eyes dimmed. Disappeared until there were no pupils, only whiteness. The angel clawed at his throat. "I...I can't say it." Each word rasped like sandpaper.

Gideon hated that he'd put the man through that torture. He laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. Stop. You don't have to answer."

Rhys took over. "We believe someone is targeting Keepers and their *Nephilim*. Murdering them. Our plan is to end it. We went to the Temple of Iris. We know who the next Keepers will be. Will you let us look at the Scroll of the *Nephilim* to determine their future pairings? So we can keep them safe?"

The sunlight burst back into his eyes. This time it burned. Every line in his face hardened. His hands fisted in his lap. Yeah, it was obvious that Hariel knew nothing about the murders. And that he was pissed. "Yes."

Rhys opened his mouth to ask another question, but Hariel stopped him with a raised hand. "You're sure of this? Not simply a few coincidences putting you on alert?"

"We are. It is far more than a few. Keepers and *Nephilim* are being hunted. Killed in the transition when they're vulnerable."

"Have you been to the Wall lately?" Xavier threw out an arm in its direction. "The deaths are mounting. Significantly. Like never before. We don't know why. Or who. But we won't stop until we do."

"In case no one else says it, thank you. I would like to assist however I can. This is unconscionable." The man was trembling in fury and outrage.

In a softer tone, Evangeline asked, "Did you know that the angelic guardian to the Gates of Hell is missing?"

This time there was a brief pause. "Yes. There are more posts that have been abandoned as well. The angel guardians of many sacred and powerful places are missing. It is a grave concern. We're unsure what is being done about it, though. Our communication with the celestials isn't all that it should be."

That was a huge admission. One that pointed to a far larger problem. What the fuck did it all mean?

“Will you keep our visit a secret?” It was a lousy question to ask, but Gideon knew it had to be done before the spell wore off.

“If that is what you want, then yes.”

Evangeline pulled out her phone. “This is the last Keeper who was murdered. That we know of. We can’t figure out what killed him. Can you tell?”

It was a long shot. Sure, Hariel had amassed innumerable facts in his time as a working angel and here as Librarian. But the man wasn’t Google. Which had already turned up zilch for them.

Hariel took the phone. It looked so anachronistic in the big hands of the man draped in clothing from an ancient civilization. Yet he knew how to use it, pinching and dragging to enlarge the image.

He recoiled. Dropped the phone on the desk.

Gideon exchanged a look with Rhys. That couldn’t be good.

What could scare a freaking angel?

With a nod of apology, he returned the phone to Evangeline, who took it warily and returned to Gideon’s side. “I know exactly what caused the death. Pestilence.”

These old-timers. It could take a bit to move them along toward a point. Impatient, Gideon rolled his right hand in circles to indicate he should keep going. “Yeah, clearly it’s a disease.”

“No. *Pestilence*.” Hariel repeated the word with portentous heft. “Someone has released one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

Holy. Fuck.

Evangeline’s hand clamped around his. Gideon had to admit he’d been about to reach for her. The world ending seemed like a solid reason to seek comfort.

Zavier slapped his hand to his forehead. Stomped in a slow, wide circle as everyone else stood frozen in place. “*Someone’s* trying to kick-start the freaking apocalypse? And nobody’s noticed?”

Gideon had expected the trip back to the Order to end up in some version of a shitstorm.

He hadn’t anticipated *this*.

Maisy gave a tiny, nervous giggle. “They say you shouldn’t ask a question if you’re not prepared to hear the answer.”

Talk about a problem being above their pay grade.

Chapter Sixteen

“You know, I feel like a normal human most of the time.” Evangeline curled her fingers more tightly around Gideon’s shoulder. Not because she was worried he’d drop her as they flew over Provence. She simply adored feeling his taut strength. “No powers. Ordinary job in an ordinary town, living in a condo instead of a house so there’s someone to shovel my snow.”

“You’re still all of those things.”

“Yes. But you just flew us through the Cascade de Sillans at dawn. Which may be one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. On the way to meet a Pegasus. That’s very not normal.”

“Not a Pegasus. Well, yes, technically a Pegasus, but with a unicorn horn, which makes it an Alicorn. And the Alicorn’s your mission.”

“I know.” Eva was grateful that Gideon had insisted they track down the next ingredient on her spell list. She hadn’t planned to prioritize it, what with the new and jaw-dropping information gleaned from the Librarian. He’d insisted, however, that their deal was clear. That he owed her this trip. Now.

“You can keep pretending. It won’t change the facts. You’re not a normal human. Even once you do this spell, you won’t be. It won’t change who you are on the inside.” For a few long moments, only the rhythmic flapping of his wings broke the still air. Then he looked at her and waggled his eyebrows lasciviously. “Happily, it won’t change your outside, either. Which is stunningly beautiful.”

“Are you allowed to flirt and fly? It feels like drinking and driving—something that’s far too distracting to allow for safe conditions.”

“I’m not flirting. I’m having a primal reaction to your beauty. Can’t be controlled. Like breathing.”

“Saying you aren’t in control doesn’t reassure me.” It did, however, delight her.

Gideon changed course to fly in a lazy circle. “I’m constantly assessing. There’s nothing else in the—” He broke off. Tightened his grip and tucked his wings tight, angling downward.

Evangeline trusted him. Wholeheartedly. It was still terrifying. Her stomach was in her throat, or she’d have screamed.

They plummeted toward a leafy copse. Gideon rolled them and then slammed out his wings to slow to a hover just above it. “Did you see it?”

“My life flash before my face? Yeah.” Including the part where she wished she’d had sex with Gideon before slamming into the ground...

“The horse. The Pegasus, I mean.”

“Up here? In the sky with us? Isn’t that why we came—because this is the flying horses’ ’hood?” She didn’t understand the urgency in his tone. Or why they’d nosedived so dramatically.

“Not this one. It had a rider. And it was green.”

Gideon’s eyes were still sweeping the canopy of trees. Every inch of him she could feel was tensed. “You have to give me some attempt at context.”

“Unicorns, Pegasus, Alicorns—they’re all snow-white. They don’t come in other shades like horses do. This one was very, very deep green. A sickly green.”

She still had no idea where Gideon was headed with this. Did he want to name it and get credit for discovering a new species in whatever was the angelic version of an encyclopedia? “It had a nice roll in the grass first?”

“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—they each have a distinctly colored horse. Pestilence’s is green.”

His brown eyes were sparkling, little flecks of gold *actually* zipping around. Evangeline knew it had to be from fury or

concern.

She, on the other hand, was equal parts sheer terror and disbelief. “I don’t want to be a naysayer, but it seems way too easy that the day after discovering Pestilence is involved, we just happen to fly across his path halfway around the world.”

“It’d make sense. Where better to hide a flying horse than where the herds live?”

“Aren’t there other herds in other parts of the world?” Evangeline didn’t want him to be right. They were alone. They had no plan. No idea of how to stop the Horseman.

“We’re almost there. Help me, Evangeline. Watch behind us for him.” Gideon boosted her a little higher. His wings obscured the view every few seconds, but she could gauge well enough if anything suddenly entered their airspace.

“I’m taking you to my friend, Jehan.”

“Did you sleep with any of the Alicorns?” She winced. Thank goodness her face was positioned at the back of his head. Since that was simply a thought twining around her brain, and not at all meant to be said out loud.

Especially not in that pinched, snippy tone.

His chest heaved as he laughed. “Jealous?”

“No. No! But your sexual, ah, antics could’ve cost me my chance at a mermaid scale. It’d be good to know what sort of reception to expect here, or if your reputation will also make things difficult.”

Stilted, much?

Of *course* she was jealous.

Of *course* she wouldn’t admit it. Plus, it was far better to spar with him about his numerous, ah, encounters than to worry about a Horseman of the Apocalypse possibly on the same flight path.

“I haven’t slept with every supernatural species. I do spend most of my days either fighting or running Metafora. Which, having examined our books, you’re well aware takes a

considerable amount of time and focus.”

Was he trying to slither out of his well-known reputation? “You slept with Aradia. That mermaid. Most of Buffalo, from what I hear. The law of averages makes it more than likely that you’d have been with an Alicorn.”

“They aren’t centaurs. They’re not half human. They’re fancy winged horses. You really think I’m *that* out of control with my sexual antics?”

Oh my goodness. Embarrassment crashed over her as Eva realized just what she’d accused him of.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t think—”

“*Couldn’t* think, because you were so jealous?” Smug surety coated his words like rich chocolate over an ice cream bar.

Which was less embarrassing? Admitting to being jealous, or stipulating that she thought he’d sleep with an animal?

Eva stared out at the spikes of mountains as they drifted closer to the ground. Again, the thought hit her, *How was this her life?* As well as gratitude to Gideon for engaging in this conversation with her. He probably sensed that she needed one heck of a distraction to keep from closing her eyes and squealing in panic about the possible Horseman in the vicinity.

“Yes. Yes, I’ll admit to a twinge of jealousy. Which I shouldn’t have. I’ve got no claim on you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” All the heat about the Horseman, and all the smugness vanished from his tone. He’d angled his head to put his lips right to her ear. Easily accessible because she’d piled her hair into a messy bun to keep it from covering his face as they flew. “You have claimed me, Evangeline. Somehow. You’ve branded me as yours. And we’re going to do something about that as soon as fucking possible.”

The intensity sent chills up her spine. It was both a threat and a promise.

And then they were on the ground so she didn’t have to figure out how to respond. Having been on lookout behind

them, it was a shock to see an Alicorn once Gideon set her down.

He was enormous. Not bulky like a Clydesdale. Shaped sleekly like a regular horse, but his back was above her head. The white wings—so white it was like the glare on fresh snow—were tightly folded along his sides. His spiral horn *glowed*, even in the morning sunlight. It was, well, magical.

“Greetings to you, Jehan. The sun is warm today.” Gideon gave a half bow.

“And the grass is plentiful. Greetings to you, old friend.” The Alicorn bent a knee—or whatever it was called on a horse—and dipped down.

Okay, this was a little bit mind-blowing. Eva’s ability to speak every language had never allowed her to talk to animals before. But then, an Alicorn was much more than a mere animal.

“This is Evangeline Thayer. She is a trusted friend.”

“She must be, for you to request a favor on her behalf.” Jehan came closer. Snuffled like a regular horse at her knees, so Eva put out her hand, palm down, for him to sniff as she shrugged off her backpack.

“You are magnificent. That’s probably not the right official greeting, but I had to say it.”

His laugh was more of a whinny. “Compliments are always a good way to open a friendship.”

“Then I regret that I have to follow it up with my request. I have a spell I must perform in order to ensure my safety. It requires the powder of an alicorn horn.”

“Gideon claims you as a friend. That is reason enough. I owe him more than can ever be repaid.”

Gideon swatted away the words. “Haven’t we argued about this enough? Stopping that demon didn’t just help your herd. We did it to protect all of Provence. You owe me nothing.”

That was interesting. Obviously alicorns didn’t have money. Or anything to trade in besides favors. That meant the

Nephilim had, indeed, done a freebie mission.

Evangeline was starting to think they probably did more of those than they'd ever cop to.

"We disagree. But then this favor will be for Evangeline alone, and she will be in our debt."

"Absolutely. The only thing is, I don't know how I could ever help you from Buffalo. I don't want to mislead you."

Another whinny-laugh. "*We* fly. One of my herd might well come to your land. Do not concern yourself with how to solve a problem that has not yet occurred."

Gideon draped an arm around her shoulder. "That's all Evangeline does. Look to the future and assess the risks."

Jehan frowned. "That does not sound like an enjoyable way to spend your days."

It wasn't. It wasn't horrible. But it wasn't so much fun. It was stable and safe, and Eva was good at it. Which had been her only requirements.

Spending her days flying around the world...now *that* was fun. But given that Gideon thought he'd just sighted an evil plague Horseman?

It certainly wasn't safe.

She pulled a vial out of her pocket. "How do I do this?"

"It will hurt you," he warned. "The heat of it will burn you. And the touch of it will scrape your fingers."

"I expected as much."

"Just pull your fingers along the side of my horn. The powder will come off. But do not touch the tip. It would injure you severely."

The legends were true, then. The horn wasn't just a breathtaking appendage, but a weapon.

Jehan knelt, then lowered his head so she could reach his horn.

Gideon took the vial. "I'll hold it to catch the powder. You

squeeze my hand.”

Oh. So it was going to hurt *that* much. “You know, every man who’s ever offered that to a woman has regretted it. We’re strong.”

“I know.” He stepped behind her to be a support, reaching both arms around her front. “But if I share your pain, it will lessen it.”

This man...he was a constant surprise. “Thank you.” She curled her fingers around his. Took a deep, bracing breath. And touched the horn with the side of her hand.

It was bad.

Like touching a hot stove burner while simultaneously scraping a fresh burn with sandpaper. Pain so bad it was nausea inducing. Luckily, the powder did, indeed, flake right off at contact.

Her spell didn’t stipulate as to the amount of powdered horn. As though that was common knowledge, like using a teaspoon of loose tea per mug. So Eva kept at it for more than the two seconds that she wanted to. She didn’t stop until there was a solid quarter inch of it at the bottom of the vial.

Gideon, to his credit, didn’t lessen his grip the whole time. He kept pressed right against her, too, giving her the strength to continue.

When Eva pulled away, she let out a gasp. Her knees crumpled. Gideon’s swift reaction was the only thing that kept her off the ground.

“I am sorry for the pain. I would have stopped it if I could.” Jehan nuzzled his big, soft lips against her arm with little snuffles of comfort.

It was still disconcerting to have the conversation sound so human and his actions be those of an animal. Eva couldn’t help but reach up to stroke just above his nose. “Thank you. Sincerely. This gift of yours will be life-changing for me.”

“Be sure you choose the right change. For the right reasons.”

So he was a flying unicorn horse *and* Yoda?

Gideon handed the vial back over. “Jehan, there is a great evil that might be near you. Have you or any of your herd seen a pale green horse in the area?”

The Alicorn reared. He probably stood more than ten feet on his back legs. He also spread its wings, which were iridescent on the underside. He was both incandescently beautiful and powerfully terrifying.

When Jehan dropped his front legs back down, they pawed at the ground. Rough, warning whinnies accompanied the tossing of his mane.

It was almost anticlimactic when he said, “Yes. The Beast.”

“Not the name we’ve been using, but if it is green and has a rider, then, yeah.”

“It was seen in one area. The next day, all the sheep on the mountain were dead. This has happened repeatedly for almost six months. We don’t know what he is.”

“You don’t want to know,” Gideon said grimly.

“Will you stop it?”

“Can’t promise that this time. It may be more than we can handle. But we’re damn well going to try.”

Eva respected so much that Gideon didn’t make an empty promise.

“All of the Alicorn herds are worried. Some have left their homeland. Gone to the New World. We miss them.”

“There’s no guarantee they’re any safer over there. Rhys, Zavier, and I are pretty sure that the one you call the Beast is trying to blend in here, with all of you. If you leave, he might follow.”

Jehan’s great nostrils flared wide. “We do not run. Or hide.” He lifted his horn as if warming up to impale the green horse.

That would be very bad, indeed. Evangeline understood his principle of wanting to defend his home. Of not backing down. But she’d learned a long time ago that the safest way to win a

fight was to avoid it entirely.

They had no idea how the Horseman spread his pestilence. With a bow and arrow like Cupid? Probably not, since they hadn't seen any arrow marks on the dead Keeper. Was it a breath he blew? Or was it touch? Would the alicorn's horn be diseased just from trying to fight the Horseman?

Eva couldn't let that happen. "Please consider it. The *Nephilim* have admitted they don't know how to defeat it. The danger is far greater than you can imagine. At least warn your herd not to engage or go near it, if the green horse is spotted."

His tail lazily swooshed back and forth. "You ask another favor?"

"If that's how you see it, yes. I would like to see you safe."

"Very well. I shall go spread the word now." He bent one knee again. "May the night come softly to you, Gideon and Evangeline."

"And may the grass be cool beneath the moon, Jehan."

The Alicorn pumped his magnificent wings and launched into the sky, heading straight for the mountain peaks.

Gideon immediately shifted to grasp her wrist and assess her hand. "Does it still hurt?"

He'd waited until they were alone. So that she wouldn't look weak in front of the alicorn. Eva appreciated his tact. "The burning stopped as soon as I wasn't touching it any longer. The heat, the power of that horn is unbelievable. I felt as if it were melting my flesh."

"It could have. That's the horn in, well, neutral. Jehan could've pulsed power through it and made it hotter."

She looked down at her skin. It did appear to have been in a run-in with a microplane, but only the top few layers. It stung, but it was tolerable. "I learned from my merman encounter. Planned ahead this time."

Rummaging awkwardly with her left hand, she pulled out antiseptic gel, gauze, and tape.

“You feel you have to bring medical supplies along on our dates?” Gideon sat them both down in the grass and began the rudimentary first aid.

“This is a date?”

Eva liked the idea in theory, of being on a date with him. Their dinner on the edge of the Aegean in Greece had been blissful—aside from first recovering from the shock of meeting a full heavenly angel. She didn’t need the ubiquitous movie and dinner combo. But she could do with less dodging of potentially fatal apocalyptic creatures.

“We’ll call what just happened the warm-up act.” Gideon rubbed the back of his neck. Shuffled the gauze from hand to hand. Was this awkwardness *embarrassment*? She didn’t think that particular emotion was in his repertoire. “I, ah, would like to take you on a date, while we’re here in France. It doesn’t involve losing any more blood—but it wouldn’t technically be classified as romantic, either.”

It was a tad hard to believe someone with his street and bed cred wouldn’t toss in at least a soupcon of romance. “So...not the Eiffel Tower?”

“No.”

That was fine. Too touristy to be worthwhile—or so she tried to make herself believe. “Lavender fields, since we’re in Provence?”

He squinted as he looked around. “We could skirt some. If it’d make you happy. The objective, though, would be to visit my family.”

Even without having lived through such a thing before, Eva read books. Watched three-tissue movies. She *knew* that it was always a big deal when a man wanted to make the familial introduction. But to a man of eighty-seven? Eva figured it carried even more weight.

It was daunting. Of course, she’d forced him to meet her eons-old aunt. That gave her no wiggle room to get out of it. “I thought you said *Nephilim* were removed from their families as children.”

“That is the way of it.” Gideon busied himself with cleaning and wrapping her injury. “But *who* the families are isn’t kept a secret. I figured that if I was half-human, I ought to know that part of me, too.”

This was far better than a showy, glitzy date. It was *personal*. “You know your whole family?”

“No. I did.” He pushed up from the thick grass. But only after placing a gentle kiss on her bandage. “I met my mother, my half siblings. Some cousins. She’d told everyone that I went to live with my father and his family. It was awkward, at first. But I...loved her. She didn’t know what she was getting into when she slept with a Fallen Angel. Didn’t know her child would be ripped away from her. I wanted to atone for that, as much as possible.”

That wasn’t his job. Eva ached for the guilt he’d taken on. “Did you grow a relationship?”

“Yeah.” He twisted back around with the sharp peaks behind him. A smile as warm as the Aegean broke across his face. “She was wonderful. We’d sing together. Her voice was so beautiful. We’d hold hands and sing hymns and classics and Elvis. She loved Elvis.”

“Then what happened?” No way could his fully human mother still be alive.

The smile vanished. “She died young. Before I needed to worry about her questioning the whole non-aging thing.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was cancer. Everyone smoked back then, especially in France. I couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it. Treatments didn’t exist yet. I threw money at making her comfortable. Funneled a whole bunch of money into a family trust. They all thought it’d been her secret. And it’s kept them going ever since.”

“You provide for generations of your family?”

“Secretly.” He winked. “Metafora’s books are clean as a whistle. As you well know by now. Our personal accounts, though? Convoluting and layered so that it is impossible for anyone to track us.”

“That’s incredibly generous of you.”

“Not so much. They’re my family. I can’t give them my time anymore. They’d question why I still look thirty. A string of identical, long-lost relatives would be sketchy, too. Especially in this internet and video-everything era.”

“You have the family you made, too. Rhys and Zavier—they’re brothers to you, aren’t they?”

“Yes. All we truly have is one another.”

While that triumvirate was wonderful, Eva wondered if he realized how lonely he sounded. Clearly, this was a man who was cut out to be the jovial, loving head of an *enormous* family. “And now Maisy,” she added gently.

“The Keeper’s grown on me, I’ll admit. Mostly because she puts Rhys in a better mood.”

“That’s how you’re friends with Jehan—you come here often, to watch over your family?”

“Not often.” The unspoken *not enough* hung in the air between them. “Which is why I’d like to go today. Hang out. Watch them for a bit. They have a farm, with a store and restaurant. I could take you to lunch.”

“I’d like that very much. Unless”—she dragged out the anticipation, grimacing as she repacked the bag—“you order snails. If you eat invertebrates in front of me, I might as well be back in Hell.”

Chapter Seventeen

It had been decades since Gideon had spent so much time with his family. Evangeline had asked a million questions, which brought the chef out, and then the owner of the farm. Gideon was lumping them all under cousins, nieces, and nephews—and not worrying about how many “greats” to put in front of them. They’d lingered for more than two hours over simple croque madames and vichyssoise.

“Thank you.” He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “For being so outgoing. For drawing them into conversation. I felt like I really got to know Emil and Danielle and Gerard.”

She beamed at him. “Me too. They’re such nice people. I’ll bet we could come back next year and they’d remember us.”

“That’s only a good thing for a little while. Then I have to fade into the background for a few decades, until the next generation taps in.” Those were the dark years. When he watched from afar. And was immensely grateful for the upswell of social media that allowed him constant glimpses into their everyday lives.

“I know. But you can enjoy the moments for now, right?”

“Believe me, I am.” They wandered down the long lane, hand in hand. It was lined with the lavender bushes Evangeline had requested to see. The scent filled the air.

It smelled like France.

It smelled like *home*.

How surreal to finally be sharing that with someone again.

She buried her face in the blossoms. Guess after living in Hell with all sorts of horrible things, simple bumblebees didn’t frighten her. “Any other old haunts you want to show me?”

“Funny you should put it like that...” Gideon pointed off to the right. Beyond a large house, with a compound of three others circling it, was a stone chapel that dated back at least two centuries. Evangeline might not be able to see more than

the black wrought iron spokes of the fence, but surrounding it was a graveyard.

“Oh. I see that I was waaaay off base with the Eiffel Tower guess.”

He paused beneath the giant arch of willow tree branches. “Like I said, it’s not romantic. If you’d like to wait here, I can pop in and be back in about ten minutes.”

“I don’t want you to rush. I don’t want you to go alone, either.” Evangeline began walking again, toward the chapel, taking the decision out of his hands. “We really ought to have flowers.”

She was sure attuned to human traditions. “Evangeline, it’s not just my mom. I know a solid fifty people in that cemetery. If we put flowers on that many graves, it’d call attention.”

“Not to mention the logistics of where we would even get that many bouquets.”

“Right,” he drawled, barely swallowing his laughter. “The *logistics* are what’s holding us back.”

Despite being six inches shorter, her legs had pumped her a good five paces ahead of him. “I need to put the blame on something. I don’t want to march in there empty-handed, all disrespectful.”

Her cadence had picked up in speed, too. Then the reason clocked Gideon in the head. “Have you ever been *in* a cemetery?”

Evangeline whirled around, holding the wrist of her injured hand. Her gray eyes were wide and unblinking. “Not...yet. Unless you count Hell. Which is sort of the ultimate cemetery?”

So she was attuned to human traditions, but definitely not acclimated. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not. When I’m nervous, you’ll know because I’ll talk a lot. A lot faster than normal, too. Maybe that’s a good thing to know about me—like a panic phrase. You can tell if I’m in danger if I start rambling—”

“Like you are right now?” It was adorable. Gideon tucked her against his side as they began walking again, this time in sync. “What are you scared of?”

“All the dead people.”

“You think they’ll turn into zombies?”

“No. I think it’s very sad to be confronted with mortality.”

Gideon did that on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis. Every time he left on a mission, never knowing if he’d come back, if the guys would, and how many evil creatures he’d kill that time around.

The secret was that it never got easy. You never accepted your mortality. If you did, the fight was over.

“Is it that you’re worried about going to Hell when you die? Being stuck there forever after escaping it once already?”

“It *wasn’t*, but thanks for stabbing that possibility into my consciousness. There’s so much I haven’t done yet. I got out, but I haven’t really lived. I’ve done my best to stay invisible. Once my power is gone I can travel without fear. Experience everything earth has to offer.”

Gideon hated the reminder that she’d be different, human soon. That she’d excise herself from all this supernatural life. That she wouldn’t want to be with him then, while she soaked up every other awesome thing.

“You’re in Provence. A few days ago you were in Greece. I’d say you’re traveling just fine. I’m happy to take you anywhere you like, once we finish this mission. Including *la tour Eiffel*.”

They steered through the open gates with CIMITIERE spelled out in gold leaf.

“The chapel looks so much older than all the graves.”

“Blame it on the government. Way back in the eighteenth century the king decided they were a public health hazard, and dug all the graves up. No more burying around churchyards. All this land belongs to my family, so it’s private. Which is how I built this.”

Gideon stopped in front of a two-story mausoleum with DURAND across the lintel. The copper-and-glass doors were flanked by copper urns shaped like eternal torches. The stone structure was embellished with rosettes near the roof. They'd been his mother's favorite flower.

"It's lovely. Soothing and sturdy, like it will stand here for all time. Only your mother is in here?"

He pushed open the door. There'd be no way to lie once they were inside. Had he brought Evangeline here to force himself to have this conversation with her? "No. There are two women entombed. The other is Colette. The woman...I used to love."

Apparently her nerves had calmed—or more likely, were superseded by curiosity—because after a long, searching look, Evangeline shouldered right past him. She slowly turned and took in the brass sconces, the stained glass window, and the white marble crypts. In addition to her name, his mother's had several lines about being a loving mother, beloved grandmother, and devoted churchgoer.

The other crypt's name, Colette, had only birth and death dates.

Gideon hadn't trusted himself to put anything else. Not with all the hate that had been in his heart at the time.

"That sounded like a specific and careful choice of words. You cared enough to put her in here with your mother."

"That spot was always for her. Because she was my wife."

Evangeline sank onto the marble bench topped with a black velvet cushion. "And you don't still love her?"

"Not at all. When someone betrays you, the love vanishes in the blink of an eye."

She patted the empty spot on the cushion next to her. "Tell me."

Standing was easier. Keeping some distance was easier.

Which still made this one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Because Gideon *never* talked about Colette. Not just due

to an unspoken agreement with the guys.

But because Gideon preferred to not think about his biggest mistake.

“I was young. I fell in love when I started visiting my mother here. Colette was a neighbor, who worked for our family. After the hardness of the Order, she was fun and softness and sweetness. Rhys and Xavier warned me not to do it, but back in the early seventies, marriage was the only possible step for her.”

“Did she know what you were?”

Absentmindedly, he traced the letters of her name with the tip of his finger. “Yeah. The guys begged me not to tell her. But it didn’t feel right to enter into a marriage while keeping such a huge secret from her.”

“You know you were right. Love can’t flourish when it’s cocooned by lies. Every Lifetime movie says so.”

He snorted at her stellar attempt to lighten his mood. “While I wouldn’t dare question their veracity, love also can’t flourish in betrayal. Colette was jealous of all the time I spent on missions. It was right after we quit the Order, so we were scrabbling for every one we could get. The time I spent with Rhys and Xavier...I told her it was my job. To her, that just sounded like a reason for her to scrape up enough money so I could quit that job.”

“Oh no. I’m getting a very bad feeling.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not bad enough. She found a witch.”

“In 1970s France? In the Yellow Pages?”

“Easier than that. Word of mouth through a network of villages. Colette ended up making contact with a demon. To be fair, she didn’t know it was a demon. He offered her money to give up Xavier.” Gideon pressed his forehead to the cool marble. It didn’t much help the pounding in his skull.

“What do you mean, ‘give up?’”

“I mean she threw a dinner for my friends. Dosed our wine to make us unconscious, and then opened the door to Gilberti

and his crew. They came to take away Rhys and Z, to keep them as caged pets, for torture. A brown-nosing present for Aamon.”

“Oh my God. He’s a powerful Grand Marquis of Hell. I’m shocked you were able to rescue Zavier at all.”

“Colette figured that with them out of the way and a big wad of cash, I could turn my back on protecting humanity and stay with her.”

“That wasn’t love.” Outrage dripped off Eva’s words like sludge. “That was pure selfishness.”

“No kidding. The plan backfired, of course. Rhys came to—he hadn’t drunk as much because he’d been recovering from being stabbed.”

“Which, to him, was as run-of-the-mill as a hangnail?”

“I mean, we still feel pain, as much as you do, but yeah, it happens pretty often. He fought them off while I slept through the whole thing. By the time he got me up, they’d taken Z and fled.”

“What did you do?”

Deliberately, he rolled and sidestepped so he no longer faced her name. Focused his gaze on the pinks and reds in the stained glass rose window above his mother’s crypt.

That night—it was the only time he’d ever been tempted to slap a woman. He hadn’t, of course. Gideon saved his violence for supernatural creatures, not humans. But their marriage, and his love for her, had ended in that second while he blearily stared at her tear-streaked face as Rhys shook him into full consciousness.

“I left. We went back to the Order to plead with the *Nephilim* to help us. Got turned down. So Rhys and I, alone, spent three months searching for Zavier.”

Evangeline peered at the death date on the crypt. “She died very young.”

“While we were searching. The demons felt cheated. They’d given her money to capture two *Nephilim*, and they only got

one. So they took her. To use as leverage, so I'd give up Rhys."

"That's horrible."

"The message was delivered in the middle of a battle in Nigeria. We were with three other *Nephilim*, trying to save a children's hospital from an infestation of *Abiku*."

"Those demons eat children."

"Yeah. I had to choose. Save an entire hospital of kids, or go save my wife."

"There was no choice."

"Exactly. When the battle ended, I went to the spot they'd told me to leave Rhys. By then, they'd left her corpse there." He'd never forget the pattern made by her blood soaking into the dirt. It almost looked like wings. "It was all my fault."

"Her death? No. She brought that on herself, by sacrificing Zavier."

No. He'd failed to protect her. And she'd become his Achilles heel. "Colette couldn't handle our world. It's too much for a human. I never should've allowed her to fall in love with me. It made her weak. Hellfire, it made *me* weak, or I would've seen her deception before it got too far."

Gideon needed to get away from the reminder of her. He shoved the bench, then placed his hand at the center of the rose carved into the marble floor.

It slid away, revealing the ladder to the hidden rooms.

Evangeline gasped. "This is my first time in a cemetery, remember. Is that...usual?"

"No. I had it built so I can stay without being noticed when I watch over my family." He extended a hand. "Will you come with me?"

...

Evangeline was *reeling* from Gideon's story. She wanted to be the one to slap sense into his ex. Of all the stupid, self-serving,

cruel things to do!

The woman in no way deserved to die for it, of course.

Now it made so much sense why Gideon was known for flitting—or whatever the male version of that was—from woman to woman.

He never wanted to risk falling in love again. Or risk having someone fall for him. It was heartbreaking.

So yes, she'd follow him into a creepy, dark hole in the ground below a grave. Whatever he needed right now, she'd provide. "You did promise no zombies," she reminded him.

"That holds true. I never break a promise. Although I'm a little surprised that woman-raised-in-Hell is put off by a little darkness."

"Not the time to take potshots. Or I'll remind you that someone raised in Hell knows *everything* about payback."

"Comment rescinded." Gideon pointed at the ladder. "But you've got to go first, so I can close the door behind us. When you get to the bottom, the sensor lights will turn on."

"Technologically up-to-date," Eva murmured.

Whatever knee-jerk fear she had about climbing into a dark pit in a graveyard vanished when the lights came on. It looked more like they were in a French chateau. Given their location, Eva assumed the bed was an actual antique, with its curving, gilt-covered headboard and footboard, both upholstered in gray silk damask. There was a marble-topped gilt console table holding a decanter and a bottle of red. Across from it was a gilt armchair with raw silk fabric. Everything was luxurious, including the thick black curtains that probably kept the underground chill off the room.

The best part was the small but perfect chandelier casting its glow around the jewel-box of a room. "Are you secretly a prince? A *comte*?"

"Hardly. My family owns land but no titles. This just seemed like a good place to embrace my roots."

"This is stunning."

“I’m not usually in the best headspace when I’m here. Figured I should at least be physically comfortable.” He smoothed a hand over the silk comforter. Absently, like he’d done it a thousand times in an effort to find some small measure of comfort.

That was it. Eva knew what he needed.

Comfort. No matter how luxurious, the thought of Gideon sitting down here, decade after decade, ruminating on his aloneness, wasn’t the right energy for the room. Rather than wallowing in the pain of what and who he couldn’t have...

...she’d let him have *her*.

It was a solid plan. Evangeline just had zero idea if it would work. Still, she wanted to try to give him this gift of...of... trust and tenderness and intimacy that she was guessing he hadn’t let himself experience *since* Colette’s betrayal.

And if she was wrong? Well, it’d be incredibly embarrassing.

But the regret of not trying seemed far, far worse.

Eva toed off her sneakers. “I’m grateful you shared that with me. I wish I could erase all your pain and guilt and suffering.”

Gideon’s head was still tilted up, looking at the closed trap door. “I earned it.”

“No. You didn’t. You made the best of the life you were given, which has some crap strings attached to it. I never thought I’d say I had it easier with my mother dying when I was born, but I don’t miss her.” She walked to Gideon and knelt to unlace his boots. He must really trust Jehan, because this pair didn’t have steel toes. “The *idea* of a mother, sure. But that’s more wistfulness.”

He rested a hand on top of her head. “Evangeline, what are you doing?”

“You had to grow up knowing that yours was out there, missing you. And then you got to meet her and yet never spend enough time with her. It happens again and again with every cousin and niece you meet through the decades.” She

looked up at him. “You’ve gotta help a bit, here. Lift your foot.”

Gideon did as she asked. “I didn’t bring you down here for this.”

“I know.” At least he didn’t need to be prompted to lift his other foot as she removed the boots. “Once I stopped being dazzled by the packaging, you’re rather easy to read. You came down here to get away from being confronted by those names on the crypts. To get away from the memories.”

“There’s no expectation from you. At all. I’m just grateful that you let me get it all out.”

For Eva, that was the loveliest part. If Gideon had truly been nothing more than his playboy persona? He would’ve laid on the charm as thick as jam and cajoled her into sex. But he didn’t. And he didn’t bring her here for a quickie. He’d brought her here to *share*.

That mattered. It made all the difference.

“I want to make new memories down here for you.” Next, she unhooked his belt. “I’ll even do all the work.”

But Gideon was still just standing, motionless, arms at his sides. His tawny eyes were closed. Eva was already uneasy enough in her far from usual role as the aggressor. What if this was the completely wrong angle and she was somehow desecrating the memory of his mother? Oh geez, his dead mother, a mere fourteen feet away... “You do need to give me a green light, however.”

His head just barely swung from side to side.

Uh oh. That looked like a no.

In that case, this would go down as the most embarrassing mistake of her life. And that included the time she’d almost stepped on a snail on the doorstep before Aunt Charmaine had told her that it was an invited guest to their party.

“I can’t believe you’d do this,” Gideon said softly.

That had to be all kinds of a red light. She’d entirely misinterpreted what he needed. How was she supposed to

know that Buffalo's Casanova wouldn't want a little old-school nakedness?

"I'm sorry." Eva got one foot underneath her, reaching back for her sneakers.

"I can't believe you want to comfort me. Nobody's done that since...since man first landed on the moon." Gideon seized underneath her arms to lift her all the way up, but with her feet still dangling in the air. "Of course I want this. I want *you*."

He slid her closer, along his arms until their chests bumped. But that was it in terms of forward motion. The man just stared at her, as if he was looking for a truth she had yet to reveal. Eva licked her lips. "Are you going to set me down?"

"You have to tell me the truth, Evangeline. Is this pity?"

Ohhhhhh. Oh, the sadness that ran so deep in this man. Eva hated Colette and what she'd done to him with a white-hot fury.

"God, no. We've both got too messed-up histories to have any room to pity each other. We've been inching toward this, you and I. While simultaneously avoiding it out of some misplaced attempt to protect each other from any possible hurt. But what you shared today proves more than ever that we should seize the moment. Take pleasure when and where we can, because there are no guarantees in life."

"I can think of one." A wicked grin transformed his face back into the sexy flirt she was used to seeing. He gently placed her feet back on the floor.

"If you say taxes, I'll tell you that you're reading the room very wrong."

"I can guarantee that I'll pleasure you until your eyes roll back in your head. I can guarantee we'll have fun. I guarantee you won't regret this." Then he whipped her tee over her head.

Eva reciprocated the gesture while he stared at her. And wished she'd worn something sexier than a front-clasp sports bra, but the niggling fear of having to run from demons any given day—and unaware of the probability of a graveyard seduction—influenced her lingerie choice on these missions.

Gideon's naked chest was...*beyond*. Beyond underwear model perfection. Beyond Greek statue perfection. All that wing work probably accounted for the, yes, *perfection* of his pees. The light brown hair bisecting his chest was burnished with gold, just like his wings. Unable to resist, Eva scraped her nails down his sculpted abs, reveling in the bump of each distinct cord of muscle.

He hissed in a breath at her touch. "Wait, Evangeline. Let me get you naked first."

"Really? After the countless warnings I've received about your reputation? I'd guessed you'd be willing to do it standing up with just a zipper undone," she teased.

"Willing? Sure. If that's all that's on offer. But I'd prefer to take my time with you. If *you're* willing." Gideon picked up a remote from the nightstand that dimmed the chandelier and set the flanking bedside sconces to a low flicker. All that and he *still* couldn't make the lights turn on at the top of the ladder? "Nobody knows where we are. They guys don't even know this place exists. We're outside responsibilities and deadlines. Let's take the time we deserve."

His phrasing made Eva realize they were running out of time to be together. And then she ruthlessly shoved that thought away.

"I'm all yours."

It was as if that short phrase unleashed something in him. With one hand, Gideon, flicked open her bra. The other undid her pants. His foot pushed them down to her ankles before her bra finished sliding off her wrists.

Maybe all the hype about him *was* real...

"Flare your wings, gorgeous."

Her useless wings? He shouldn't care about them at all. "Why?"

"Because I made you three guarantees."

Ah. Each of those guarantees was a long-winded way of promising an orgasm. So she'd save her questions for the end.

Eva popped out her wings as Gideon scooped her into his arms and carried her to stand at the side of the bed.

“That was a whopping seven steps. I can walk, you know.”

“I’ve noticed. You’ve got one hell of a swish in those hips. Even in Hell I noticed that, right off. But I enjoy touching you. I enjoy any and every excuse to touch you. “

“Same.” Eva couldn’t believe that was all she could muster. She blamed the fact that he was touching her wings.

Touching the *underside* of her wings, to be precise. Right before they melded into her back. He barely stroked, so slowly with just his fingertips, but those few square inches of flesh and feathers became her entire world. Similar to if he’d been stroking her clitoris, but it raced sensations along the nerves on the outside of her skin.

Eva had known the area was a bit sensitive. She’d had no idea it was erogenously charged. It wasn’t as if she could easily twist her arm fully backward to reach that spot herself. But she did claw her nails across his back and lift her wings out as far as possible.

As if that wasn’t enough, once her chest began to heave with deep sighs in response, Gideon put his lips on her breast. It was just a languorous exploration from the underneath, up the side, and then over the top down into the vee between them. His mouth sucked at every inch of her breast. Unrelentingly. And then he started all over, replicating the exploration on the other one. Wet, hot, openmouthed kisses that dragged across her skin over and over and over.

Did he touch her nipple? No.

Did that make her desperately *want* him to? Good God, yes.

Already sucking in air in uneven bursts, Eva asked, “Would you get the same sensation if I touched your wings in the same spot?”

“If you mean it jacks up my desire to an eleven, then yeah.” He didn’t lift his mouth to talk. No, Gideon let the vibrations of his words ripple through her skin. *That* was magical.

“That’s... Nobody’s ever touched me there before.”

“You hid who you truly were.” He finally dragged his mouth away to look up at her. “You don’t have to with me.”

Wow. Now *he* was the one giving her the gift. Eva found the courage to respond, “Same goes for you.”

There was a moment of silence. His fingers stilled their thrumming through her feathers. Then a harsh, surprised laugh erupted. “I guess you’re right. We’re quite a pair.”

He’d zipped her right past the need for any further foreplay with the wing touches. “How about we become a *naked* pair?” She hooked her thumbs in the waistband of his pants.

“Hang on.” His eyelids slammed shut. “I don’t have a condom.”

“Seriously? How many women do you sleep with a year? No, a month? I know you can’t catch illnesses, but you could certainly make a baby. How could you be so reckless?” She wasn’t at all mad. Eva simply enjoyed watching the abashed shock slacken every muscle in his face.

“Hey, hooking up wasn’t on today’s agenda. I’ve got weapons in every pocket, my wallet, and my phone. Period.”

Eva pushed him aside. Then she pulled out a first aid kit from her pack. “I don’t always carry a condom in case of unplanned nooky. I carry one because they’re a good thing to place over a wound for protection.”

“Protection...obviously.”

“Are you twelve?”

“I think every man’s still got a horny little twelve-year-old hunkered down to stay in some corner of their brain.”

She put two on the nightstand. There was no need to tell Gideon that she’d packed the second one...just in case of something *not* wound related...

“Thanks for being prepared.” There was a dull thud and clinking of several weapons hitting the floor, muffled by his pants. “Are you ready for your reward?”

When Eva turned around, Gideon was naked. Muscled, with just the right amount of hair—including the sexiest of all trails heading down from his belly button. Legs that somehow looked longer when naked, spread wide. And in between hung a magnificent cock.

She lunged forward.

Gideon stopped her with a whiplash curl of his arm around her waist. “You’re in violation of my dress code. How about we fix that?”

He managed to twist up and sideways in the air with the most controlled flutter of his wings until they were above the bed. They hung there for a few moments. Eva wrapped her legs around his hips, trying to push him down to the bed.

“Stop rushing me,” he ordered.

But...his exceedingly hard penis bobbed against her ass. Its insistent rhythm had her hips twisting. She wanted so much more of it than mere taps. But *then* Gideon kissed her. In mid-air. As if holding her up wasn’t any harder than holding a yoga ball.

And the kisses were meltingly good. Eva had known that from their first kiss in Hell. Their tongues danced. Pushed and twined and tickled and suckled until her head spun as if they’d been pirouetting through the sky. Never once did she stop noticing the granite of his body pressed against her nakedness. The heat pouring off of him.

The way all of it flooded heat *through* her.

Eva had no idea how much time elapsed before he gently lowered her to the bed. Gently pulled off her pants and underwear.

And then *ravenously* scraped his mouth from her knee to the crease of her groin, along the tender inside. From between her knees, he looked up and asked, “That okay?”

“I’m...comfortable.” She reached out to caress the satin pillowcase on the opposite side of the bed. Wow, it was fun to wind him up.

“I don’t want you to be comfortable. I want you to be out of your *mind*.” Gideon grabbed the pillow from beneath her hand. He shoved it under her hips. Wriggled his magnificently tight ass as he worked his way down the bed. Whew, that view alone surged wetness between her legs.

First, he rubbed all that golden, silken hair against her. How was the top of his freaking head giving her more pleasure than her last three partners combined? She circled her hips to move with him. Then Gideon lifted just a few inches and huffed out a breath.

That got her attention. A wide warmth that delighted her.

Two more huffs before he switched it to a pursed, soundless whistle of air, right down her crease.

Ohhhh.

That quiet, narrow force of the whistle reminded her a lot of the time she’d gotten too close to a hot tub jet. It was focused, and the effect was electric. She bucked against him.

So he did it again.

And again.

The fourth time, in desperation, she reached down to grab his hair, to try to force him closer.

Reaching up, he held his index finger to her lips. Eva opened, eager to get her mouth around any part of him. After thrusting it in and out three times, he shifted. Widened the elbows propping him up and lifted her leg over his shoulder.

Then he slid that same finger inside her while licking a line down her center. No, to be precise, he flicked his tongue down one side, then the other. As Gideon crooked his finger in a way that shot her hips even higher, he oh-so-slowly swirled a circle around her clitoris.

Eva *melted*. From the inside out. All of her turned to pure, wet heat as she quaked beneath him.

She panted for a few seconds, letting the waves lap through her.

Gideon didn't wait, though. He immediately nibbled his way north, around her belly button, up her ribs, then around her breast again.

It'd been...what...five minutes? And Gideon had given her a mega-orgasm.

That was his warm-up act?

As he continued to lap at her breast, she realized it wasn't a soothing smooth of his tongue around her nipple. No, he was revving her right back up with fast little flicks.

And it was working.

Gideon plucked her nipple with his teeth. It teetered right on the brink of pain but then subsumed her with *sooo* much pleasure. His fingers mimicked the motion on her other breast. The invisible but unmistakable string between her breasts and her core went taut, vibrating inside her body with shock after shock of melting pleasure. Eva's legs thrashed, restless, against the silk sheets, held wide by his thighs.

Foil tore between his teeth with a sharp rasp.

"Wait. Don't you want me to...get you ready?"

"Whew. Way to insult both of us with that question. I've been ready since I first set eyes on your beautiful body. Because you are sleekly stunning, Evangeline. Not to mention"—he wrapped her hand around his rock-like penis—"there's no more 'ready' than this."

"Sorry. You, ah, momentarily melted a whole swathe of my brain cells with that orgasm."

"You don't need to use your brain. Don't think at all. Just feel. You against me. That's all there is."

Gideon dropped his welcome weight along her length. It instantly threw every still recovering nerve ending in her body into overdrive.

He was hot and heavy, scratchy and smooth, and he covered all of her in a way that was both comforting and insanely exciting.

Eva rocked her hips against him. He slid into her wetness so easily. For about an inch. Then it became a slow and steady, millimeter by millimeter incursion as she adapted to his length and girth.

Teetering on the edge of discomfort and satisfaction had her raking her nails down his back in frustration, even though it was her own tightness holding them back.

“We’ll get there,” he reassured her with a deep kiss. “Take your time. There’s no place I’d rather be.”

She’d never been so full.

She’d never felt so good.

One last wriggle seated him deeply. He stayed there, unmoving, just kissing her, *claiming* her as both hands cupped her head.

There was no temptation to close her eyes to let the pleasure mindlessly wash over her. No, Eva *needed* to see Gideon’s pupils blacken and enlarge with his passion. Had to watch the veins pop out at his temples as he finally plunged in and out.

She had to see him smile down at her with a warmth that rivaled the heat flooding between her legs. It amplified her lust until she was right back at that peak, trying to hold on and wait for him. He crooked one arm behind her knee. Lifting it up pushed him impossibly deeper. Eva’s mouth dropped open on a low moan. Her fingertips dug into his ass in a wordless plea for him to go faster and closer. Finally, Gideon increased his pace with an urgent moan.

Eva gave in and let go, every inch of her body quaking in release as Gideon yelled.

When he collapsed, he was thoughtful enough to shift his weight at least marginally to the side so she could breathe. She kept her legs firmly wrapped around his. Stroked one hand over his hair and let the other caress his slightly damp back.

She didn’t want to move for at least, oh, three days. Probably wouldn’t be *able* to recover from her boneless state for at least that long.

Eva thought back to when Gideon had guaranteed that she wouldn't regret this idyll. He'd been wrong.

She was, of course, thrilled to have the memory for the rest of her life.

But making love with Gideon had changed things. It had brought to the forefront that ignoring growing feelings didn't make them disappear. That enjoying his conversation, his loyalty, strength, the way he propped her up, and that amazing body...it all added up to something she hadn't even noticed.

She *cared* for him.

A lot.

So a part of her already regretted the perfection of this afternoon, because it would make it exponentially harder to walk away from him.

Chapter Eighteen

Gideon nuzzled his face into Evangeline's neck. This carrying her as he flew was equal parts pleasure and torture. Flying with an erection kept his mind on his cock instead of noticing updrafts and wind currents.

"Sorry we had to leave so quickly." He'd have preferred to spend the weekend—no, the entire week—in that cozy room with his dark angel. But responsibility had reared its ugly head in the form of his alarm going off. "This whole saving the world thing is really cutting into my bedroom action."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Sexing feels...disrespectful? I don't know what to call it. I'm eighty-seven. Give me a break."

"I call it fun. Tremendous fun."

So did he. Except when it stopped being just fun and became something more that he didn't have words for. Which was why he was using the uber-cheesy ones. How was it that he could speak every language in the world and couldn't find the right description for what he felt about Evangeline?

What she *made* him feel?

All he could say was that it wasn't just sex. And he wasn't bored yet. And he didn't think he could get enough of her.

What did it all mean?

It turned out that orgasms were the easy part. No, that wasn't true, either, because the *rest* of it wasn't hard. Evangeline was easy to be with. Easy to talk to, when she wasn't working him into a frenzy or infuriating him. Easy to make smile and laugh. The ease with which she relaxed him and put a smile on his face and comforted him.

He knew enough not to call a woman "easy" and expect it to be taken like the compliment it was.

Evangeline brushed a soft kiss over his cheek. "Can we touch down for a minute?"

“We’re almost to the waterfall.”

“That’s why I want the break. I don’t want to waltz into the Watchtower looking like I just rolled out of your bed.”

He thought she’d never looked so beautiful. A little mussed, a little sleepy, and a lot happy. “There’s no hiding that glow of satisfaction. It won’t wear off for at least a couple of hours.”

Kicking her heel lightly against his ribs, she said, “Smugness is not a good look on you.”

“Don’t lie. Everything’s a good look on me.”

“I just want to be sure I’m pulled together. You’ve been liberal with the kisses and caresses while flying.”

“Hey, my wings were plenty busy. I was just keeping my other body parts from getting bored.” He set her down on a moss-covered rock by the edge of the river that flowed from the falls.

Evangeline finger combed her hair quickly, then began to braid it. “I suppose you want me to be grateful that I was able to help stave off boredom for you, so that you’d keep us aloft without nodding off.”

“You know what? I should probably sneak in one more kiss while I can.” Gideon bent down. A split second later, he heard a distinctive whistle of air past his ear.

It was a knife being thrown.

Wings flared wide to protect Evangeline, he spun around to spot for his attacker. Which wasn’t hard. The guy wasn’t trying to hide—or protect his identity.

Gideon recognized him right off. The green and white spotted wings didn’t so much blend into the gray rockscape. It was Ashish, a slightly younger *Nephilim* he’d been on several missions with over the years.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He kept spinning around, to see if there was an attacker behind him that knife might’ve been meant for. But aside from Ash, they were alone.

From the edge of the trees, he yelled, “What needs to be

done. What others are too lazy or complacent or scared to do.”

“Nobody’s writing down your speech in verse. Tell me why you attacked me.” The handles of Gideon’s daggers were in his palms. He wasn’t so worried about holding off a single attacker by himself. He *was* worried about protecting Evangeline.

Maybe she was on her phone right now, texting for backup.

Or maybe she *wasn’t* because she assumed he could handle himself. Which, again, was true, but he needed to be sure she didn’t have so much as a feather ruffled by this idiot.

Ashish swaggered forward, sticking to the edge of the river. He wore dark green pants beneath a belted green robe—very old-school Order attire. Mostly it made him look like he was trying to blend in with his own wings.

“I knew you’d be back. I saw you fly through this morning. That if I staked out the falls long enough, you’d use them to return. This was the perfect spot for an ambush.”

There was usually significantly less talking in a well-planned ambush. Not that Gideon planned on giving the guy pointers.

After a firm push on his wing, Evangeline came out from behind him. Voice ringing loud and clear, she said, “You’re a fool to go up against Gideon Durand. Because you’re not just fighting him. Ultimately, you’ll end up fighting Rhys Boyce and Zavier Carranza as well.”

Evangeline made a solid and true threat. Still, it pinched his ego a little that she felt it necessary to bring the others up. He had this.

Ash tossed back his long brown hair. “You take a stand against darkness because it is the right thing to do. Not because it is simple.”

Uh-oh. This sounded more targeted, and not accidental. Couldn’t be a coincidence he dropped the word “darkness” when facing off against a dark angel. Guess their visit to the Order hadn’t gone unnoticed after all.

The Librarian wouldn't have said anything to give them up. But the time they'd spent paying their respects at the Wall had been enough to be identified. How they'd identified Evangeline so quickly, he had no idea.

Was it because Hell was buzzing about her and Charmaine disappearing up above? Was it Aradia's coven that had the loose lips? The fucking merman? No way to tell. No time to figure it out. Gideon had a more pressing question for the other man.

"Ash. Why attack me?"

"My attack was against the dark angel."

That made things worse on so many levels.

First of all, it meant that Ash's aim was a disgrace to his Order training. That knife had been a whole body width away from Evangeline. Secondly, it meant that there was far greater danger. Ash was unpredictable if not engaging in standard battle. Trying to take down Eva while not necessarily wanting to fight Gideon meant he could do something reckless.

Plus, it targeted him for a massive beating for so much as intimating that Evangeline deserved to be attacked. Bad enough Hell disrespected her. The celestial forces had no right to pile on.

Normally he was good with fighting first and pounding out answers after the opponent was bleeding and semiconscious. But to give Evangeline as much protection as possible, he had to at least *try* to have a coherent conversation first.

"Will you put down the knife and talk to me?" Gideon double-thumped his chest. "You know you can trust me. We've fought *together*. We've won many battles against evil, *together*."

Instead of putting the knife down, Ash gave it a flashy spin. Which would've given Gideon the perfect opportunity to kill him—but that wasn't his goal. No, he needed to know what, or who, drove his former comrade to attack.

"It looks like history isn't repeating itself this time around." Ash pointed the knife at Evangeline. "Now you're conspiring

with the Forces of Hell. And there's too many *Nephilim* doing that for my taste."

Yeah, that was a neon-bright clue right there. A clue that landed on the side of *their* team, trying to contain whatever was behind the murders. A clue that other *Nephilim* at least had their suspicions, which should give them a leg up on investigating. As long as Ash didn't do anything stupid out of misplaced heroism.

Beside him, Evangeline gasped.

"I am *not* a Hell force. I'm every bit as good as Lucifer Morningstar was before he fell. Doesn't your Order teach you the basics about dark angels? Some are good, and some are bad—living representations of the two sides of Lucifer. Or were you just not good at paying attention to how varied and interesting other races are?"

Why, *why* would a woman who had no way to fight or defend herself poke the bear? How did she think this was helping the situation at all?

Still, it was a *little* hot how she stood right up to the armed man threatening her. How Evangeline refused to let herself be bullied anymore, even when faced with violence and danger.

One last attempt at resolving this without bloodshed. "Look Ash, we're investigating. Rhys and Zavier and me. We're trying to stop whatever evil is rising. We're not conspiring with any part of Hell."

Wordlessly, Ash merely thrust his knife toward Evangeline.

"Being born in Hell doesn't make me evil." This time she didn't sound mad. Her tone was patronizing in the extreme. "Does being born in France make you a bad driver?"

"Hey." They might be in a life-and-death standoff, but there were still lines that didn't need to be crossed. "Unnecessarily harsh. Not to mention untrue."

To his shock, Evangeline stomped closer to Ash. Not a lot closer. Enough that Gideon would have to yell at her later about the utter tactical stupidity of it, though. "Born in Alabama means you aren't going to Harvard? Or whatever I

might say about the fact you're left-handed and what could be inferred from that... Guess what—I'd say *nothing*, you jerk. Because I don't judge people by anything other than their actions."

Guess she'd told him!

"How about we share our information? Then we can figure out next steps."

Ashish's lips flattened into a line of regret. "Look, you're a good soldier. You've always had my back. I want to trust you. But I can't. Can't risk it. But you can be on your way if you just give me the Dark One."

"Over my dead body. *Literally*," he threatened in a tone as flat as the Black Sea. Gideon had been concerned about Evangeline being collateral damage with an injury. But there had never been any scenario where he turned her over or allowed her to be killed. If it wasn't so bleakly unthinkable, it'd almost be funny.

"Will you stop talking about me as if I'm not here? I have agency." She tossed her blonde hair. "I have my own mind."

Yeah. A mind that had clearly never heard the pearl of wisdom about trying to bond with your attacker. Make them see you as a person and not simply an end.

Enough was enough. He was ending this. But there'd only be two of them fighting. Gideon strode forward and caught her arm. "Evangeline, you need to go. Fly through the falls. Get to the Watchtower. Save yourself while I deal with this."

"I can't."

From day one, they hadn't believed her when she said she couldn't fly. They believed that *she* believed it. But it was all wrapped up with her feeling powerless compared to the other dark angels when, in fact, her single power was freaking kick-ass.

If adrenaline could get a mom to lift an SUV off a baby, then it could get Evangeline to fly.

"I promise your wings will kick in. Your body knows what

to do. Just aim at the Falls and think about the Watchtower.”

“No, Gideon. I can’t *leave* you alone!”

Hellfire.

This whole caring for each other thing was kicking him in the ass. “Keep your mouth shut, please,” he hastily added, “and stay back. Far back.” Not that Gideon put the odds on her doing it at above 40 percent.

Evangeline was exactly the type of person who’d try to help by hitting Ash over the spine with a fat branch. She was full of misplaced bravery and heroism. However, she had no idea what *Nephilim* were capable of enduring. It’d be like a back scratch to him.

Posturing a little, Ash said, “I don’t *have* to kill you, Gideon. Just incapacitate you enough so I can get to the Dark One.”

“You *can’t*.” Bothered by the repeated threats, Gideon stalked toward Ash. “You can’t incapacitate me. You sure as hell can’t kill me. That’s not me being smug, or a cocky asshole. That’s a fact.”

And while he’d been willing to let Ash walk away, mostly intact, now he was less inclined. It’d put Evangeline in continued danger. Sadly, Ash was a risk that had to be contained.

“You haven’t been training with the Order.” The words echoed off the cliff face surrounding them. “You’ve gotten sloppy since you quit.”

Huh. Was that the bullshit line they were officially pedaling? Making the three of them out to be pussies? Making it look like they couldn’t cut it in the Order?

That’d be a part of his next conversation with Caraxis, for sure. It also meant a 10 percent rate hike to the Order, as of right the fuck now.

He glanced around at the rocks, the cliff face, the trees. This wasn’t the worst battle ground he’d ever been on. “No. I’ve gotten better since leaving. I’m not hampered by the rules and

traditions of the Order any longer.” With a single pump of his wings and a push of his thighs, Gideon leaped a good fifteen feet to land on a drooping branch. “I’m stronger. Smarter.” He jumped on the branch. As it cracked under the sudden force, Gideon somersaulted off. He landed beneath it just in time to catch what was now a sharp and pointy lance. Lance-approximate. Lance-ish. A handy extra weapon. “I’ve logged field time against the things the Order is too damn scared to send you out against.”

Wings fully extended, Ash hovered a few feet up. “You really think I can’t dodge a piece of a big-ass tree you throw at me?”

“Sure you can. It can’t get a ton of velocity going.” After a quick glance over his shoulder to be sure Evangeline was, in fact, staying off the field of battle, he bared his teeth. “But I can.”

Gideon sprinted, then launched into the air, wings pumping furiously. Hey, it looked like a lance so he might as well use it as one. He aimed straight for Ash. The broken end of the branch was aimed at his heart. And in those old-school belted robes instead of fighting leathers, it’d go right through him like a kabob stick.

Closer now, it was easy to see Ash’s determination morph to fear. Oh yeah. He was well aware that Gideon didn’t plan to pull any punches. That, for all his bluster, he had zero chance of winning this fight.

Ashish flew backward with all his might, barely staying out of Gideon’s reach. He rode the updraft. It gave him just enough extra speed to get through the waterfall.

Gideon twisted his angle to go straight up the face of the water to spend the extra velocity he’d gathered. There was no use trying to follow him through the portal. He had no idea where Ash had gone. And it could be literally anywhere in the world.

Still free.

Still wanting to hurt Evangeline.

Yet this still made Ash nowhere close to their biggest problem.

Discarding the branch, he dove back to Evangeline. To his surprise, she was, indeed, where he'd told her to remain. Aka out of the way. But she had picked up a large rock that Gideon assumed she'd meant as protection. For her *or* for him.

She was freaking wonderful.

Grabbing her shoulders, he asked, "Do you want me to yell at you first or kiss you?"

Her eyes sparkled. Her outstretched hands planted on his chest. "Gideon, you were magnificent. The man *fled* from you. Full retreat. Without you even touching him. You are an immense badass."

Yeah, the reputation they'd earned over the decades did put an end to more than a few battles before they even began. It could never be counted on, though. "Well, once he lost the element of surprise, Ash would've known there was no way he'd take me."

"More to the point, you wouldn't let him take *me*." Evangeline poured out the words with the thick sweetness of maple syrup. "You were my champion."

"That's what I do. I protect good from evil." But then he couldn't play it casual any longer. Gideon pulled her close. Tucked her head under his chin and held on to her with all his strength. She was so soft. Fragile. Important to him. "I was so worried you'd do something brave and stupid."

"I was thinking about it. But then I remembered I trusted you. I knew you'd keep us both safe." Evangeline's voice was muffled, with her cheek pressed to his chest.

"Don't scare me like that again," he ordered. Did it come out gruffly? Yeah. But now that the laser focus of the fight was gone, Gideon could admit that there'd been a nonstop fear clenching his gut. For her. For him if he lost her.

"I didn't have a choice. I don't care that you're one of the best warriors between Heaven and Hell. I won't run away and leave you alone."

She would, though.

As soon as she had her spell ingredients together. She'd turn her back on him to save herself.

And Gideon would have to let her go.

Chapter Nineteen

The *plan*, the beautiful plan, was to drag Gideon into the shower. His cozy little room beneath the mausoleum didn't have one, and they'd gotten...sweaty. Multiple times. So Evangeline's entire plan had been to get back to the Watchtower and get him all soapy and wet...and then proceed to get sweaty again.

She was a true Type A. Eva planned everything. Then she planned alternate scenarios for what was planned. Not sticking to said plan was almost as bad as dumping a handful of fire ants on her bare legs.

And yet? Her plan was kiboshed. So she still had a considerable itch that needed scratching. By Gideon. While naked.

After all, he deserved some sort of special thanks for the way he'd heroically kept her safe back at the French waterfall.

Eva rested her hand on Gideon's thigh. Because she *could*. There was a delightful freeness in how she could touch him now that they'd had sex.

She intended to do it a lot.

Looking out the car window, the cemetery right by the house came into view. She'd better wrap up her ranting quickly. "It is the twenty-first century. Why do we have to race to Maisy's house just because Aunt Charmaine wants to tell us something? She could email. Call. Text. Share this urgent info with Maisy and Zavier and Rhys."

"Your aunt is a Fallen." He leaned enough emphasis on the word to topple over an elephant. "Eons older than us. With knowledge of the millennia. If she says it's important that we swing by so she can show us something, we go."

Ugh. That strong sense of duty she admired so much in him was not working for her right at this moment. "You're kind of proving my point. Our sense of time is barely a blip to her. Ergo, we could've waited a few hours and she wouldn't even

notice.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded with a flip of his hand on the steering wheel. “I’m enough of a rebel to be willing to piss off a full angel. But I’m not willing to be rude to the woman who raised you.”

Damn it. Eva liked him even more for that annoyingly on-point response.

Gideon parked in front of Maisy’s house. The driveway was full of cars, indicating the others had already gathered. That cut her chances of sex down even more. “I’m just going to say it.” She slammed the car door shut with far more force than necessary. “I’d very much like to have sex with you again. As soon as freaking possible.”

His laughter startled a family of birds into squawking and flapping out of the oak tree that dominated the front yard. “That’s what’s got you in this mood? Do not let there be any question in your mind about my eagerness.” Gideon met her in front of the porch steps and threaded his fingers through hers. “The moment we can leave, we will. And we head straight for your bedroom.”

With Maisy and Liss just down the hall? No. “I was thinking more about those four shower heads and the bench back in the bathroom at the Watchtower. And soap. Lots of slick, soapy wetness as I stroke you everywhere.”

“Hellfire, woman. Now you’re just torturing me. Yes. Absolutely.”

She let them in and the playful, lusty mood between them shattered. It was chaos in the house. Aradia was chanting over an actual mini cauldron in the living room. The noise of Zavier and Rhys arguing loudly drifted down the hall from the study. A whole lot of clanging was happening in the kitchen.

Above it all was her aunt’s singing. Clear. Pure. Like breathing oxygen while being showered with starlight.

Angel song was powerful. It could heal and enchant, even to other supernaturals. Eva both loved and hated it when Charmaine sang. It left her feeling as boneless and relaxed as a

two-hour massage. Like happiness had seated itself as an organ in her body. However, her aunt only did it to self-soothe when something was bothering her.

Whatever news awaited them, it wouldn't be good.

Gideon paused. Smiled in an almost loopy way that was beyond adorable. "That's absolutely beautiful."

"Indeed. It also indicates that something's very wrong." Letting go, she rushed into the study. Her aunt was in the big leather desk chair, eyes closed and hands clasped at her heart. Her iridescent hair was piled in a messy topknot. Liss had bought her a bunch of tanks and shorts, and today's were a lilac tie-dye. She looked like a super model at a wellness retreat. Eva tapped her arm.

The song abruptly stopped. "You're here."

"You're enchanting the entire house. There are humans here, you know."

She waved a hand dismissively. "The boys gave them earplugs. I needed to sing. *Needed* to, Evangeline."

"I get it. Thanks for staying inside, at least." When her aunt sang outside, it was like a Disney flick. Aside from not being quite as cute. The birds and mice and other...creatures that were drawn to the angel song were in Hell, after all.

Charmaine pointed at Gideon, leaning on the doorjamb. "Gather everyone." She stood and hugged Eva tightly. "You thought coming up here would be safer than living in Hell. But what you've gotten yourself into—I fear it is far more dangerous. I am so sorry."

Eva swallowed hard. Then she broke out of the embrace. "Let's not be overly dramatic. People fracture their skulls slipping in the shower. Life's dangerous. But it has lots of good parts, too." Like the last six hours. French kissing. French everything. In France. With a Frenchman. Yeah, it didn't get any more sublimely perfect than that.

Charmaine grabbed her chin, twisting Eva's head side to side. "You slept with the *Nephilim*."

Mortification pushed heat into her face. She shuffled back a few steps. “You’re like a mother to me. I can’t talk to you about this.”

“Child, that is precisely why you should talk to me. I know you inside and out.”

“Okay, then, let’s say I choose not to discuss it.” Talking about it with Charmaine would lead to questions for which Eva had no answers.

“You care for him.”

“Well, yes. But really, we’re just enjoying the moment. This brief moment.”

“He will hurt you.”

“Not intentionally. And only if I allow it.” Which she would not. Eva was the one making the choices. It didn’t matter that Gideon had the reputation of a playboy. It didn’t matter—aside from being heartbreaking—that he’d decided to wall himself off from love because of his dead wife.

It was her decision to rid herself of the power and all ties to the supernatural world.

Because being safe trumped being happy.

Her heart flew into her throat. Where had that thought come from? Was it true?

Gideon leaned back in. “Everyone’s in the dining room. Do you want us to have Aradia come back later to finish her spell? She said you asked for souped-up protection on the house. She’s got a few more layers to go.”

“The witch stays.”

“She’s proven herself. She leads the strongest coven this side of the Rockies. But we’re still not entirely sure that she wouldn’t put her own motivations ahead of what we need,” he cautioned.

“The witch stays. You will need help from every angle.” Charmaine swept out of the room as if still in robes of gold-laced satin instead of Target’s best and cheapest.

Eva elbowed Gideon. “See? I told you the pretty song was a harbinger of suckitude.”

“Nice vocab.” He tugged at the bottom of her braid. “Does it come with a skateboard and a rainbow streak in your hair?”

“I stay up on pop culture.” Devoured it ravenously, truth be told. It was the best way to fit in as a human. “I pick and choose what speaks to me. And sometimes, a teen slang word is absolutely the most appropriate choice for an adult situation.”

The end table that was a catchall for keys and sunglasses now held a pile of earplugs. Eva would need her own pair if her aunt still “needed” to sing more.

Everyone sat around the dining room table. It was piled with bowls of red and green salsa, guacamole, sour cream, shredded cheese, rice, and chips. In the middle was a mounded platter of fajitas.

“This looks amazing. I’m starving.”

“That surprises me not at all,” Charmaine said with a smug tone and a slow wink.

Oh my goodness. Eva did not want the entire table to discuss if she and Gideon had sex *because of her appetite* and how they felt about that development. Especially since the two of them hadn’t really discussed it. “Who do I thank for this feast?”

Liss wagged her fingers. “I can’t help you with the magical stuff, but I can feed you and mix a killer margarita.” She filled the last glass and set down the pitcher, which incongruously was etched with a maple leaf. The previous owner of this house had apparently been nuts for maple syrup—and took advantage of the proximity to the Canadian border.

Across from her, Aradia raised her hands, palms up, just above the table. “Do we have to say a prayer first?”

Zavier propped a broadsword against the side of the china cabinet. “What about us makes you think we do that?”

Instead of the blunt snark Eva had witnessed from the witch

previously, she ducked her head. “The, you know, angel.”

For all her bluster—and being a Wiccan—the woman was according her aunt a deep level of respect. No matter what else ever transpired between them, Eva would always be grateful to her for this moment.

Delighted laughter trilled out of Charmaine. “Thank you, my dear, but that’s not necessary. I, ah, lost my privileges of rank a very long time ago. Think of this as a business meeting. Or, more likely, the drawing up of a battle plan.”

Rhys flattened his palms on the table. His dark scowl was so serious above the navy camp shirt with flamingos she had no doubt Maisy had stuffed him into. “We’re not fucking chatting about the food and pretending this is a normal dinner for an hour. Tell us, right now, what you discovered.” Belatedly, he added, “Please.”

Oh, thank goodness. Eva wouldn’t have been able to eat a thing while worrying about what horrible, cursed, fatal shoe was about to drop.

“While I’m being sheltered here so delightfully, I thought I’d see how I could help. Maisy told me that the last Keeper had acquired many souvenirs that might be supernaturally useful. I’ll admit, I was curious. I haven’t had anything to be genuinely curious about in almost forever. Aside from this one being given into my care.” She patted Eva on the arm. It made her feel like a toddler when Charmaine did that, but, to her aunt, she *was*.

“I’m so grateful you stepped in to go through Uncle Harold’s collection. He had some notes and theories.” Maisy stood to fill Charmaine’s plate. “We just don’t know if they’re theories he put together after binging *Lord of the Rings*, or based on actual word of mouth.”

Zavier growled. An actual rumble from deep in his throat. “Can we get to the important part?”

Liss gaped at him. “You’ve never seen them, have you? Any of the trilogy? Or you wouldn’t be so dismissive. That’s it. I’m instituting a movie night as soon as this is over.”

“This *what* is over? The epic and endless struggle between good and evil? Or this interminable stall before sharing what she found?”

Gideon leaned across Liss to grab Xavier’s plate. “I’ll fill this up for you. Maybe you’ll stop acting like a dick when you’ve got food in your belly.”

“We’ve sat through too many official pronouncements that turn out to be nothing more than self-aggrandizing shit or explanations of rules that stop us from doing what needs to be done. I’m not hopeful.”

“Well, at least if your mouth’s full, you’ll be quiet.” Gideon dropped the full plate in front of him. “Charmaine, I apologize for his attitude. We are eager to hear what you’ve got to say.”

The kindness Gideon was showing her aunt made Eva want to sprinkle kisses all over his face.

But that *definitely* wouldn’t get Xavier in any better of a mood.

“I suppose I’ve been taking the long way around to spitting this out because I simply don’t want it to be true.” Charmaine raised both arms, inhaled, closed her eyes, then steepled her fingers at her lips. “What I found in the study is a relic of the Titanomachy.”

Eva was glad she wasn’t eating yet, because she would’ve choked and dropped her fork. The guys looked as stunned as she was. The three human women, however, seemed to be waiting for more info.

Which was a sad reflection on the schools of New York state. “You remember the Greek gods—Zeus, Hera, Apollo?”

Maisy nodded, sending her red ponytail bobbing left and right. “Of course. I mean, I can’t name all twelve, but the myths were fun to read.”

With a pointed glare at Xavier, Liss added, “Good in movies, too. The *Lightning Rod* series.”

Eva tried very hard to not let her hand shake when the tongs were passed to her for the strips of chicken, peppers, and

onions. “Those were the Olympians. They *came* from the Titans, who were the children of Uranus and Gaia, or Sky and Earth. The Titans were much more powerful than the Olympians.”

“Then what happened to them? Or do I not want to know?”

“It’s a whole thing,” Rhys answered. “One of them, Cronus, unseated Uranus and ruled with the other Titans for a good long time. But Cronus gave birth to the Greek gods that you’re familiar with. The kids weren’t so thrilled with good old Dad’s rule. So they decided to follow his lead and unseat *him*.”

“It didn’t happen overnight. It was a ten-year war between the two sets of gods, the new and the old. That period is called the Titanomachy.”

“They made a movie out of it,” Zavier said snidely. “Maybe that should be your homework tonight, Liss.”

“To go back to the original story, Cronus used a sickle to castrate Uranus, thus usurping his throne. Zeus used the same sickle to kill Cronus.” Charmaine thrust out her arm, pointing to the hallway. “That very sickle is in your study right now.”

“Very funny.”

“It is, in fact, deadly serious.”

Aradia waved her napkin in the air. “I’m sorry—I’m still trying to absorb that I’m sharing guac with a Fallen Angel. You’re telling me that Aphrodite and Athena were just as real as you are?”

“Yes.”

Aradia gulped down her margarita. And kept going until she drained the entire glass. “And there’s a weapon strong enough to kill a god fifty feet away?”

“Yes.”

Eva knew that her aunt had an excellent sense of humor. She also knew that the woman would never joke about gods and power. There was no doubt she was telling the truth. As she *saw* it, anyway.

“Aunt Charmaine, how do you *know* it is the sickle of Cronus? Whatever drawings still exist wouldn’t be proof. Not to mention that something that old would be in rough shape. I’m not expecting that it has his initial stamped on the handle, but what makes you so certain?”

“The power.” She leaned back in the simple wooden chair, gripping the armrests until her knuckles whitened. “When I held it, I felt my full angelic powers return. I haven’t felt that since the day we were cast out.”

Oh.

Well.

Evangeline couldn’t begin to imagine what that resurgence of power had felt like to Charmaine. The fact that she’d had the self-control to let go of it was astounding.

And Evangeline desperately wanted to rush down the hall and see what it looked like.

“That’s why you wanted me to put extra protection around the house. To protect a freaking god relic?!?!?” Aradia was not keeping her cool. She was, in fact, shrieking. Again, understandably so.

“Yes. The power can’t be sensed until it is touched. Celestials and demons won’t be drawn here to it. But we must do everything to protect against any random incursion.”

Maisy waved her arms across the table. “What does this all mean?”

Charmaine took the time to finish building her fajita. They all waited while she rolled and tucked. Thankfully, she answered before taking a bite. “The previous Keeper’s excellent notes indicated he took it off a *Nephilim*, right before he was murdered.”

After swallowing hard, Maisy asked, “You think that’s why he was murdered?”

“No. If that were true, the sickle would no longer be here. But what if the attacks against Keepers and their paired *Nephilim* are merely a distraction?”

Evangeline had zero idea where this was headed. She also was having a hard time getting past the fact that something used to slay a god was so close.

Zavier raised his hand. Stayed pointedly silent until Gideon sighed and then waved for him to speak. “You mean the murders, right? What the hell’s worse than a string of murders perpetrated on the very people protecting all of humanity?”

“Not worse. Bigger.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Maisy murmured.

Evangeline very much agreed with her.

“Everything you’ve discovered points to dark and light angels working *together*.” Charmaine slowly interlaced her fingers. “What if they’re trying for a coup? To overthrow God and bring back the Titans?”

Silence reigned around the table. Everyone stopped chewing to absorb the possibility. Evangeline reached over to Gideon. He immediately took her hand and squeezed it tightly. It grounded her from flying apart in terror. Somewhat.

Rhys lifted his glass. “Liss, we’re going to need a *lot* more pitchers of these.”

“I’m thinking if I filled the *bathtub* it still wouldn’t be enough tequila for that pronouncement.”

“Charmaine, I’m...grateful you were able to, uh, discern this object of power. It can’t be easy having it so close. If you’d prefer, we could remove it to the Watchtower right now.”

“No.” Her answer came, swift and harsh. Then she smiled. A wan smile, but still with more megawatts than any Hollywood icon. “It restored my power, but ultimately, it is an illusion. I would never be allowed to wield it. I am Fallen. I am to remain that way for all my days. If I did more than hold it for a few seconds, I’ve no doubt there would be an... intercession.”

“You’re saying celestials would swarm the place.”

“Yes. And they might be angry enough to smite first and ask

questions never. I wouldn't put you at risk like that. It's pointless for me to even stroke a finger down that sickle again."

"What would happen if I did?" Evangeline was surprised she'd spoken out loud. It was just a musing that flitted through her head. For goodness sake, she was trying to get *rid* of her power, not get more of it!

"I honestly don't know. There are no stories of it being wielded by anyone besides Gaia, who created it, and Cronus and Zeus."

"It's not worth the risk to try to find out." Gideon's eyes flashed golden fire. "What if that amount of power burned you up?"

"I'm not volunteering to go in there and give it a swing right now. It was merely a hypothetical."

Rhys spread his hands in a "that's enough" gesture. "Guessing we'd all agree it's a problem for another day. After we go into research mode. There must be info on it."

Oh, yes. Celestials were big on keeping records. Keeping *score*.

As was Hell...

Gideon hitched his thumb over his shoulder. "Probably in those secret stacks in the Order's library. Not that they'd let us waltz back in there at this point."

"One thing at a time. We'll work on the sickle. Z, why don't you work on getting an iron box to contain it and take to the Watchtower?"

"Harold must've touched it, to get it in here."

Zavier always had to push the envelope. But guess what? Gideon was more than ready to draw the line. Due to the whole not wanting to see one of his best friends burned up with God power.

Gideon slammed his hand onto the table, making the chips jump. "Well, he's dead now, so we don't know what he did, do we?"

“For fuck’s sake, use some gloves.” Rhys snatched up the tongs and snapped them together. “Or barbecue tongs, for all I care.”

“I have iron tongs. We use them for putting ingredients in the cauldron. They withstand heat and dampen at least some kinds of magic. I can bring them over when you’ve got the box,” Aradia volunteered.

Zavier gave a tight nod.

Rhys took a decent chug of his margarita. “For right now, we’ve bitten off more than we can handle, now that we know a Horseman’s been unleashed. How the hell can we figure out how to stop it?”

The answer was so simple. “I know,” Evangeline said.

“Really?” Xavier leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming with not-at-all-concealed anger. “Is that why you stayed so long in France? You’d already come up with the solution and figured a little R&R was called for?”

They *knew*.

They all knew that she and Gideon had been together. How—it didn’t matter. Their current predicament was much more vast than her embarrassment.

Eva pointed at Rhys. And yes, maybe her finger shook a little. Because this was a very big deal, what she was about to suggest. “You said hell. Just now. That’s when it occurred to me.”

“You’ve got a rockin’ library down there we can access?”

“Actually, yes. But that’s not my solution.” Maybe it could be, given enough time. But the longer they took, the more people might die. Her fear in no way stacked up against that. “My grandfather, Lucifer, will know how to stop the Horseman.”

Another wall of silence descended. Not so much as a crunch of a chip.

Finally, Charmaine tenderly stroked the back of Eva’s head. “You are right. It is time for you to meet.”

Liss banged her fork against her glass. “Hang on. You’ve *never* met him? Your grandfather, the Devil, Lord of the Underworld? And you want to kick off this big intro with the news that he’s lost one of the harbingers of the Apocalypse?”

“They aren’t harbingers,” Charmaine corrected. “When all are released, they *begin* the Apocalypse.”

She threw up her hands. “Even better.”

Rhys stroked his chin. “It’s like the Cold War. Back in the eighties. The U.S. and the Soviet Union blustered and threatened, but nobody was willing to drop the first nuke because it’d lead to mutually assured destruction. I imagine it’s the same with the Four Horsemen.”

“You don’t know that, though,” Maisy shot back.

Zavier jumped on board. “Call it an educated guess. It explains why nothing has happened with them. Why Good and Evil keep engaging in pissy little skirmishes, but not ever reaching for the big guns.”

Eva needed them to *not* debate this into the ground. She needed them to get on board and move forward before she had second and fourth and twelfth thoughts about it. “So while it is merely a guess, I believe my grandfather knows how to control the Horsemen.”

A *pfft* of air buzzed past Charmaine’s perfectly pink lips. “Of course he does. Their stables are in Purgatory, which is under his purview.”

“Actual stables?” Aradia mused with surprised awe rounding her dark eyes and mouth. “Who knew?”

Yes, it was fascinating. What might a horse eat, stabled in purgatory, that could carry a plague-inducing...demon? Demigod? None of it mattered, though, to her proposed family visit. “I also believe he in no way wants the Horsemen loose. And that he doesn’t know one is already out causing a... ruckus. Maybe he’d be grateful for our help herding him back into the stable.”

Gideon clapped his hands, then shot finger guns at her. “Because Lucifer can’t at all be seen to directly influence the

Horsemen. That'd be interpreted as an act of War. If Heaven finds out he had anything to do with the Horsemen, they'd act. It really would start the Apocalypse."

Nodding, Eva said, "I—well, all of you, rather—are his best bet."

Apparently not caring about the other six people at the table, Gideon curled her hand into a fist and dropped kisses across her knuckles. "You *want* to meet him? After all this time?"

She'd always wanted to meet him. Her grandfather, anyway, not so much the Devil. Growing up without parents had made Eva crave any familial connection possible. But...he *wasn't* just her grandfather.

There was no getting around that he *was* the Devil.

For all that she'd lectured Gideon on Lucifer being an angel, first and foremost, the best and brightest there ever was, who still retained plenty of good? It was the Devil part that had always drawn her up short.

Eva wrapped her other hand around his wrist. "I never had a reason big enough to counter my fear of what he is. Now I do."

"Now *we* do," Gideon corrected.

"Yes, we all have a big enough reason."

Gideon shook his head slowly. Then he flashed an almost sad smile before dropping one more kiss on her wrist. "No, *we* are meeting your grandfather. I won't let you go alone."

Absolutely not. This was her risk to take. Period. Eva snatched back her hand. "That's a horrible idea. No. You can't."

"I can. I've traipsed through Hell before. Made it out none the worse for wear."

Z stomped his boot. The effect was muffled by the carpet, but it still got everyone's attention. "Be serious. This is different and you know it."

Gideon's head whipped around. The tenderness he'd shown

Eva was replaced with the full warrior mode. “Meeting the Devil? Yeah. I’m well aware that’s fucking serious, Z. Still needs to happen.”

“It’s a big step.” Rhys stretched his arms as wide as possible. “Like going from the ground to the top of the Great Pyramid in one step. You sure about this?”

“I won’t let her go alone. You all know I don’t share Evangeline’s view that she’s powerless. I know that her power won’t work against him, though. I can at least fight.”

“Not a full celestial angel.”

Gideon wavered his hand. “Guessing some of his powers were downgraded in the Fall. Either way, it’s a frightening prospect to mosey in front of Lucifer, and I won’t have her be alone *and* scared. I’m going with.”

“I applaud your chivalry, *Nephilim*.” Her aunt leaned across Eva to squeeze his hand. “While you’re right that some of Lucifer’s powers were...muted, he gained others so that he could rule over Hell. He is by no means impotent.”

After snorting, he said, “Well, I wouldn’t wish that on any man, not even the Devil.”

Evangeline almost laughed. It was typical, joking Gideon. But she was too scared that he’d truly insist on going with her, on risking himself *for* her, to allow her throat to open to laughter.

Charmaine raised a cautionary finger. “He is also by no means a happy man. He has a temper. At times.”

“Then I’ll set an alarm to be sure to avoid them.”

“You joke, but I’m warning you that Lucifer could kill you. Simply for being good; a living reminder of what he’s lost.”

“I hear and value that you are taking the time to warn me. I’m honored by that concern. Such as we’ve never before received from a full celestial.”

“I’m not. I’m Fallen.”

“And I’m a *Nephilim*. Like all angels, he probably thinks

I'm neither good nor worth giving two shits about.”

“He might also decide to kill you for sleeping with his granddaughter.”

Well, that unlocked Eva's throat. Her embarrassment rolled right over her fear like a tank. “Really? You couldn't talk to me about it first? You had to bring it up over a group dinner? My sex life is not open for discussion.”

“You're saying I should wait to high-five Gideon?” Rhys drawled slowly.

“Read the room,” Maisy said sharply.

Solidarity, sister! Eva wanted to high-five *her*.

“What? He gets to joke about Lucifer needing Viagra, and I can't say well done for getting together with a beautiful, brave, intelligent woman?”

“No. You may not.”

Eva had to grab the reins of this conversation. “Aunt Charmaine, you make a valid point. We don't intend to walk in there with our hands in each other's back pockets, flaunting our, um, status.”

“No need. It will be obvious to Lucifer that the *Nephilim* cares for you. Any being who chooses to go to the center of Hell with you is deeply connected.”

Gideon grabbed the leg of her chair and gave it a one-eighty spin. Their backs were to everyone else. “Forget about them. Forget about what it means or doesn't and who knows what. I want to be there, with you. For you.”

Eva hated herself for admitting it. It was so selfish. If she were stronger, she'd lie. But she felt so much stronger looking into his brown and gold eyes, with his hands wrapped tight around hers. “I want you there, too.”

“Then that's all that matters.” He tipped his forehead against hers. “You and I. A team.”

If only it were that simple. “It's not, though. If anything happens to you, that could leave Rhys and Xavier weakened.”

“That’s a different problem. Not a bigger one.” Gideon brushed the softest, most tender kiss against her lips. “You’re worth the risk to me, Evangeline.”

“Lucifer really could kill you,” she murmured.

“Well, I’ll at least be with you until then.”

Chapter Twenty

The Watchtower was full of weapons. Ancient to modern. They had many in multiples of six, so that Rhys, Gideon, and Xavier could each carry two. Were there more than strictly necessary? Sure. But it meant they always had choices.

Except for today. Gideon stalked through the armory and couldn't find a single perfect weapon to take to Hell. Nothing stood out as obviously powerful enough to protect against the Devil.

He barely walked as far as the shower without daggers up both sleeves and one in an ankle sheath. Those were as automatic to don as boxer briefs. What he was missing was... angel Kryptonite.

Then again, he'd never *planned* to provide protection for the Devil's granddaughter. Gideon wouldn't say it was a lack of planning holding him back.

"The email came." Evangeline walked at her normal pace. But her voice sounded like she was running; fast and jerky. "He'll see us now."

They'd finished dinner, had the promised sex—twice—and then sent the email requesting a meeting. They'd only gotten up an hour ago. Gideon had anticipated at least a few days to steady himself. Come up with a strategy.

Convince Evangeline that his cocky swagger was in place and he wasn't scared shitless.

"Right now? Or, you know, when we're ready, he'll be there. Like the ad for holiday music that starts on the radio November first."

"Now." Evangeline plucked the halberd out of his hands and placed it back on the wall. "You don't need to take any extra weapons. We both know they won't do any good."

"Look, the 'how' may not be clear to us, but I swear to you, Evangeline, I have your back. I will literally die before letting him hurt you."

“I know. But let’s call that Plan B, shall we?”

Gideon noticed that she’d dressed up a little. No sneakers and yoga pants for running away. Evangeline wore pale blue pants and a white shirt with ruffles down the front. “You look lovely.”

“It seemed wise to make a good first impression—both as a granddaughter and because we’re asking for his help.”

“Then I should change. Put on a tie.”

“You do you, Gideon. I wouldn’t dream of asking you to be anything else.”

He thought about it. The three of them wore sports coats and ties in the office every day to set the right tone. It felt like a different kind of armor, to be suited up.

Not today, though. Today he was there as a *Nephilim*, a warrior. Evangeline’s champion. He’d stick to his fighting leathers. “I’ll text the guys. Let them know we’ll be out of touch for...well, as long as it takes.”

“You’re supposed to fly us in.”

His thumbs raced over his phone. “Where? The entrance to Hell we used last time?”

“No. Just like any other portal trip, think about where you’re going—to Lucifer—and the right door will open.”

There wasn’t time to think or worry, thankfully. “Then climb on, beautiful.”

Evangeline hopped up, straddling his hip. She gave a big smack to his cheek as Gideon secured her with one arm around her waist. With only a fleeting thought about the belt buckle knife he could’ve added, Gideon flew through the back of Niagara Falls.

He came out through a swimming pool waterfall feature. There was no moat of flames, no blackened turrets. They were in the backyard of what looked like a typical Southern California mansion. A Mediterranean style villa, but more up-to-date and ornate than the real deal. Ruthlessly trimmed gardens formed the patio. Palm trees and Italian pines

bordered the garden.

A series of archways opened to all glass walls. Red tiles covered the third-story roof. And a dark wood door with carved panels stood partway open.

“It’s tasteful, comfortable, and a bit ostentatious,” Eva said as she slid off of him. “It must take so much power to maintain.”

One obvious answer sprang to mind. “Maybe it’s powered by the tortured souls in Hell.”

Eva pinched his forearm. “Gideon. You must close off your preconceptions. My grandfather may not be mean at all. He doesn’t *want* to be here, remember?”

“That makes three of us.”

Holding her hand, Gideon pushed the door open all the way. The living room was spacious, with ivory furniture. The dark exposed beams popped against the light ceiling. A man stood with his hand on the marble fireplace mantel. He wore a modern black suit. Light rippled off—or from?—his wavy brown hair.

The Devil looked like he’d fit right in at the next Buffalo Kiwanis meeting.

Most striking of all were his eyes above the classic aquiline nose. They were the exact color of Eva’s—that very pale gray—except that Lucifer’s were bordered with a thin line of jet black.

“Evangeline.” He slid one hand under his lapel in the Napoleon pose. “It brought me great joy that you finally reached out.”

She squared her shoulders. “I wish I could say the same. Honestly? I’m a little nervous. Because I’m thirty-one and I’ve never met my grandfather before. This is awkward.”

“Do not be afraid. I may be the King of Hell, but you do not have to bow.” After a double beat of silence, he laughed. A laugh that was warm and silky and made you want to join in. “You really don’t. Nor do you have to hug me. I respect your

boundaries. This is awkward for me, as well as joyous.”

“That’s a relief.”

Lucifer shifted his angle ever so slightly. “First, I must deal with the one you brought.”

That sounded ominous. So Gideon went to his default—sarcasm and swagger. “I plan to also follow the no-hug policy.”

“So bold, Gideon Durand. Are you not worried of what I might do?”

Yes. Absolutely. “To Evangeline? You bet. For myself, it matters far less.”

“Then come with me.” He led them through double French doors back onto the patio. This time they walked past the still, turquoise water of the pool to a gap in the pines along the edge. “Evangeline, I ask that you stay back. This is for Gideon. Come no closer.”

At least he hadn’t separated them. She patted his biceps and then sat on the cushioned lounge. Gideon had to assume nothing violently bad would happen to him in *front* of Evangeline. He took the final few steps to the edge.

“I am the King of Hell. I am also the arbiter of Purgatory. Some progress, but many are trapped forever. It is a state of sameness. No misery, but also no joy. None at all.” Lucifer swept his arm out, over the railing. “Look, Gideon, at who you have put down there.”

This was his big move? Gideon had zero guilt about the fatal blows he’d dealt to keep humanity safe. “I doubt that. I only kill creatures of Hell or ones whose actions have already destined them to a spot down here.”

“Is that what you think? Then this will be instructive, indeed.”

Gideon forced himself to look down into the depths of Purgatory. It appeared much like the entry ring to Hell; gray rocks along the sides and the floor, with a thin gray mist coating the air.

Lucifer snapped his fingers. The mist cleared over one person.

One woman.

It was Colette.

His long-gone wife wore the bloodied and torn dress she'd died in. She looked identical to how he'd seen her last, when they'd discovered her corpse. Brown waves matted with blood to her scalp. One arm with a broken elbow sticking out the wrong way.

“Do you see her? Your wife?”

“Yes.” Lucifer, showing his cruelty, had cast a circle of light around her.

“You have the power to free her. You could take her place.”

The guilt—it hit him with the strength of twenty fullbacks. Knowing he had the power to free her would haunt him forever. But Gideon could live with that guilt.

He *couldn't* abandon Rhys and Zavier to fight without him. He couldn't free her as long as he held the memory of Zavier's haunted, tortured eyes when they'd finally rescued him from the endless pain Colette had conscripted him to.

And he would *not* abandon Evangeline.

Carefully, he said, “I would be relieved if she were allowed to progress from this place. But it will not be my doing.”

“Colette is stuck down there *because* she dared to love a celestial being. All that our life could offer her was too much temptation. As a mere human, she was not able to resist. You should have known better. You should have prevented her from choosing you.”

Gideon knew that. He'd thought it a million times. How selfish he'd been to lure her into the dangerous mess of his life. How she'd made choices, but he'd set her on the path toward him. You didn't hand a toddler a chainsaw. It was too much to handle. And knowledge of the celestial world had been far too much for Colette to handle.

Renewed guilt ripped through him. “I didn’t realize the consequences of my actions. I thought love would be enough to keep her safe.” He white-knuckled the iron railing.

“You protect other humans, but somehow you were not able to protect the one you claimed to love.”

“I...I tried.”

Lucifer continued his relentless attack. “And yet I’m supposed to accept you loving my granddaughter? Knowing you could so thoughtlessly not bother to protect her? Why shouldn’t I smite you down right now?”

Ah. He’d overplayed his hand. First, by using the word smite, which was so old-school that he might as well have stuck in a few thees and thous into the speech as well. Secondly, though, Lucifer had given Gideon the opening to call his bluff.

Deliberately, he turned his back on both Purgatory and the woman he’d put there, even if indirectly. Then he took what might be his last breath—if he was reading Lucifer wrong. “No smiting. It wouldn’t suit your purposes. Because you don’t want the apocalypse to start. And you’ve done the due diligence to figure out that my friends and I are your best chance of stopping it.”

Lucifer’s wings didn’t flare—not even showing as faintly translucent, like *Nephilims*’ did. But a hint of an outline of their shape, like a thin line of smoke, did appear.

Still, he’d gone too far to hold back *anything*. Despite how terrifying it was to stand up to the Devil.

Gideon held up a hand. “I’m not done. You’ve forgotten the vital info that I’m half-human. Which means I learn from my mistakes. I would never cause harm to Evangeline. I would literally give my last breath to keep her safe for the rest of our days. Isn’t one of your monikers King of Lies? You ought to be able to tell that I’m speaking the absolute truth.”

The hint of wings disappeared. Lucifer snapped his fingers. The view of Purgatory also disappeared. Now there was simply azure ocean with lapping waves below them. He

walked back to Evangeline. Crooked his arm like a courtly knight and, once she tentatively twined her arm through his, headed back inside.

Guess he'd passed the test?

And continuing to live was all the reward he'd get? Well, Gideon figured escaping unscathed from an audience with the Devil was enough for him. But he sure as hell wouldn't leave Evangeline alone with her grandfather.

He rushed after them.

...

Eva was an expert at compartmentalizing. It was what allowed her to go to college, go about her day as an actuary, without constantly worrying about accidentally running into a demon, nullifying their powers, and getting herself killed as a result. She kept that possibility in a locked-down compartment. It was only opened once a month to check if there was anything more she could do to safeguard herself, or when she visited her aunt.

She'd taken a moment to have a quick freak-out when Lucifer pulled Gideon to the edge of the property. Then she took a few moments to tear up when she overheard their conversation. Now she'd locked away all thoughts of how she'd spent her entire life in fear of meeting the Devil—like, well, *everyone*.

This was her grandfather. One with the power to help her. He could make up for thirty-one years of missed birthday presents.

Eva sure felt better once she heard Gideon's footsteps fall in behind them, though.

Lucifer settled her on a very comfortable couch, and managed to mostly hide his scowl when Gideon dropped down next to her. He sat in the chair opposite, hands on its arms in a way that was evocative of sitting on a throne.

"From your message, I'm aware of why you've come. What you want from me. As it happens, I *am* grateful that you

brought the situation to my attention. You are correct in your assumption that I do not want things to escalate.”

“That’s great.”

Gideon exhaled a long sigh. Eva wanted to hug him, her relief was so strong. But she didn’t want to rub their PDA in her grandfather’s face when he clearly was barely tolerating their relationship.

Lucifer steepled his fingers and tapped them against his nose. An onyx and diamond ring winked on his right hand. “However, I have a pressing question. Why have you never asked me for help until now, granddaughter?”

Really? They had to dig into the dynamics of why she might be scared of the second most powerful being in the entire universe? *And* she’d have to figure out how to answer without insulting him?

When in doubt, her fallback was always honesty. “It is... unclear to me how much leeway I have to speak freely,” Eva said cautiously. “I would not intentionally anger or hurt you, but I’m more than a bit worried of what will happen to us if I do it accidentally.”

“This is delightful. Conversing with you like family, rather than my subject or prisoner. We shall make a rule. When you are in my palace and we are alone, you are my granddaughter. You have all the freedom that familial relationship connotes.”

“Okay.”

“If someone joins us, you must be more, ah, thoughtful. Respectful.”

“Of course.” It’d work. They’d be able to talk without her second-guessing her every word choice. “Oh. That guarantee of free speech has to go for Gideon, too. When he’s with me.”

“I will indulge this request.” He glowered at Gideon. “Do not test my boundaries, though, *Nephilim*.”

“I’m only here to support Evangeline. I don’t have any desire to get in a fight with you. Sir.”

Eva bit back a giggle. Two alpha males, both posturing and

jockeying to see who was tougher. It was unnecessary and hilarious.

Lucifer stood to pour from an orange and white blown-glass pitcher. “Knowing that you may speak from your heart, tell me why it took you this long to contact me?”

Eva closed her eyes. Knowing she could officially say anything was about a million miles away from actually doing it. She shuffled her foot over until it touched the edge of Gideon’s boot. That helped.

Opening her eyes, she looked right at him as he set down a goblet in front of her. “Why didn’t you ever contact *me*?”

“Ah. I prepared for this one. Charmaine disagreed with my decision to wait. Evangeline, you are barely a minute old in terms of how long I’ve lived. Would you expect the president of your country to have an audience with a newborn?”

“No.” It was enough to juggle the dichotomy of the King of Hell, the brightest, most powerful angel, and her freaking grandfather. Thinking about his age was simply one more hurdle she hadn’t yet dealt with.

After he’d poured his own glass, Lucifer shoved one at Gideon. “I needed to wait for you to mature enough to *want* this connection. Also, I don’t believe that it was merely hurt feelings from my not making the first move that stopped you.”

He’d known her for ten minutes and could already see right through her? Talk about a full-on grandfather power. “I wasn’t lying. It’s a two-part answer.”

“I’m genuinely curious as to the second part.”

Evangeline had come to this realization after reading an even dozen self-help books. And had a one-time session with the company-provided therapist. Although she’d had to do a lot of creative editing to her story, she’d still spoken enough truth that she’d been guided to a breakthrough.

“I didn’t think that requesting a meeting was worth the risk—or that *I* was worth it, to you.”

“Perceptive. And correct. You weren’t officially worth my

attention—until you realized your worth for yourself.” He leaned forward. “But I have been watching you this whole time.”

Her heart leaped. Which was probably silly. But when you had few connections in life, learning that someone cared enough to pay attention was a gift. “Really?”

“I’m proud of you, Evangeline. Proud that you found the strength to leave. Proud that you found the strength to fight on the side of good. I wasn’t sure it was possible.” Lucifer sat back, patting over his heart. “I hoped. For something good to finally come out of all of this”—he gestured widely—“is remarkable.”

Attempting to compartmentalize her grandfather separately from the Devil wasn’t working. Sure, her grandfather would be pleased that she was a part of a group. The Devil—for all the goodness still left in him—shouldn’t so much be thrilled that she was teaming up with warriors for good to protect Keepers.

It, in fact, went against everything she knew about the kingdom in which she’d been raised.

“I don’t understand.” Eva swooshed a hand in the space between her and Gideon. “You’re happy I’m helping Gideon and his team?”

“Indeed. It means that you’re finally coming into your unique birthright. You see, you are the first Dark *Nephilim*.”

Gideon did a full-body jerk at the announcement. Not Eva. It wasn’t worth trying to wrap her mind around. Because it simply wasn’t possible. “There is no such thing.”

Then she had a moment of realizing how ridiculous it was to try to correct an ageless being on the facts of *his* history and power and knowledge.

Happily, Lucifer merely smiled at her audacity. “There wasn’t—until you. Your father wasn’t a dark angel. He was a Fallen Angel. A full-blooded celestial. One of my children, but from before the Fall. And your mother was, of course, human.”

Eva's entire world tilted on its axis. She couldn't figure out what to feel, so she stuck to getting the facts straight. "My mother was human? Charmaine lied to me?"

"I ordered her to. Bear no ill will upon her." Lucifer's voice intensified to the point the water in her glass trembled. Talk about disconcerting. "We didn't know exactly how you'd turn out. Your mother was a human, but already a, ah, resident here in Purgatory."

He might as well have said that her mother was a rainbow. Because there were only souls in Purgatory—not people. Not physical beings. "How is that possible?"

"It wasn't. Ever." Lucifer stood to pace the length of the room. Eva couldn't see his wings...but she could see small gray smudges of smoke where the tips of his invisible wings would drag along the floor. "First, because it is forbidden for the Fallen to interact with souls in Purgatory. They are of neither Hell nor Heaven. It has taken this many millennia for a Fallen to break my rule. Secondly, she was a soul. There should have been no way for her to become pregnant."

Eva spread her arm wide, shaking her head. "Then how—"

He spun around. Not on his heel. With some unseen flap of his wings. "Love."

Gideon snorted. "C'mon."

Tiny gray sparks went off in his eyes. A good two inches off the floor, Lucifer floated quickly back to stand at the corner of their couch. "I do not joke about the rules of my kingdom being upended, *Nephilim*. This is not merely my conjecture. Scholars down here as well as celestials were consulted."

Eva swallowed hard. Here she'd spent her entire life feeling less than ordinary, and he was telling her that Heaven and Hell had circled the wagons to discuss her very existence? She squeezed Gideon's hand with all her might. "About me?"

"About how you came to be. And about what you might become. It is believed that the human and the Fallen loved each other so greatly that it brought forth a life. She died in childbirth. I had to make an example of your father. Thus you

were sent to live with Charmaine.” Reaching out a cupped palm toward her cheek, Lucifer said in a much gentler tone, “You are still my granddaughter.”

Right at this second? Eva genuinely couldn’t decide if that fell in the plus or minus column. So again, she circled back to the facts. “I can’t be a *Nephilim*. I have none of their powers.”

“Need I point out that you do not share powers with dark angels? That was a story we spread to keep you safe as you matured. There are those who want what is unique. Having you seen as a—”

Gideon leaped to his feet. His hands fisted at his sides. And the rest of him was a single, taut, angry line. “Powerless runt of the litter? An embarrassment to all dark angels? Something to be bullied and pitied—that was your solution?”

“Yes. It put Evangeline under the radar, as it were.” Lucifer crinkled his nose. “While not pleasant, it reduced your risks. And it made you, yourself, downplay your actual power.”

The power balance—if there could be such a thing with the brightest of angels in the room—was off with her still seated. Evangeline stood, wiping her damp palms on her pants. “I’m nothing more than a one-trick pony, though.”

In a rush, Lucifer floated over the coffee table to confront her. “That one trick is *everything*. The power to reject, to nullify the dark in creatures is unique. And it is a powerful weapon. Not to mention that your very existence is literally a bridge between Heaven and Hell.”

That all sounded like a whole lot of responsibility and danger. “I don’t want it. I never wanted to be different.”

After a triple blink, Lucifer cocked his head. “You want to be a demon? I can make that happen, right now.”

“NO!” She backpedaled away, not stopping until the length of the gray-veined marble fireplace was between them. “I...I want to be enough for Gideon. I still want to be human. To give up my un-power.”

Lucifer floated right up to her again. Frowned, squinted, and looked at her like she’d just insisted that she was a flamingo.

“*Do you?*” he bellowed.

Eva felt the vibrations from the question in her bones. As though he might push out a different answer.

But she wasn't a pushover. And she wouldn't be bullied by her grandfather. So she stood there, staring back and not blinking. Not so much breathing, either.

To her absolute amazement, he broke first. Lucifer landed and walked over to the bar cart. Whatever he poured was dark and tall and only for him. “Let us get to the reason for your visit. Getting Pestilence and his horse back in the stables will require a sacrifice—a death. This *is* Hell, after all.”

In a tone as dry as the dust bunnies under her bed, Gideon said, “Color me unsurprised.”

They were both so blasé about it. Meanwhile, all Eva could wonder was who and how for the death. It wasn't something you ordered off Amazon.

“You will use the death to lure and distract Pestilence,” he said, pointing at Gideon. “Only then will Evangeline be able to approach the unattended steed and nullify its powers.”

“Pet the pony and everything goes back to normal?”

“Almost.” Lucifer snapped his fingers. A mottled green and black leather halter appeared at Evangeline's feet. “Put the halter on; it will send the horse back to the stables. And Pestilence will return to stasis. That is all that is required.”

Gideon made a time-out gesture with his hands. “Hang on. You're saying you had *no* way to corral this thing, from the beginning of time, until Evangeline was born, thirty years ago?”

“Not precisely. What I offer you is the simplest way.” Lucifer drained half the glass like a shot. “One in which I am not seen as interfering.”

Ahh. Exactly as they'd guessed. No direct leverage from Heaven or Hell, or else it'd be considered tinder and gasoline to lighting the Apocalypse.

So she and her new friends were genuinely the best chance

at preventing that escalation. But Eva wasn't on board with the whole death thing. As Lucifer had pointed out, this was Hell. Which meant trickery and conniving could be utilized to get the job done, too.

“One more thing, *Nephilim*. The stables for the Horsemen are in Purgatory—my territory. But they are looked after by a pair of angels, to keep the balance. They are the only ones who could have removed the halter.”

It seemed like Lucifer had just told them who was responsible. No actual name, but it was a heck of a lot more to go on.

Gideon gave a nod so deep it nearly rounded his shoulders into a bow. “I will utilize that information discreetly. Thank you.”

Eva was frantically trying to come up with a work-around. Pestilence had been systematically killing the Keepers—and Keepers-to-be. But there was no way she could sacrifice one of them. There had to be a different sort of approach to death as a lure.

“We can use Aradia. Get her witchy powers to help us fuse the essence of the next Keeper to something.”

“No.” Lucifer set down his glass with a substantial clink. “That would not be enough. I see the good in you fighting the inevitable. It must be fused to *someone*. There must be a life force to attract it.”

A demon lord dressed in Elizabethan era doublet, ruff, and hose bowed from the doorway. Lucifer gave a nod and then waved him away. “Our time is at an end. If this goes as planned, you will have my gratitude.”

“It'll work,” Gideon ground out between gritted teeth. “It has to.”

“Granddaughter, I hope your plans change and you embrace being the first dark *Nephilim*. If not, I do not expect to see you again. I wish you well.”

If this was their one and only visit? She'd regret forever not giving him a hug. Because Evangeline had no doubt Lucifer's

intervention had kept her alive and relatively safe. She took a deep breath, and then threw her arms around him.

It didn't even take a single second before he hugged her back. A good, solid embrace that lasted long enough that their breaths fell into sync. Then Evangeline returned to Gideon's side to take his hand.

"I'll do more than see *you* if she's hurt," Lucifer threatened Gideon. As he did so, his wings flared into visibility for the first time.

They were probably three times as big as Gideon's, in both span and height. And so utterly black that it was almost impossible to focus on them.

"Evangeline, if you take away nothing else from this meeting, know that you are *full* of power. Use your wings."

Chapter Twenty-One

“I thought we didn’t want a Fallen in our Watchtower,” Xavier grumbled at Gideon as he flicked elemental energy to light the fire.

Well, it wouldn’t be a day that ended in *Y* without Xavier finding something to bitch about.

Gideon would miss that when he was gone.

Well, hypothetically. Since he had no idea what would happen to him...*after*...once he sacrificed himself. Would he finally be allowed into Heaven? Or would his hybrid soul still be considered too tainted?

Rhys beat him to the punch. He slapped a hand high on the massive stone fireplace. “She’s not moving in. She’s here for a strategy session. Period. Because Charmaine’s seen more things in an eighth of her life than we all have combined. She’s useful.”

“We agreed it’s not safe to have the Cronus sickle and the Horseman’s halter in the same location.” No reason to make it easy for the bad guys. “Better to have her here for an hour.” They hadn’t figured out if it was safe for her to return to Hell. Or what they’d do with her when—if—Evangeline gave up her power and turned her back on all of them. Maybe they’d have to build Charmaine an in-law-type suite at the back of Maisy’s yard? “She’s a nice lady, Z. Give her a chance.”

“I know she’s nice,” he bit back. Xavier unlaced the leather gauntlets he’d worn all day to break in. “There’s just suddenly a lot on our plate. We’re fucking stopping the Apocalypse now, and she’s one more complication.”

“You know I can hear you.” Charmaine pushed all that iridescent hair behind her ears. “My angelic senses all still work just fine. I’m not an ill-trained pet to be shuffled off to a kennel when I’m inconvenient. I can take care of myself.”

As Evangeline entered the room, she said, “Plus, you guys don’t get to decide her future. You can make suggestions, but

that's it. Don't regress and get all 1960s on us and think you can lay down pronouncements."

Feisty. Freaking fabulous. Evangeline got into a staring contest with Lucifer Morningstar, *won*, and was still juiced and ready to fight for feminist rights.

What a woman.

Gideon raised his voice. "No one is doing anything about Charmaine right now." Then he gave her a quarter bow. "Aside from offering our sincere gratitude that you're willing to help us make a plan."

"You are a delightful man. Come, sit next to me." She patted the brown leather couch cushion.

"No thanks. I'll stand." Because now was the moment to reveal the decision he'd made on the way back from Hell. Before they all started discussing anything.

Because if he put it off, let the options drag out, Gideon might lose his nerve.

The guys sat in their usual recliners. Maisy and Evangeline filled the couch. Gideon quickly looked away from her. Staring at her beautiful face would only make him change his mind.

Rhys gestured to the halter on the slab of granite that acted as a coffee table. "Gideon, do you—"

Gideon interrupted. "It has to be me. I'm doing it."

"You want to take point for this discussion?" Rhys mimed wiping his hands. "Go ahead. I only take charge because you two are too lazy to get it done."

"No. I've got to be the one to die."

Zavier burst to his feet and halfway to the ceiling. "Like hell you do!"

"Not an option." Rhys stayed calm, in his recliner. Clearly certain that he'd shut down Gideon's proposal.

He'd expected that.

“Z, get back down here. Hovering’s just weird.” Gideon slowly paced in front of the fireplace, going over the incontrovertible points he’d lined up in his head. “It has to be a choice to make this sacrifice. We don’t murder people. It’s not like we can wander over to the nearest hospice and ask for volunteers. *Hey, do you wanna die today?*”

“Why not? We wouldn’t be actually killing them. Pestilence would. It’d still be their choice.”

“Not one we can allow. Especially not from the humans we’ve sworn to protect. That’s not what we stand for.”

“We don’t do suicide missions, either.” Rhys kept his tone calm and reasonable. As if he really thought that would work on the guy he’d lived and fought by for eight decades. “That’s *part* of why we left the Order. We’re more useful alive and fighting for the next hundred years than we are dead.”

“Usually, that’s true. Not in this case. It must be one of us.” Gideon’s resolve strengthened with each restatement. Rhys had Maisy now, so he was out. And Xavier had already suffered enough.

“You’re all overreacting. There doesn’t need to be a death,” Maisy announced.

Evangeline gave a bitter laugh. “You think you know more than Lucifer?”

“I’m interpreting what he said. There needs to be the *potential* for a death. To lure Pestilence to us.” She shimmied side to side. “A little fancy footwork dodging him for just a few seconds until you get the halter on. Stay out of his grasp and nobody dies.”

Color drained from Evangeline’s face so completely she looked about to faint. Gideon would’ve darted forward to catch her if she wasn’t already sitting. “So nobody dies... unless I’m even one second too slow putting essentially a muzzle on an enormous demon horse that won’t be inclined to sit docilely and let me approach? That’s the revised plan?”

Maisy gave her a one-armed hug. “It’s a better plan than assuming Gideon dies no matter what.”

He agreed. Just about anything was, at this point. Singing the “Star Spangled Banner” naked while hopping on one foot in front of a bunch of nuns was more appealing than dying.

It put impossible pressure on Evangeline, though. He couldn’t, *wouldn’t* have her spending the rest of her life second-guessing if she could’ve saved him if she’d just been better or faster. He had to shut that down.

Gideon focused on the contrast of Maisy’s red hair laying on a Starburst-pink shirt. And how Evangeline was still as white as chalk next to all her brightness. “Maisy, I love your optimism. There’s even some logic to it. But we’re talking about a Horseman of the Apocalypse. No matter how fast my foot and wing-work, I doubt there’s anything I could do to evade him.”

Charmaine tut-tutted. “You shouldn’t try, dear boy.”

Maybe not. But he was a warrior. He’d damn well go down fighting. And then he’d make sure his last look was at Evangeline. She wore a long cotton skirt—but he knew what the legs under it felt like. Same with the breasts under her baby-blue tee. He knew what she looked like inside and out. Her heart, her strength, her bravery. There was no better last look in the whole world.

Zavier threw the gauntlets across the room. “Of course he should fucking fight. We don’t give up. Ever.”

“I meant that Gideon shouldn’t try to evade Pestilence.” Charmaine rose to her feet. A peach and white maxi dress flowed around her legs as her wings unfurled and slightly fanned back and forth. “I should. I should be the sacrifice.”

Hope flashed through his chest, so bright and hot that for a moment Gideon worried he’d fallen into the fire. He’d been so certain, so set that he’d die tomorrow.

Everyone else stood. Chaos erupted in swearing and babbles. Evangeline clutched at her aunt’s arm. Zavier stalked over to stand shoulder to shoulder with Gideon, as always.

Rhys held out a hand to beckon Maisy to his side. Everyone quieted. “That’s quite an offer. However, we wouldn’t ask you

to give up your life. It is our duty, our sworn oath, our acknowledged risk to protect humans. This isn't your fight."

"Shouldn't it be?" Charmaine floated across the room to stand in front of the rushing blueish-green wall of Niagara. "As an original Fallen Angel, I've had a more than long life. In it, I've never made a real difference to or for humanity. It's about time I did. This sounds like a great way to go."

Rhys exchanged a three-sided, weighted stare with Gideon and Xavier before asking her, "You're sure about this?"

"I've been banned from Heaven for millennia. In all that time, the only worthwhile thing I did was raise Evangeline. I've watched her grow—even more in the past few weeks. Knowing that she'll be all right was my only purpose."

Evangeline's hands fell to her sides. "But that's giving up," she said in a very small voice. Not at all arguing—just as a statement of fact.

"There's no chance I'll ever be reinstated as a full angel, believe me. I can, however, choose to act like one. Choose to act *for* good."

Charmaine was a class act. Gideon was proud to have her in their Watchtower.

Evangeline lifted her chin. Tears glinted at the corners of her smoky eyes. "I'll miss you."

"You were about to leave me forever anyway, remember? With that plan to give up your powers and all ties to the supernatural world? There's no difference."

"Knowing that you've ceased to exist is hugely different," she corrected.

Maisy bumped elbows with her. "Are you kidding? Charmaine being in the mix gives my plan—the one where *nobody* dies—a much higher statistical chance of working. A full angel stands a far better chance of holding out against Pestilence."

"Or it could all easily go tits up and everyone dies," Xavier pointed out.

If the women hadn't been in the room, Gideon would've punched him. "Seriously? You think now's the time for one of your dives into moody darkness? You're an asshole."

"I'm a realist." Zavier stomped over to go toe-to-toe with him. "Whenever we plan a mission, we go through best- and worst-case scenarios and make sure we're ready for both of them. I don't fucking want you to die. Or Evangeline, or Charmaine. But we still have to talk about it."

"He's right." Per usual, Rhys broke their tie. "We have to have a contingency plan up our sleeves. But...I don't think we'll need it." He draped his arm around Maisy's shoulders. "Good *will* triumph."

Gideon shook his head. His friend was a goner. "Wow. What Cupid shot his arrows up your ass?"

Charmaine clapped her hands. "Oh, I remember him. Such a mischievous scamp."

That broke the tension in the room. Everyone got drinks, resettled. Gideon noticed, though, that the color hadn't yet come back into Evangeline's cheeks. In case he didn't make it through tomorrow, he had to make sure that she didn't absorb even an iota of blame for whatever went down. If it was the last thing he did...

...

"The halter's in the safe," Gideon announced as he entered his bedroom. Evangeline stood by the window. More of a porthole, with Niagara Falls streaming by on the other side, but enough that it seemed to have captured her attention.

Without turning around, she asked, "A magical safe, I assume?"

"You mean does it have more protection than the sixteen-digit computer lock with a biometric sensor only set up for the three of us? Yeah." They all enjoyed the hell out of new tech. Living long enough to watch it evolve and get to play with it was awesome.

She crossed her arms, hugging herself. "Is there an alarm?"

“For if it gets broken into?” Gideon stripped off his weapons first. Stars on the dresser, dagger on the nightstand, and another under the mattress. “We’ve got the whole place alarmed. Nobody could get within two floors or ten rooms of the thing without us getting there first.”

“It makes me nervous,” Evangeline admitted.

He rubbed up and down over her arms. “You’re not alone in that. Those aren’t *good* vibes coming off it.”

“No.” She shuddered. “Having lived in Hell, I can say with some conviction that it takes a lot of evil to set my teeth on edge. But that halter does.”

“Don’t think about it for the rest of tonight.” Gideon turned her in his arms. “Z’s in his wing figuring out how to make contact with the next Keeper to get his essence. You had a solid idea about using that as a lure instead of the actual person.”

Eva nodded. “I really think it should be enough to get the attention of Pestilence.”

Fingers crossed. Gideon continued his litany of reasons why she should be able to relax. “Rhys is with the Cronus sickle, filling Aradia in on what spells we need from her to pull this off. Nothing can happen tonight. Aside from some very NSFW things I plan to do with you.” Moving her hair out of the way with the back of his hand, Gideon kissed the spot on her neck where her pulse thrummed just beneath her skin.

“About that...” Evangeline paused. Pulled back.

That’s when Gideon noticed that she hadn’t so much as toed off her shoes. The fancy ones she’d worn to meet her grandfather. Blue patent leather heels with a little strap. He wanted to see her in *only* those shoes.

“Hey, I don’t have to take the lead. That was presumptuous.” He flung himself back onto the bed with its mound of pillows. A warrior deserved a little soft squishiness at night. “We’re alone. Have your way with me, woman.”

“Is that the best plan?”

Gideon propped himself on one elbow. “You’d rather be with your aunt getting her culture on at the opera?”

“That’s a definite no. I’m more of a *Hamilton* and *Frozen* girl. Grand opera leaves me grandly yawning.”

“Then come on over here.”

She edged in the opposite direction of him. Away from the bed and toward the door. “I thought you might prefer to go out.”

What was that about? “Where? To a bar? If you want a drink, we’re fully stocked. Including some rarities we’ve picked up from all around the world. If you’ve never tried Lion’s Milk from Turkey, well...you’re not missing that much, to be honest.”

“No, I thought *you* might want to go out. I could go back home.”

He jackknifed off the bed. “Where’s this coming from?”

Evangeline’s hand was actually on the doorknob. “In case this is your last night. Ever. I thought you might want to go have one more fling.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all. I’d understand.” She ratcheted out a tight smile. “Live it up on your last night. Like a sailor on shore leave but amped up two hundred percent.”

Frustration and, yeah, the start of some anger burned just beneath his skin. Was the fucking Devil more perceptive than her? He’d taken his ass to Hell for her. What more did a man have to do to show his feelings?

“Evangeline, I can’t believe I have to clarify this, but on what could be my last night on Earth, I want to be with *you*.”

One shoulder jerked. “I don’t want you to feel required to be with me. Just because we’re partners in this endeavor. Mission. Quest. Whatever you call it.”

He called it a near-apocalyptic cluster-fuck. Now wasn’t the time to argue semantics, though. “Is that what you think? That

I'm with you out of obligation?"

The grip on the doorknob was so tight that her knuckles were white. "I don't know what to think. I'm not trying to make any assumptions. I'm merely giving you options."

"Yeah, well, you're off the clock as an actuary. I don't want politely presented strategic options. I want *you*."

"You've had me. Go live your life and have someone else."

"That's fucking insulting. To both of us." Then Gideon noticed the single tear tracking down the cheek farther from him. It changed everything. "Evangeline, you can't want this. You can't want us to be apart. Tell me the truth."

"I'm trying to do the right thing. To protect my heart *and* yours."

She was trying to be noble. Unbelievable. "I can tell this isn't easy on you. So I'm going to hold off on sharing just how pissed off I am that you still don't believe you're enough for me."

"I can't be."

"Remember what Lucifer said? That whole swathes of Heaven and Hell were secretly figuring out just how unique and magnificent you are? You're more than enough for anyone."

"It doesn't matter what we learned today. It doesn't just eradicate the way I've felt for thirty straight years—that I've never been enough for anyone. Not powerful enough. Not special enough. Not evil enough for Hell. Not interesting enough for Earth. Once I'm human I won't be enough for you. I'm not...whatever enough for my grandfather to take the time to talk to me for thirty years. And tomorrow I might not be enough to save the world."

Instead of bursting into racking sobs, Evangeline stood motionless, and let twin trails of tears track down her cheeks.

The sight broke Gideon's chained-up heart in half.

He was careful not to touch her. The urge to soothe her, to hold her, was almost overwhelming. But this couldn't be even

the slightest bit about sex. Which left Gideon with a mostly blank playbook.

It meant breaking the vow he'd made fifty years ago to never again open himself up to the pain of love and the potential for loss.

But if he was going to break a decades old rule—doing it the night before near-certain death sounded just about right.

“It doesn't matter what the rest of the world thinks. As long as you're enough for yourself. As long as you accept the wonder and strength and heart that is wrapped up in such a beautiful package. You're more than enough for *me*, Evangeline.”

“You don't have to—”

“Because I sure as Hell love you. There's no going back to other women, assuming I live past tomorrow—not even if you refuse me. You're it. You're the one.”

Her hand bonelessly slid off the doorknob. “You love me?”

“Despite my best and strongest intentions to do otherwise. You're irresistible. And I felt all that before we found out you're really a *Nephilim*, just like me. The first Dark *Nephilim*, which makes you the very best and most exceptional one.”

“You *love* me?”

Had Lucifer's last thunderous roar damaged her hearing? “That's not funny. Cut it out. I love you and I won't let you belittle yourself. So will you step away from the damn door and stop trying to throw me out of my own bedroom?”

Evangeline blinked back the tears still hovering on her lashes. He wasn't sure what she'd do.

Maybe he should've kept his mouth shut? Not churned up everything between them, kept it casual?

Nah.

That would've been lying to her. Which he would not do.

Evangeline wiped her fingers beneath her eyes to clear the last of the tears. Took a few snuffling breaths.

And then she jumped on him. Legs clamped tight around his waist, hands knotted behind his neck. Thanks to the exuberance of her jump, her mouth didn't exactly land on his. But that was okay. Gideon was able to course-correct her.

Their kisses were wet. Hungry. More than a little laced with desperation. Probably because they *did* both realize this could be the last time for everything.

What a way to go, though.

By the time they made it to the bed, Gideon had ripped her shirt off. He heard two thumps as her shoes landed somewhere. Evangeline unlatched from him and wriggled out of the rest of her clothes.

When Gideon finished clawing his shirt over his head and saw her lacy bra and panty set that revealed much more than they covered, he groaned. "You dressed like that to meet the Devil?"

"I dressed to feel my strongest, most confident." Her smile was sweet, but her eyes were full of heat. Like a ghost pepper wrapped in honey. "Sexy underwear does that for me."

"Wait till you see what it does for me." His cock was so hard it ached. Ached to be inside her. It also made getting his pants off a lot more difficult.

"Here, let me." Evangeline slid her hand inside the zipper and cupped his balls.

Gideon hissed at the punch of lust in his belly. "That won't make it any easier to get my pants off."

"I'm just having a little fun along the way. Touching you is very addictive. I feel you quiver, and it sets off little lightning bolts of desire all through me."

She took the words right out of his mouth.

"We're going to explore that cause and effect. In great length. Later." Every skim of her nails tightened his balls.

"You're right." That sweet and spicy smile that promised so much flashed once more. "I shouldn't tease you when you are so obviously overcome by the sight of my body." Evangeline

whisked his pants to the floor. The boxer briefs followed a second later. “Maybe you weren’t ready to have the full force of my sexiness unleashed on you. I should’ve started slower.”

Her confident playfulness was just more gasoline on the fire. “I’m two seconds from coming in your hand, for God’s sake. But I can handle you, Evangeline. I can handle you better than any other man in Heaven, Hell, or any dimension in between.” Gideon undid her bra with one hand. Then he pulled it off with his teeth.

Because he needed access to every stunning inch of her. Gideon put his hands under her arms and lifted until her breasts were aligned with his mouth.

Then he got his first mouthful of that pale pink sweetness. He could spend all day swirling his tongue around Eva’s nipples. The way they crinkled and hardened every time he rasped across the top made him feel powerful as fuck. Like he could do *anything*, because he made Evangeline Thayer gasp and whimper and *writhe*.

When Gideon switched to her other breast, Eva clutched at his hair.

Even better. Just as it was another level of better once she wrapped her legs around his waist. Although that reminded him that he wasn’t touching *all* of her.

So Gideon banded an arm across her back to hold her in place and ripped her panties from her body.

Her hands bracketed his face as her legs straightened. “I thought you liked those!” Evangeline protested.

“I did.” Gideon set her back on the floor. “I liked the way they felt balled up in my fist while I looked at you. I’ll buy you a whole drawer full of ’em, just to rip off, one by one.” He palmed her while he spoke, rubbing the heel of his hand in circles that made her eyelids flutter shut again.

“I...I’d be okay with that.”

“Hope you’re okay with this.” He simultaneously drove into her while flying up a few feet and over to press her back against the wall.

Evangeline's legs immediately clamped back around his hips. She met him, thrust for thrust. Those delicate fingers sought out the sensitive underfeathers of his wings and scraped back and forth. The first time it happened, he dropped two feet from forgetting to keep his wings moving. She was a quick learner—and lover—of wing play. It was something he rarely engaged in: couldn't with humans, and didn't want to share that level of intimacy with other paranormal creatures.

Having Eva caress him there was mind-blowing.

Gideon shifted his hands to cup her sweet, sweet ass. He kneaded it to pull her as close as possible with every thrust.

Their coupling was hot.

Raw.

Urgent.

Her keening wails of pleasure had Gideon picking up the tempo. She captured his mouth. The moment their tongues touched, she bucked against him, and Gideon emptied into her with a guttural moan. Holy hell, the woman drained him so much that he had to drop them down. He *couldn't* keep them aloft, his pleasure was so all-consuming.

Staggering a bit, he maneuvered them to the bed. Eva curled onto his chest, hand on top of his heart still beating as fast as a hummingbird's. She sighed and snuggled closer, entwining their legs.

It was as close to perfection as Gideon had ever felt.

One thought kept driving into his brain like a flaming sword, though.

Why hadn't she said "I love you" *back* to him?

Chapter Twenty-Two

“My bank account’s quite enjoying the repeat business.” Aradia smirked as she shut her car door in the wholly empty parking lot. “But my savvy witchy brain is wondering if perhaps you guys are frantically scrambling to keep the world from ending.”

“That’s it in a nutshell.” Xavier bared his teeth in what the rest of the world considered a grimace, but he insisted was a smile. He was leaning against the side of their enormous black SUV. Arms crossed. Dressed in fighting leathers from head to toe and a crossbow propped next to him.

Which struck Eva as odd. And not particularly stealthy for being in the parking lot of an ice cream shop in a Buffalo suburb at midnight. Did he just get a kick out of attempting to intimidate the witch?

“No, not in general.” Aradia tapped the Apple watch on her wrist that was so at odds with her tiers of crystal necklaces, gauzy skirt, and black scarf tied around her head. “I mean imminently.”

“How’s tonight?”

She turned to Gideon. “It suddenly feels like I should *not* hand over this potion that masks your powers. Feels like you might need them.”

“That makes two of us,” he grumbled.

“Stop pouting.” Eva punctuated her command with a double shake of her finger. Gideon had been grouchy ever since they realized he’d have to hide his *Nephilim* powers, or else Pestilence might come after him, too. “You’re coming along because you don’t need powers to wield a sword or the other ten weapons you’ve got hidden on your body. You’re still very much a deadly warrior.”

A throwing star appeared in his hand. He tossed it high in the air and caught it with two fingers and not a single contact with the wickedly sharp blades. “Damn right I am.”

They had no time for more ego stroking. And after the three orgasms he'd given her last night, the man shouldn't need any.

Eva faced the witch. "I don't understand why you had us meet you *here*. It feels exposed." Sweet Jenny's Chocolates and Ice Cream wouldn't have any patrons at almost midnight, but it was next to an apartment building.

"This is where you need to have your big confrontation. Well, not here." She pointed to the thicket of trees behind the shop. "Down the embankment to Ellicott Creek. Follow it about fifty yards until you're underneath the overpass for Main Street."

"Here? Downtown Williamsville?" Gideon shook his head. "We were going to do this by Fumacinha Falls in Brazil. It's a six mile hike to get to them. Nobody would be there now."

"You're overthinking it. And isn't Brazil in a different time zone? This needs to happen now."

Zavier rolled his hand in a "go on" gesture. "How about you drop the condescension and explain why this has to be here and now?"

"The downtown grid of Buffalo? It's all built to channel ley lines. Earth energies. Conduits and amplifiers for all supernatural powers."

"Riiiiight," Z drawled.

"I'm serious. The guy who first surveyed the land that became Buffalo? Was married to a powerful witch from England. That's why our coven is so strong. Combine the ley lines with a crossroads—which inherently is packed with power—and being there at midnight and you've got a surefire recipe to broadcast to whomever you are trying to reach. It's overkill. It's using a police helicopter spotlight to brighten the grommet when you're trying to lace your shoe."

"You say that." Overkill sounded just about perfect to Eva. This was a risky, dangerous, possibly suicidal thing they were about to attempt. "We're certain we need all the oomph we can get."

"If you want oomph, why isn't Rhys here? I do so enjoy

ogling all three of you together.” Her voice oozed like caramel dripping off a spoon.

Not that Eva disagreed—the *Nephilim* packed a gorgeous wallop—but she didn’t love the idea of the brunette who had a hook-up history with Gideon ogling him at all. Not anymore.

Not that Eva had any claim on him. She’d purposefully *not* poured out her heart to Gideon last night.

It’d been a close call. When he’d admitted that he loved her? She’d wanted to shower him with kisses and repeat those three words back. But...something kept her from it. What if he did die tonight? What if she did?

And if they *didn’t*, what sort of future was in store for them? Was he just caught up in the life-and-death adrenaline of the situation? Would he put his playboy ways aside for her? Did she want him to?

Eva’s life was a roiling mass of uncertainty. She thought she had to abandon the idea of giving up her powers. Knowing she wasn’t actually a failure as a dark angel but a unique dark *Nephilim* changed everything.

Where did Gideon fit into all of that?

“Aradia, stop.” Gideon’s voice was firm as he put his arm around Eva. “No more suggestive stuff. I’m with Evangeline now.”

Really?

“Oh really? That’s how it is?” She squinted at both of them, curiosity brightening her features despite the lack of a moon. “Good for you. We had our fun and I’ve long since moved on. Unless...” Aradia hip-swayed her way over to Zavier. Managed to walk two fingers up his sternum before he batted her away.

“Not a chance in Hell. Get to what happens after Charmaine, Evangeline, and Gideon are ankle deep in mud under Main Street.”

“To recap the instructions I emailed you, and being men, you probably didn’t bother to read.” Aradia held out a small

black vial to Gideon. “Notice that you can’t see through it?”

“Yeah. The vial’s black.”

“Nope. That’s the potion inside. Does the same thing to all your half-angel-ness. Completely cloaks it. No connection to the elements, no super hearing and whatever other snazzy powers you have that I haven’t sussed out yet. Most of all, your wings won’t even materialize while this is in your body. Drink it as soon as you get in place.”

“It had better not taste like shit. I paid extra for—”

“Yes. I used my magic mojo to make it apple pie flavored, per your request.” She shook her head. “Evangeline, I hope you are aware of just how much trouble you’re taking on with this one. Please remember that you have options.”

That phrase hit her like a brick. Eva had never thought of her life as having multiple options. It was only ever one thing at a time. Escape from Hell. Get rid of her powers. Get a normal life.

“I...I do, don’t I?” she mused slowly.

“Hey. I’m literally touching you. Maybe wait to evaluate your next conquest until I’m in your rearview mirror.” A piercing bitterness laced Gideon’s words.

“Oh! Oh, not you.” Eva patted the unyielding wall of his chest beneath his black tee. “I just meant that since that meeting with my grandfather, things have changed. I *do* have options. A whole lifetime’s worth. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

Had she hurt him? Did he understand that she didn’t have a handle on anything right now—aside from getting through the next few hours?

Aradia snickered, then pulled another vial from the fabric bag at her waist. “Charmaine, this one’s for you. Don’t drink it.”

Her aunt had put back on her flowing garment from Hell. She looked every bit the angel. Her hair glowed in the darkness. “Does it taste bad?”

“No idea. It’s a topical.” This vial was mostly clear, with a

pulsing peach tinge to it. “It’s infused with the essence of the next Keeper-to-be. Roll it on just like you would a perfume. It should work instantly. Then drop it on the ground and step on it. Crush it into the dirt. We don’t want what little essence remains getting on anyone else.”

“Thank you for your aid.” Charmaine cupped Aradia’s cheeks. “You say you do this for the fee, but I see that you care. That you are trying to do what is right in the world. Stay strong on that path.” Then she kissed her forehead.

It left a lip-shaped sparkle for a few seconds before disappearing into her skin.

It also left a glow of wonder in the softening of the witch’s normally sharp features. “It’s been an honor to meet you.” Then, pointing in turn, she said, “Evangeline, stay safe. Gid—don’t be stupid when you’re almost-human. And Zavier—annoying as always to see you.” She kept her headlights off as she slowly rolled out of the parking lot.

“You *blessed* her?” Eva asked her aunt, shocked to her core. It was a gift rarely given by a Fallen. It called upon too much of their long-disused power and made them uncomfortable at all they’d lost all over again. Eva herself had only been blessed once by Charmaine; the night she left Hell for good. “But she’s a pagan witch.”

“The lines between religions are merely drawn on paper for humans to fight about. Every god and goddess ever worshipped still exists. The overlap and power structure is more fluid than governments and named religions. Like time and dimensions.” Charmaine squeezed Eva’s hand. “Limit your thinking and you limit the possibilities.”

Knowing about the Titans was one thing. Realizing that Odin and Quetzalcoatl and Phra Narai were all still in play, if even a little, was far too much to even try to think through right now.

Gideon pointed at the SUV. “Z, you’d better get out of here. Can’t have Pestilence picking up a whiff of you.”

“I’ll be at the Watchtower.” He hooked a thumb toward the

sound of tumbling water. “Glen Falls is right there. Seems like the witch put some actual consideration into an escape route. Anything goes south, use it to get home. Or text us and we’ll be here in a blink.”

“Aren’t Maisy and Rhys in bed by now? It’s been a solid twenty minutes since we left them alone.” It was apparently a running joke among the men about how frequently the two slipped away to a bedroom with the weakest of excuses. It delighted Eva to be a part of it all.

“They promised to put clothes on once I texted that I was on my way back.” Xavier put both hands behind his back and executed a flawless formal bow to Charmaine. “You are not Fallen in my eyes.”

“And you are not broken in mine.”

What did that mean? How was there some deep secret about Xavier that her aunt had unearthed and *not* passed on to Eva?

He kissed her cheek. “Be bold, Evangeline.”

“Not safe?”

“Nah. Safe never got you anywhere. Life’s more interesting the more bold you get.” Then he just looked at Gideon for a long enough time that Eva started to wonder if *Nephilim* shared telepathic powers nobody had ever told her about.

Finally, he clasped Gideon’s forearm and double-slapped his back. “Start the mission off right—”

“—or else the world might end,” Gideon finished. “Yeah. I’m excruciatingly clear on the mission parameters *and* consequences this time.”

“Don’t you fucking dare die and leave me with just Rhys.”

“Staying alive is my plan. I swear.”

They did the awkward manly embrace/pat thing and then Xavier peeled out of the lot. Evangeline’s heart dropped.

What if she didn’t pull this off? The only horse she’d ever been near was the kind centaur in Provence. It was doubtful that Pestilence’s horse would be so well-behaved.

Gideon held out his arms to both women, as if escorting them into a ball. “Shall we, ladies?”

Charmaine picked up her long skirt. “I’m very pleased you finally met your grandfather, Evangeline. It has been difficult hiding how much he cares and watches over you.”

“I don’t think we’re going to hit up Disney World once a year or anything. But I’m glad, too. Sorry that he put you in the position of having to lie to me.”

Her aunt reached across Gideon to put her palm on Eva’s cheek. “I don’t regret a single moment of my life with you. My brother was a fool to even enter Purgatory, let alone fall for a human. You, however, are a gift. A gift of pure love, now that you know your true delineation. Perhaps you haven’t discovered all your powers yet because we were looking for the wrong things. Open your eyes and your heart, child.”

“I will.” Eva would *not* cry. Because everyone would be fine. What with the solid plan. Sure, Pestilence could start the Apocalypse, but he’d never gone up against a Fallen Angel with absolutely *no* fucks left to give.

It seemed like time was speeding up, because they were under the overpass before she could think of something meaningful to say. The creek gurgled peacefully. The rumble from Glen Falls was more fitting to the ominous moment.

Gideon had his stern game face on. “Charmaine, you stay out here in the open. Evangeline and I will stick to the shadows until Pestilence arrives. If his footwork gets too much for you, I will run my ass off and be by your side.”

The Fallen held out her arm. “No.”

“But that’s the plan.”

“It just occurred to me. Evangeline’s a Dark *Nephilim*—what if he senses her?”

None of them had thought of that. Thinking of herself as a dark angel was still deeply ingrained.

Eva shrugged off the suggestion. Hopefully convincingly. “If someone could sense that I was a *Nephilim* by now, they

would have.” It sounded plausible. Or wildly optimistic. Or both. “He’ll be far more drawn to the Keeper’s essence. It’s just one more reason for me to be focused and fast.”

“Stay with her,” Charmaine ordered Gideon. Then she liberally rolled the essence over her arms, neck, and chest.

While she crushed the vial on a rock, Gideon downed his potion. “Tastes good. But I don’t feel anything.”

“Try to pop out your wings. Maybe it takes a bit to kick in.”

He just stood there.

“Go ahead, try.”

“I am. Nothing.” Dawning dread pulled down every muscle on his face. “I can’t fly.”

“Well, they say couples start to act and look like each other the more time they spend together...” It was a weak joke. Best Eva could do, though. The heavy green halter shook in her two-handed grasp. She’d never wanted to save the world. She’d just wanted to be safe.

As she literally trembled with fear, it occurred to her what a mistake that had been. A mistake of selfishness. Everyone wanted to be safe. Those with the extra abilities to help *keep* them safe had a responsibility to do so.

“Then I guess I’m getting prettier by the minute,” Gideon said—in an equally weak joke—as he covered her hands with his.

Her shaking stopped.

Her fear hadn’t. But she finally accepted that this was her duty. Being scared. But being strong with people she trusted would get her through.

Unmistakable hoofbeats clattered through the night. A pale green horse ran through the air above the creek. Its rider wore a dark green robe and hood. Eva couldn’t see his face beneath it.

She really didn’t want to, either.

The horse slowed to a walk. Before it stopped, Pestilence

vaulted off to land on the embankment near Charmaine.

“Keeper.” Its voice was deep. Dark. Sort of like Darth Vader.

The good guys had kicked Vader’s ass, right? This was a good omen.

Its horse, on the other hand, was enormous. It made the centaur look like a Shetland pony. Even if her nullifying power did take away all its evilness, the idea of throwing a halter around its head was a tall order.

Pestilence paused. Lifted his head to sniff in a slow, wavy line. “You are not to be a Keeper.”

She laughed. “Men are always trying to put limits on women. How about you and I go down to Hell and we just see about that?”

He lunged at her.

Eva screamed, as Charmaine dodged at the very last second. It had begun.

Gideon stood behind Eva, one arm clamped around her waist. He hauled her closer to the horse. “Stay on task, Evangeline. This only works if we each do our jobs.”

“Then help her!”

“I have to help you first. Saving the world trumps saving one person.” He crouched, making a cradle of his hands. “I’ll boost you so you can get the halter over its head.”

Eva glanced one more time at her aunt. She was dodging and feinting like a professional boxer. Her robes swirled around her, and she let her natural golden aura shine forth and illuminate the entire creek.

Charmaine was glorious.

It was easy to tell when Eva’s power hit the steed. The sickly green color leached from its hide and turned instead a rich ivory. The thing didn’t get any shorter, though. It must’ve felt the difference, the disappearance of its power. Frantic whinnies erupted. It swung its head left and right, looking for

what had changed.

Right then, Gideon sent Eva flying into the air.

Flying was not her thing. Every superhero movie she'd ever watched from her couch streamed through her mind. Arms at her sides or in front of her to aim? Were the capes an integral part of the whole aerodynamic thing? Holding the halter complicated things even more.

The horse was still freaking out, hooves flying in all directions. It kicked Gideon in the head. He slumped to the ground in a heap, obviously unconscious and almost right beneath those flailing hooves. A stream of silver blood bloomed down his face. It glistened on the collar of his black shirt.

“Gideon!” she screamed, pointlessly.

He didn't budge.

But the momentum carried her relentlessly, onward and upward. She didn't twist around, mid-air, to go to him. Because he and Rhys and Zavier had all taught her, by example, over the past few weeks. She had a duty to finish. To save humanity.

Miraculously, Eva got the halter over the horse's head on the first try as she dropped down hard on the packed earth. It still bucked and kicked. The tight hold she had on the straps meant she was tossed into the air twice as it fought her and the halter. Eva slammed into its ribs and had a feeling that one of hers cracked.

But she wouldn't let go. She wouldn't give up. She'd spent thirty years unable to truly fight Hell's creatures. She was damn well taking down this one today.

Eva used the tossing about to brace her knee on the horse's back. That gave her added leverage to tighten the halter. Looking up as she cinched it into place, she saw Pestilence throttling her aunt. His mottled green hands were locked on Charmaine's throat, shaking her hard enough to break her neck.

Then his head turned toward her. He let out a massive roar.

The hood fell back, revealing a face without any features. Merely a clump of those oozing sores she'd seen on the last dead Keeper, with two eyes and a mouth.

She'd never been as terrified as having the attention of something so purely evil focused on her.

He winked out of sight in a black vortex. The horse disappeared, too, back to its stable in Purgatory, if Lucifer had been correct. Eva fell what had to be eight feet to the ground. Something in her ankle cracked as she hit the dirt.

And Charmaine's body slowly dissolved into a thin cone of smoke the same color as her and Eva's eyes, drifting up into the treetops.

Tears choked her. Eva crawled to Gideon's side. There was a hoof-shaped cut bleeding profusely at his hairline. At least his chest still moved. Slowly. Shallowly. There wasn't a moment to lose.

Because she'd already lost one person she loved tonight.

No matter how scared, she'd do whatever it took to not lose another.

Lucifer had told her to use her power. And her wings. If only she could figure out how to do the thing she'd always been told wasn't possible.

Sobbing, Eva gathered Gideon into her arms. Grunted as she rose to one knee. The man was heavy. Adrenaline gave her the strength to get both feet under her and stand. Sadly, adrenaline didn't at all mute the pain in her broken bones. But it didn't matter. Not as much as saving Gideon.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Concentrated on...what? Mindset was everything, but was there an inner switch to flip? Did you visualize the wings? Find whatever chakra was—

Eva opened her eyes. Looked down at the far-too-still face of the man she *loved*. And pushed through the air for the very first time.

She didn't fly anything close to a straight line. Could've been her weak wing muscles, or the tears streaming for her

aunt. But she at least pumped consistently enough to make it to the waterfall. Visualizing the Watchtower, she flew straight at the water-covered rocks...

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hellfire.

Head pounding, Gideon cracked open one eye. To the very unsettling vision of Master Caraxis staring at him.

That was what had happened when Rhys and Maisy battled Lilith and Volac and barely made it back from Hell. Was this déjà vu? Was he still unconscious? If so, why did his head feel like it'd been cracked with a hammer—

He sat up with a gasp as memory flooded back to him. Which turned into a wheezing breath as even worse pain stabbed through his head.

“Slowly.” Xavier slipped an arm behind his back. “You’ll be okay, but it’ll take a bit for the healing to kick in fully. Your brain got scrambled. Probably a skull fracture. But it’s not like you were the smartest one of us to begin with.”

“Where’s Evangeline?”

“She’s fine. She’s taking a decontamination shower. To be on the safe side, after touching the horse. She’s *fine*.” Rhys insisted, crouching on his other side. “Maisy’s with her. No pustules. Her powers nullified everything perfectly.”

Okay. Now Gideon could truly take a breath.

He was on the lab table in the Watchtower. Not the cushioned gurney they used for first aid. The fact they hadn’t taken him down a flight, but treated him right by the waterfall portal, meant he must’ve been in awful shape. “What happened?”

“You got kicked in the head by a horse. The plan worked despite you lying around contributing nothing. Pestilence is back under lock and key. We did it.” Xavier high-fived Rhys over Gideon’s legs.

“And Charmaine?”

“I’m sorry.” His tone sobered. “She’s gone. Went out swinging and gutsy and so full of goodness that she freaking

shone with it, though. More than pulled her weight, distracting Pestilence long enough for Eva to get the job done.”

It had truly seemed like a possibility—if not a strong one—that they’d all walk away from that creek in one piece. Gideon knew the sacrifice had been wholly Charmaine’s choice, but the loss still cut deep.

“Damn it. I should’ve done more. I should have—”

“You did the one thing you had to do. You got Eva in position to halter the horse. You were essentially human. If you’d gone near Pestilence, you’d be dead now.” Rhys held up a mirror. It revealed a line of black stitches, an enormous red welt, and a lot of swelling.

Yeah, that hadn’t been necessary. The pain was making it clear this wasn’t a run-of-the-mill concussion.

Knowing that, didn’t make it any easier to stop what-if-ing. “Wait. With Charmaine gone, how’d we get back here?”

Zavier tried to ease him into lying back down. “Your girl flew you.”

Arms flailing, Gideon shot back up. His stomach almost revolted at the pain of the sharp movement. “She what?”

“She found her wings. Picked you up and flew straight through Glen Falls. We couldn’t believe it when she came through Niagara and almost dropped you at our feet.” Rhys slipped a shoulder beneath his arm. “God, you’re stubborn. I’ll help you over to the couch, but you’re not getting vertical from there.”

Did Rhys use his wings a little to propel them along? Gideon would never ask. But he was relieved to be on the squishy leather. “She really flew. I knew she could do it.”

“The Dark *Nephilim* may be capable of many things yet to be revealed,” Caraxis intoned. “We simply do not know.”

Ah. He’d been doing a great job of ignoring the trainer from the Order. A visit from the man usually portended a possibly fatal job offer, or a verbal slap about some way they’d pissed off the Order. It could not, however, be coincidence that he

was here right after the Horseman had been neutralized.

That meant it was time to draw the line.

“Let’s be clear. Evangeline doesn’t have to tell you *anything*. She doesn’t have to tell *us* anything. She could decide to give up her powers and string leis in Hawaii for the rest of her life. She is not under your purview.”

“Hearing that’s almost as nice as seeing you conscious.” Evangeline limped across the room to him, an Ace bandage on her ankle. Her bare feet with their pale purple nails squeaked to a stop right at his legs. With great caution, she reached out to caress his shoulder. “I’m so glad that you’re okay.”

Talk about an understatement.

“Right back at ya.” Gideon took her hand. Pressed a long kiss to its palm, folded her fingers around it, and then covered it with his other hand. It’d probably take days to process the overwhelming relief at knowing she’d made it through their mission. “I can’t believe I missed seeing you fly for the first time. I’m so proud of you.”

She perched gingerly on the cushion next to him. Her hair was still wet. Evangeline wore black yoga pants and an oversized gray tee that slipped off one shoulder. The sight of her was better and more soothing than a morphine drip. Or that really good fairy drug they’d sampled last solstice.

“You’re probably more proud because you *didn’t* witness the klutzy catastrophe that was my first flight.” A rueful smile nudged up the corners of her mouth. “There’s definitely lots more to it than just instinct.”

The jostling pain didn’t matter. Gideon pulled her in tight to his side. He needed to have her touching him. “I’ll be happy to give you pointers. You know...for a fee.” Then he waggled his eyebrows as he inched her hand down his belly...

Caraxis cleared his throat. “I am not trying to lay claim at all to Evangeline Thayer. Merely sharing the delight and pride of the Order that you have finally embraced your unique abilities.”

Her chin jerked up. “*Finally?* That sounds an awful lot like

you were in on the big secret. Had an inkling. Knew a hell of a lot more about my life than I did.”

That’s right. Caraxis ought to be quaking in fear at that cool and steady anger in her tone.

He did take a few steps back. “Lucifer reached out to a select few at the time of your birth. Seeking guidance on what might evolve as you matured. We have kept the secret from the rest of the world ever since.”

“See that you continue to do so.” Rhys’s words couldn’t have been sharper if he’d etched them on a knife blade.

“You have my word.” Wrinkling his nose, he added, “Which I realize you don’t take for much.”

Wow. That was an outright grovel for the ancient angel. On *top* of Gideon not dying? This was one hell of a night.

“You irritate us, but you’ve dealt straight with us. Others in the Order—some of whom outrank you—don’t deserve our respect.”

Rhys had his don’t-fuck-with-me face on. The one he used in negotiations when he didn’t intend to give in on a single point. He might as well be chiseled on Rushmore next to Washington, there was so little expression in his eyes and mouth.

“There we are agreed, Rhys Boyce.” Caraxis gave a half bow. “Nevertheless, the world is a safer place now that you have dispatched Pestilence—as is angelkind. I will pay quadruple our agreed-upon fee. With the hope that you might share a portion of that with Ms. Thayer.”

The Order was penny-pinching. Never a job-well-done, here’s-your-bonus organization. Clearly Caraxis realized just how close they’d all skated to disaster with Pestilence on the loose.

“Thank you.”

“That’s not enough,” Z rasped out. “You need to get your house in order. *Nephilim* and Keepers getting fucking murdered on your watch? That shouldn’t be acceptable to

you.”

“It is not.” Caraxis...paced across the room. The Fallen Angel rarely betrayed emotion, let alone concern. Pacing just wasn’t in his wheelhouse. “Lucifer has set things in motion. All the guarded locations have two angels in place once more. Measures are being taken to make sure there can be no more subterfuge and attempts at mutiny.”

That was laughable. Gideon would’ve laughed if he hadn’t known that it’d make his skull feel like it was cracking in two. “Heaven, Hell, everything in between—everyone’s got free will. Nobody’s truly pure of heart. ‘Measures’ aren’t enough. We’ve still got a long way to go.”

It wouldn’t take too much effort—compared to taking down a Horseman, anyway—to learn the names of the angels who guarded the stables in Purgatory. Lucifer giving them that tip had been a turning point. At least one of them was responsible for letting Pestilence out. And thus planning the murder spree.

But it wasn’t like they could *fire* an angel from its post. That would take intervention way above their rebel pay grade.

“We’ve uncovered which angel was behind the murders.” Rhys stood with his feet spread and his hands clasped behind his back. Classic it-was-the-butler-in-the-dining-room-with-a-knife stance. And yeah, he was bluffing a bit, but narrowing it down to two sure counted. “It is a full celestial angel. If we tell you who it is, can you do anything about it?”

Caraxis centered his hands on the wide black sash that tightened his tunic. He looked down and nodded. “Yes.”

“*Will* you?” Z drilled.

“That depends. Do you want me to?” The master slowly lifted his head to meet Z’s stare. “Or would you rather wait and watch to see their next move now that Pestilence is no longer at their disposal?”

Well, well. Caraxis had come to play. And more importantly, to share. They were finally on level ground. “Good question.” Gideon pointed at his line of stitches. Might as well use the injury to buy them more time to strategize. “We’ll get back to

you on that. It's late, and we've been through a lot."

He didn't mention they were mourning Evangeline's aunt. Caraxis was still too much a soldier at heart to see that as a reason to put off any decision-making.

"Either way, I will need the name from you. There are... lines of communication to Heaven that require the answer."

Rhys must've also been astounded by how much Caraxis was letting them lead. In a rare goodwill gesture, he poured the man a triple Blue Label Johnnie Walker. "Then you can only reveal that they masterminded the murders. Our theory that this is part of a larger conspiracy has to remain secret."

"Did you discover the reason behind the murders?"

That's where it got tricky. One or two rogue, pissed off angels were one thing. The beginnings of a coup attempt on Heaven was something a lot bigger. And it was an accusation that couldn't be made without evidence and an exit strategy.

"Possibly." Rhys poured glasses for the rest of them. Maisy handed them out. She gave Gideon a tender kiss on the cheek. "But we aren't willing to say yet. The theory's pretty out there. We need time to work on getting proof."

With her usual good cheer, Maisy said, "Safety first. Better to measure twice and cut once!"

With a tinge of his usual impatience, Caraxis said, "Do you have anything else you *can* share tonight?"

"Nope." Z jumped right in with that. He loved shutting their old trainer down.

"Are you certain? Because an email directly from Lucifer Morningstar says otherwise." After silence swelled long enough to hear the ice crack in Evangeline's glass, he added, "I didn't arrive tonight by coincidence."

Gideon's brain had been too scrambled to wonder at the timing.

"I don't usually discuss my grandfather in mixed company," Evangeline said. In that same *how dare you presume to know me* tone that had put his hackles up at the start and now made

him want to kiss her. “Name-dropping’s so gauche.”

“Forgive me, Evangeline Thayer, but the King of Hell himself reached out to me in my official capacity as trainer of the *Nephilim*. He told me that as of tonight you would be in need of assistance, and requested my help.”

“Did he?” Carefully, Evangeline drew herself up from leaning on Gideon. Her feet thumped to the floor as she pursed her lips, and then crossed her arms. “He said to show up past midnight, tonight, because I’d suddenly need you?”

That meant he’d been positive she’d figure out how to fly in the battle with Pestilence. Tricky old devil.

“I do not presume to speak for Lucifer. Only to pass along his words, along with my own offer to finally train you in your *Nephilim* powers. If, of course, you so desire.”

Rhys calmly said, “No.”

“Hell, no.” Zavier punctuated his by tossing his glass into the fireplace. Maisy, inches away, didn’t even jump. She’d been around him for only a few months, but that was long enough to know that he randomly threw knives without warning, or glassware whenever his anger became too much to tamp down.

That still wasn’t enough emphasis for Gideon. “Over *your* dead body, Caraxis. The Order’s stronghold is definitely compromised. No way would we send her there.”

Eva held up her index finger. “Nobody is sending me anywhere. My grandfather has offered a gift. Thank you for relaying it. This is quite a bit to process, as you can imagine. You’ve known I was a Dark *Nephilim* for thirty years, and I’ve known for a day. May I request a compromise?”

“Of course.”

Man, he was far more polite to Lucifer’s granddaughter than to all the other *Nephilim*.

“I’d like to be able to visit your stronghold and have free access to the library. I think that starting by learning about what I am would be better than diving right into training. The

more I learn, the less scared I'll be of these powers.”

What was she up to?

“That is logical. People will notice you, however. They will talk.”

“That’s how I started my life in Hell. No reason your stronghold should be any different. You may tell the Librarian, Hariel, of our arrangement. Everyone else can take their gossip and shove it.”

“As you wish. You’ll need one of these men to escort you the first time. Then you’ll be granted full access.”

“Thank you so much.” Evangeline stood, took Caraxis’s hand and shook it with the faintest head nod. “Maisy, would you take the master back to the library? I left my phone there, and I want him to put in his information in case I have questions. And I don’t want to leave Gideon for a second.”

Her bright red ponytail swung back and forth as she nodded. “You bet. Need anything else?”

“The blanket from in there—the mohair throw? We’ll probably be up on this couch all night until the healing potion finishes its work.”

“I know you’re really into the old-school fighting garb.” Maisy led Caraxis back through the armory to the stairs. “But Liss and I have a bet going I’d love for you to settle. Do you ever wear jeans?”

The door shut behind them. Gideon sighed. “Damn it. I really wanted to hear his answer. Maisy sure knows when to play along.”

Rhys smiled with an indulgent fullness they’d never seen before he fell in love with the Keeper. “I’m sure she’ll take a wrong turn and think of three other things to lengthen the trip and give us plenty of time to hear whatever Evangeline’s come up with.”

Zavier squinted, pointing at Eva. “You were gracious. Which makes me think you were actually being sneaky. Or savvy.”

It was fine that Xavier saw through her. As long as Master Caraxis hadn't. "We need information on the Titans, right? *Lots* of information. If this angel's come up with the idea that it is possible to bring them back, there must be reasons. Explanations. Hints. That library could be the best place to track it all down. Nobody will know what I'm really researching."

Gideon goggled at her. "You're freaking brilliant."

"I'm well aware I have a lot to learn—hopefully from the three of you—about being a *Nephilim*. But remember that I still bring my own good ideas to the table. Don't ever presume to choose for me again."

Rhys held out his hand. "Welcome to our team." He snapped back his wrist. "That is, if you'd like to join us. I wouldn't want to presume."

"Quick learner." Evangeline laughed and shook.

Zavier kissed her on both cheeks. "You will make us stronger and smarter. And I will make you curse my name with all the exercises to get your wings up to speed."

"I look forward to it. Truly. I want to get *good* at it. To truly embrace all the powers—whatever they might be—of a Dark *Nephilim*."

Rhys moved the bottle of whiskey to the coffee table in front of Gideon. "We won't let Caraxis bother you again."

"I'll be back in two hours with another dose of the potion." Z scowled at him. "If you're having sex, I won't give you any more painkillers. Don't put that image in my brain."

Eva gurgled with laughter. "I have a broken rib and ankle."

"I promise there's no chance of that tonight." Then Gideon made a show of looking at his watch. "The night's officially over in—what—four hours? Yeah. We're good."

"You're annoying as hell." Z double-thumped his forearm. "And I'm glad as Hell that you're still with us."

"Me too."

Once his friends were gone, Gideon turned his full attention to Evangeline. “You slow-played revealing your injuries. Are you okay?”

“You’re the one who nearly died.”

“That’s just a Tuesday for me,” he scoffed.

“Well, I’m not looking to embrace *that* part of being a *Nephilim*. Maybe, in addition to being the first Dark *Nephilim*, I can be the first non-combat *Nephilim*.”

“I’m all for that.” Gideon dramatically threw out his arm to the side before laying it over his heart (and holy Hell, he shouldn’t move around that much with a fractured skull!). “My heart couldn’t stand worrying about you 24-7.”

Which was true.

Although right now, he was more worried about the *next* twenty-four hours with her. It didn’t sound like she was walking out on them, in order to help save the world...

...but would Evangeline stay with *him*?

Trying for casual, he asked, “You joined our rebel team?”

“Looks like. But don’t worry—I won’t leave you hanging. I’ll finish the actuarial review of your company.”

“Yeah. That’s *exactly* what I was worried about.” But it didn’t surprise him one bit that she wouldn’t skate on that responsibility. “Guess that means you’re not getting rid of your powers? After all that flirting with the merman?”

She *tsked*. “Honestly, Gideon, if we’re going to have any hope of a future, you’ll have to learn to control your jealousy. Now that I can fly, I might want to go back and visit my new friend the merman.”

“Don’t tease me. I’m being held together by string.” He pointed to his cut and the zigzags of black thread holding it together.

“I want to go back and explore Greece, now that I can fly there myself. But I’d rather do it *with* you.”

Okay.

That was a start.

It wasn't nearly enough for him, though. "Go on," he said with a magnanimous roll of his hand.

"It should be obvious, but I'm abandoning the spell. I can do more good by embracing whatever powers I have as a Dark *Nephilim* than I can without them."

There were beads of sweat along his hairline. Was it the pain? Side effects of the healing potion? Or Evangeline still dancing around whether she loved him or not?

"Agreed."

She curled her legs under her and leaned into his side again. "I've had my head buried in the sand for so long. Hiding from danger and evil instead of standing up and fighting it. Everything changed for me in that hospital. It made me begin to reconsider my priorities. When I saved countless babies just by walking past a demon. I didn't even work up a sweat. I made a difference. For good. That's...heady stuff."

"I know."

That was one enormous obstacle breached. Now to move on to the really hard one.

The glaring omission of the return "I love you."

Gideon stretched his arm along the back of the sofa. Kicked it into recliner mode, and then let his arm slip down to curl along her shoulder. "I didn't want to embarrass you in front of the others, but I do need to point out that you saved my life."

"It seemed the thing to do at the time."

"I thought you didn't want to get involved and save *anyone*."

"Well, I was being reciprocal. You did save me first. From myself, and from the stupid decision to try to get rid of my powers. I had to make things square."

That...seemed headed a solid one-eighty *away* from admitting she loved him. You balanced the books before walking away from someone.

Hopefully, it was just his concussion and fracture confusing the issue. “You saved me so that you wouldn’t owe me anything?”

Evangeline kept her eyes fixed on the floor. Or her bandaged ankle. *Aka*, not him. “Plus, you’ve shown me that life is a lot more rewarding when lived to the fullest. There’s no one more qualified than the lascivious, lustful, laughing, loquacious and—”

Gideon muffled her mouth with his hand. He couldn’t take it anymore. “Stop. You’re missing the most important *L* word.”

She twisted away. “You’re right.” Smiling beatifically, she continued, “Lover extraordinaire Gideon Durand to make sure I continue to have the time of my life.”

Eva wouldn’t torture him on purpose. She was playing with him. Right? Had to be.

Probably...

“Close. Not close enough. Third time’s the charm?”

Those gray eyes brightened as they met his. “I love you, Gideon. I’ve suspected it for a while. I didn’t say anything because it wasn’t the plan. I didn’t want you to feel tangled up in obligation if I said it. I also didn’t want you to think I would say it simply because we were facing death.”

“I would’ve been okay with that, actually.” But her saying it *now*—better late than never—more than made up for it. Hell, it did more for him than that souped-up healing potion of *Z*’s. Gideon squeezed her hand with all the strength he could muster.

“After the horse kicked you, I wasn’t sure you were alive. Then I wasn’t sure you’d *stay* alive. The thought of you dying without knowing that I love you was unacceptable. I think that’s what gave me the power to use my wings for the first time.”

“So I’m responsible for you becoming the first and only Dark *Nephilim*. I’m the gift that, in turn, allows you to give yourself to the world. I made you into who you are. I am the reason behind your awesomeness.” He sipped his drink, so

relieved that he was practically dizzy. Ah—something else he could blame on the head injury and keep his ego intact. “Yeah, that’s pretty much how I roll on a daily basis.”

Evangeline brushed her lips across the stubble on his cheek. “You’re incorrigible.”

“You knew that from day one. Fell in love with me anyway. That’s on you.”

“I did. I am very much in love with you, Gideon. I do want to explore my potential. I want to help you save the world. If you’ll keep me. If you’ll love me back.”

He wasn’t functioning at full capacity. But he’d have to be fully decapitated not to be able to answer her. “I lost one woman that, well, I *thought* I loved already. That pain made me give up love. Which was as stupid as you trying to give up your powers.”

“Oh, so we’re doing things together already, like a real couple?” she snarked dryly. “Next thing you know we’ll dress in matching flamingo shirts and Birkenstocks?”

Holy Hell. Gideon spent more on designer suits in a year than Zavier spent on weapons. The woman was definitely poking his Achilles heel. “Are you trying to scare me back into unconsciousness?”

“Never. But if you did pass out, I’d just save you again.” Evangeline beamed at him, and he swore it lit the room by an extra thousand watts. “That’s going to be my new thing.”

“Let’s set the bar a little lower. We don’t want to be saving each other on a daily basis. I just don’t want to ever lose you. I want to share my life with you. Make you laugh. Make you scream in ecstasy. The usual couple deal.”

“I like that plan.”

He was so tired from the healing potion. From healing itself. But Gideon couldn’t slip back into unconsciousness without locking in a promise from her to be with him. When he woke up in four hours. Four days. Forty years. She’d still be by his side. “We’re agreed, then? Because I was paying attention earlier. I’m not presuming. You want to be stuck with me?”

“Forever.” Eva bit her lip. “Or at least until the world ends. If you screw up and let that happen, we might have to renegotiate terms.”

Yep. That was his girl. Sassy and sweet and ready to save the world with him. What more could a man ask for? “I love you so much, Evangeline.”

“And I love you, Gideon.” She cuddled into him, lacing their fingers together over his heart. “And we’re going to give Rhys and Maisy a run for their money about which couple stays locked in the bedroom together more often.”

His last thought, as he fell asleep, was that Hell had sent him Evangeline—the angel he’d love for the rest of his life. Maybe Lucifer still really did have a good side.



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Chapter One

The thumping drone from the overhead speakers didn't come close to drowning out the persistent, *annoying* tinkle of bells. So many freaking bells. Liss Jemison looked around the belly-dance class. She was the sole woman not draped in gauzy, colored scarves dripping with bells. Her black lycra shorts and workout tank clearly marked her as a newbie. Looking at the mirror, she was a black hole tainting the entire class.

Liss didn't enjoy sticking out. Hated it, in fact, just as much as she hated lentils and people who waved you through a four-way stop even though it was clearly their turn.

Gee, it would've been nice if the teacher had given her the heads up. Although the teacher—her new-ish friend—was an actual, real, full of powers *witch*, so Aradia probably didn't worry too much what others thought of her.

“Hey!” The woman next to her had a head full of skinny braids. Each with its own damn tinkling bell on the end. “Your arms are going the wrong way. You almost clocked me.”

Her feet were going the right way. Didn't that count for anything? “Sorry. It's my first time.”

“Then maybe you should stand in the back and watch instead of potentially wiping out an entire row.”

Wow.

Liss was a scrapper. She'd been dragged across Europe for most of her childhood by her parents. Always the new person in a room. Always the first one, not *picked*, but *picked on*. She'd learned fast that there wasn't any point in waiting. Or being polite. Standing up for herself, fighting for respect, was an ingrained habit.

But...she dialed back the urge to bare her teeth. Because she'd recently learned that something far worse could be piloting that bitchy, tinkling woman.

Something wholly evil.

So she swayed and swiveled her way to the *front* row. The distance ought to calm the snarky dancer. And nobody else would dare snap at her that close to the teacher.

Probably.

Because she did bend her arms the wrong way again, almost immediately. How was it so easy to dance on top of a bar after two tequila shots, and so difficult when completely sober?

Thankfully, the music soon stopped. Aradia did a triple pirouette that sent her long black hair flying. “Let’s give ourselves a big hand for celebrating our bodies tonight!”

After everyone clapped, they quickly filed out of the wood-floored studio. Liss had heard whispers in the locker room about somebody bringing their famous pumpkin brownies for after class. Nobody directly mentioned them to her, though. Which was fine. It always struck her as counter-intuitive to gorge on sweets right after exercising. A lot like her dorm mates in undergrad who thought eating yogurt for breakfast entitled them to a full pizza for dinner.

“What’d you think, Liss? Did you enjoy your first class?” Aradia grabbed a towel and dabbed at her sumptuous cleavage.

She contemplated lying. But, again, Aradia was a witch. Wouldn’t she be able to tell? Or was that not an always-on thing? Did truth-telling require a spell? There was *so* much she didn’t yet know about the paranormal world.

So Liss went with her trademark blunt honesty. “The bells kind of drove me crazy.”

“Oh. Hah. Yes, they do probably take some getting used to. Sort of like walking through a Christmas party. Festive, right?”

Christmas was still two months away. *Not* a selling point. “The moves were fun. The ones I managed to keep up with. Is there a class—a beginner class—where people don’t dress up?” There. It was an obtuse way of saying *I can’t take the bells again*.

“Sure. I told you to sign up for this one purposefully, though.”

“Why?” It wasn’t like Aradia sensed her natural talent. Because Liss had zero dance training. Unless very infrequent Zumba sessions counted.

“Everyone but you here tonight is a witch. Some from my coven, some independents.” Aradia shook her hips, sending the purple chiffon scarf covered in silver coins into a cascade of sound. “That’s why they’re all decked out in bells—to keep demons away. I figured it’d make you feel safer.”

Nope.

While it was sweet and thoughtful of Aradia, it made Liss feel annoyed rather than safe. Combative, even. Although that was probably residual from her toe-to-toe with braids girl.

She could take care of herself.

Okay, not *actually*. The past six months had been spent learning about all the awful Hell creatures that tried on a daily basis to destroy humans. But the Buffalo Dance Studio wasn’t a demon nest. Liss needed, desperately, to assert her independence from the powerful warriors that treated her like a blown-glass figurine dropped onto a go-kart track.

Aradia didn’t know how much Liss chafed at the coddling, though. She’d seen Liss at the start of all this, jumping at every dark shadow and gasping every time a new horror was revealed. The hard-nosed witch was acting like an older sister.

Damn it.

She couldn’t be anything but grateful.

So she smiled and belted out a few lines from the classic song ‘Don’t You Worry ‘Bout A Thing’. Contemplated trying to pair them with the newly learned belly dance moves—but Aradia’s kindness would no doubt dissolve into laughter at the attempt.

Then Liss bent to grab her water bottle from along the mirror. Aradia’s thumbs bit into her sweaty shoulder, pulling her back up. “You’re good.”

“Hardly. I’m lucky I didn’t maim anyone tonight. I need blinking lights overhead showing me which way to go.”

Wasn't there a video game where you danced for points? Maybe she should go to an arcade to up her skillz before the next class.

"No. Your singing. It's remarkable."

Huh. Aradia was managing to pick at all of Liss's barely-scabbed-over sore spots tonight with unerring accuracy. It showed how off-balance she was that she'd let a song slip out in public.

"I'm average." She shrugged it off and immediately swigged her water.

"We usually hire singers for our solstice celebrations. It'd be wonderful if you could sing for our winter solstice."

"I don't sing for money. I don't sing for anyone." Yikes. The speed and tone of that bypassed harsh and zoomed straight to bitchy. "Sorry. Um, not my thing." *Aka*, Liss would rather crawl over ground glass and then swallow it before singing for money. Overreaction? Sure. Deeply rooted in childhood trauma? You bet. It didn't change her stance.

Aradia's dark brows knitted together in confusion. "I thought you were looking for any and every side hustle?"

"I am. Only the ones that don't require singing, though. That's my—what's it called?—hard limit."

"Ooh. I always suspected you had a darkly playful side." Aradia trailed her hand down Liss's arm. "I'm even more intrigued that you know about hard limits."

Liss wasn't sure if it applied to all covens, or even all witches, but Aradia had a '60's free love approach to sex. She appreciated Aradia finding her own happiness and not conforming to societal norms, but...

Liss was a teacher. She was, at heart, a rule-follower and an absolute, um, norm.

"I'm a reader. Not a doer." Dark and hot romance books were the way she rebooted after a crappy waitress shift or a boring day temping at an oxygen warehouse. Imagining *doing* the things in those books, though, was as far as she went. "But

I appreciate the compliment.”

“It’s a shame to waste all the good chi that’s built up in here tonight.” Aradia floated her hands through the air. *And* floated a few inches off the ground, too. “So much healthy positivity! I could make sparks fly. With my tongue. *Not* a euphemism.”

Wow. Liss couldn’t wait to get home and share that little nugget with her friends. It was yet again a day that ended in Y...and therefore a day when Liss learned something absolutely new about the paranormal.

It was wild to think that this was her life now. Less than six months ago, she’d been the cliché of riding out a quarter life crisis. Not by choice, but due to her school district cutting her job as the music teacher. She’d downsized to a crappy apartment with her best friend, Maisy, and worked three very crappy temp jobs to make ends meet.

But then a freaking demon had crashed Maisy’s birthday party. It had been the equivalent of them cannonballing into this entirely *other* world. A tall, dark and gorgeous *Nephilim*—half-angel, half-human—named Rhys became their guide. He also became Maisy’s boyfriend, after lots of bickering that turned on a dime to banter to flirting to innuendo that usually made Liss leave the room with an eye roll.

Had she been scared when that green, scaly demon with two sets of teeth announced it’d be eating them for dinner?

Absolutely.

Had she been scared the next day at meeting Rhys’s winged warrior partners, Gideon and Zavier?

Absolutely.

Was she still scared every single day? Mmm, a little?

Liss accepted that it was all true. You couldn’t watch a six foot, three inch man pop out wings of velvety black and silver while spinning knives in both hands and not go weak in the knees with lust...*and* believe that half-angels were real.

Not to mention totally human witches who floated while hitting on her.

She was spared having to come up with a polite refusal when the studio door banged open. Xavier Carranza filled the opening—partly from his height and muscled breadth, and partly because he wanted to be noticed.

If he didn't want to be? He would've made it into the mirrored room without a sound or even dispersing a molecule of air. That was the talent of this trained warrior. But honestly? Liss couldn't imagine ever not noticing Xavier. Not with the shock of black hair that contrasted with his dark gray eyes. The muscles-for-days and yet the way he moved like a panther, stalking or being poised to attack whether crossing to pick up a remote or training—shirtless! Yay!—with Rhys and Gideon.

Oh, she *noticed* Xavier. Constantly.

But right now, Liss was mostly noticing that he shouldn't be here.

She rushed over to him, bare feet squeaking on the wood. “What’s wrong? Is Maisy hurt? Or Eva?”

His deep bass voice always managed to send chills racing across her skin. “Why would you think that?”

“Because there’s no other reason for you to show up at my belly-dancing class. Unless you want to pre-pay for a series of lessons for yourself.”

“I don’t need to be taught how to dance. My people invented the tango. Rhythm flows in my blood.” He placed a hand on his chest, extended his other arm, and shifted his weight side to side.

Even in his black cotton sweater and jeans, the simple moves flooded the room with sensuality. Liss, however, wouldn't tell him that. Their relationship was founded on bickering, with breaks for mocking and occasional co-snark aimed at their friends.

“You were taken from your mother a week after you were born and raised in the training stronghold of the *Right and Holy Seraphic Order of the Nephilim*. I’m guessing they didn’t include cotillion class in the curriculum.”

“Fighting is a dance. You learn choreography; who feints, who lunges, and carefully execute it hundreds of times until the moves flow out of your muscles without thought or hesitation.”

Well. That was about as many words as Liss had ever heard Xavier spew at one time. He was more of the *why use ten words when a grunt will do* kind of guy. “That’s relatively eloquent. Who are you, really? What shape-shifting demon has possessed you?”

Another shock. One of his quicksilver, blink-and-you’ll-miss-it grins ghosted across his face. “A man who knows that dancing gets you laid.”

“Ugh. You’re a disgusting beast.”

“He’s not wrong, though.” Aradia winked and trailed her fingers across his shoulder blades as she exited the room.

He twitched off her touch after no more than a second. “Grab your things. Let’s go.”

Liss had left her shoes against the wall, rather than in the locker room. Because nobody told her not to wear shoes. She jammed her feet in. “Again, where? Why? What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He gave a firm push at the small of her back, aiming her toward the back door. Liss worked very hard not to wriggle at his touch.

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s no emergency. No more than any other day, which, recently, is a Hell of a lot more.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To take you home. Keep you safe.”

Those words ground her to a halt faster than stepping in cement. “No, thank you.”

“Not up for debate.”

God, he was infuriating. Stubborn. Bossy. And certain that simply because he’d lived eighty-seven years, he was right more often than not.

Not this time.

“You’re right. I’m not debating. I’m telling you that I don’t need a guard dog. And I really don’t need someone else telling me what I need.”

“Wrong. You’re human. *Nephilim* protect humans. It’s that simple.”

She grabbed her coat off the row of hooks. Although Liss was almost pissed enough to let her anger warm her against Buffalo’s November chill. “Yes, sure, you protect humanity in general. Specific humans from specific demons that have been sighted or already threatened them. I don’t have a demon posse coming after me.”

“That’s optimistic of you.”

Zavier was too subsumed by the dangers he fought on a daily basis. It seemed to have gone right over his head that all that protecting and defending *worked*. “I’ve lived twenty-six years without even knowing demons existed. I never heard voices trying to talk me into doing something evil. Never saw ghosts, never felt a chill in the air.”

“But you’re one of us now.”

“Hardly.” The *Nephilim* were crazy powerful. Had wings.

Gideon’s girlfriend, Evangeline, was a dark *Nephilim*, with powers she hadn’t fully yet identified. And Maisy—who’d always seemed as average as Liss—had picked up a snazzy new power as Keeper of the Key to the Gates of Hell. She could shoot the First Light out of her body. It eviscerated anything evil.

Then there was Liss. A tag-along, third wheel, normal/average/powerless human.

With a tight smirk thinning those full lips, Zavier snorted. “You think the paranormal world gossips any less than humans? Everyone knows about you, Liss. That you live with a Keeper. That you’re friends with the three most powerful *Nephilim* warriors.”

Ha. Liss noticed that he slid in that self-stroke, calling

himself the most powerful. Xavier wasn't at *all* modest about his fighting skills. For a man who kept such a low profile in conversations, it was always adorable watching him puff himself up.

Except for now.

When he was using it as a ridiculous excuse to harangue her. "Great. Maybe this so-called notoriety will get me a job offer. Or my Tinder profile will get better matches."

"Stop joking," he ordered. His words clipped off like bullets. "You're a target now. A way to get at us."

That hadn't occurred to her. Sure, she enjoyed a good superhero show where the secret identity was maintained to keep family and friends out of danger. But that wasn't real.

Of course, six months ago, Liss hadn't thought that devastatingly hot half-angels were real, either.

"You taught me and Maisy all that self-defense. I'll be fine."

A second later, his forearm was at her throat. He'd wrapped a leg around hers. Oh, and Xavier's other hand held a knife to her ribs. "How fine?"

Liss wasn't worried at all that he'd hurt her. She *was* worried that she'd sort of...quiver at being pressed up against all of him. "Show-off."

"Preternatural speed isn't showing off. It's just one of a dozen ways creatures can kill you before you realize they're even there." Xavier released her. Then he brushed a fingertip across the beads of sweat dappling her chest just above her sports bra. "Where's the protection charm Gideon made for you?"

Uh oh. This was her bad. She tossed it into her pocket—most days—before leaving for work. But the velvet pouch wasn't much of a workout accessory. "On my dresser. I didn't want it clanking against my sternum during the class."

"As much as you don't want to be eaten by a demon?"

She threw up her arms, whacking her wrist on the door frame hard enough to feel it reverberate up her arm. At least it

distracted her from the lingering heat where her ass had been pressed against Xavier.

“Enough. You’re hyper-vigilant. I’m...not. Yet. Where we both should be is probably somewhere in the middle.”

Liss wanted to storm toward the bus stop. But it was hovering around freezing, so it wouldn’t exactly suck to immediately jump into Xavier’s SUV. And what really stopped her intended dramatic flounce (which he’d *so* earned with that smug, know-it-all attitude) was the layer of ice bridging the doorstep and the parking lot.

She looked down. Prepped to step flatly so as not to land on her ass...

...and promptly landed on her ass. Because Xavier had shoved her. “Hey!”

Looking up to yell at him gave her a front row seat to watching the *Nephilim* warrior in action. He’d popped out his ombre black and silver wings to fly over the ice. In those two seconds, he’d also popped jagged-edged knives into both hands from his arm sheaths.

That was due to the...thing at the edge of the building.

Oh, Liss was sure it was a demon, thanks to the giant fanged, disembodied head with entrails hanging from it. She just didn’t know what kind. Or what gender.

Somehow, it floated. Zipping around, evading each of Xavier’s knife thrusts, its entrails wagging around and dripping black blood on the fresh snow. Liss scooted over to the door. Then she slid her arm through the handle, holding it closed. Nobody was coming out here to witness this horror on her watch. It was the smallest possible thing she could do to help.

It was also the only thing she could do. So she wouldn’t run inside and scream and flip out. No, she’d stay out here with it and help keep Xavier’s secret.

Now she understood what he’d said about dancing and fighting being similar. His body moved so fluidly. The only noise was of the scritch of his coat and the wheezing gasp of

the demon head. Xavier wasn't panting. Or grunting with effort. He used his wings minimally; mostly to shoot up in the air.

Aside from the whole disgusting demon thing? This was a show that Liss could watch all night. Because she wasn't scared. Okay, a little grossed out and terrified, but that was more of a knee-jerk, lizard brain reaction.

The logic center of her brain was aware that Xavier, Rhys and Gideon truly *were* the best fighters out of all the *Nephilim*. Liss had zero doubt that Xavier would triumph. Probably without so much as breaking a sweat.

Too bad it was November, and his coat obscured the movement of his muscles. Still super cool to see his wings somehow coming *through* the coat. And to watch him spin and twist and lunge in athletic and acrobatic mastery.

Yeah—she was getting turned on by watching him battle a demon. That summed up the weirdness of her new life in a nutshell.

Xavier somersaulted *under* the dangling entrails. Then he grabbed them to reel in the head like a kite bucking against the wind. Once the head was in reach, he buried his knife in an eye.

That dropped it immediately to the ground, motionless. Xavier barely rolled out of its way in time. He stood, looking at the streaks of black entrail blood glistening wetly on his clothes. "Damn it. This is going to reek on the drive home."

"Are you okay?" Liss asked in a breathless rush. Because now that the head *was* dead—or incapacitated, how could you tell?—she realized that she'd been tamping down on more fear than she'd admitted to herself. And she was comfortable staying pressed against the building, a solid dozen paces away from the head.

"Of course. That was nothing." His tone indicated that her question was like asking a weightlifter if opening a jar of pickles had been tough.

"It was *something*. What was it?"

“A *Leyak*. Indonesian demon that’s human by day, which is how it’s getting around downtown Buffalo unnoticed.” He pointed with a bloody knife at her position. “Good move barricading the door. Thanks.”

“Um, the person due thanks is *you*. For saving me, and everyone inside, from that thing.”

Zavier opened his trunk. Pulled out a tackle box full of absolutely zero fishing supplies. He grabbed a container of Morton’s salt, a small vial, paper, and a lighter. “Yeah, well, it’s nice to have a visual aid to make my point.”

“Huh?”

He sprinkled salt in a circle around the head. Crumpled the paper into a ball. Then he dripped the contents of the vial onto the oozing entrails. “Holy water. It’ll speed up this clean-up.” After lighting the ball, he dropped it into the circle. Green flames shot at least twelve feet into the sky. It lasted for three seconds, and then nothing at all was left. “This *Leyak* was lying in wait. You could’ve been killed.”

Technically, if Zavier hadn’t come, she would’ve exited via the front door to get to the bus stop and would’ve avoided it completely. But Liss knew he’d barrel right over that argument. And the only reason she would’ve made it was to piss him off, on principle. “It wasn’t lying in wait for *me*.”

He wagged a hand back and forth. “Fifty-fifty. The witches are a big draw. That much power in one place makes them a target.”

“Aradia said they were wearing bells to repel demons,” Liss murmured. Suddenly the annoyance of the tinkling was something she was quite willing to accept. If she came back for another class. Which wasn’t looking real likely right now.

“Smart. Smarter than you with no protection charm. Frankly, this thing could’ve been tracking you all day, in its human form. Then waited back here for the dark and the easy opportunity to take you out. Both for a snack, and as a smack in the face to us.”

“Oh.” Guess she couldn’t try to refute that anymore. Shame

washed over her for putting him in the position to *have* to rescue her. For being so stubborn and ungrateful every time one of the guys had insisted on giving her rides.

“Come over and blend this salt into the snow.”

Liss used her foot to wipe away the circle while Xavier cleaned his knives. “Sorry that you had to work, um, off-the-clock, as it were. I can’t really afford your standard demon-slaying rates.”

“Nobody hired me for this. Still would’ve done it to protect those witches inside.” Gruffly, he added, “Especially you.”

“Because if I died, it would make Maisy cry, and then Rhys would be pissed.” She knew she was the third wheel. The *Nephilim* accepted Maisy because she and Rhys were together. And they accepted Liss as, well, an appendage of Maisy. Technically, they had no reason to keep her in their inner circle.

“That.” He opened the door for her. “And I like our movie nights.”

Zavier’s admission took her by surprise. “Oh. Good.”

That smug, pretentious grin flashed as he started the car. “Mostly, I’m happy to do this freebie because it proves my point.”

Jackass.

But he’d more than proved his point. That Liss couldn’t do *anything* to protect herself.

As well as the auxiliary point that Xavier was smoking hot with a knife in his hand...

...

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There are no idea trees. Or even bushes. But I'd been stuck for weeks on what could be the big twist for this book. Until one Saturday I was absently skimming Goodreads, and a single title leapt out at me. I didn't read the blurb—but that book unlocked the (I'm just gonna say it) brilliant, hellish surprise for me. There's your behind-the-scenes peek. I'm grateful to Goodreads, lol.

About the Author

[Christi Barth](#) earned a Masters degree in vocal performance and embarked upon a career on the stage. A love of romance then drew her to wedding planning. Ultimately she succumbed to her lifelong love of books and now writes award-winning contemporary romance, including the Naked Men and Aisle Bound series. Christi can always be found whipping up gourmet meals (for fun, honest!) or with her nose in a book. She lives in Maryland with the best husband in the world.

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