

CHAPTER I

Death.

It's inevitable.

None could evade it.

The two scourges Aethan had been tracking had a few more moments to enjoy life. But their faint odor of sulfur was fast dissipating in the frigid night air. In a burst of inhuman speed, Aethan left the crowded streets and cut through a dingy alley on the Lower East Side and pulled up short. Despite the stench of decay from the trash bags piled high on the side, the acrid reek of sulfur stung his heightened senses.

Eyes narrowing, he scanned the alley. There, in the shadows of the looming buildings, he found the two hauling a whimpering female along with them.

Anticipation stirred. Finally.

Demoniis were a damn menace to humans, always drawn to a mortal's life force with a constant fix needed to sustain their decaying bodies.

With edginess riding him, he needed the fight. Aethan strolled closer. "Let her go."

The pair swung around. Shades covered their eyes. Aethan knew exactly what they hid. The two men whipped off their sunglasses and their eerie red irises glowed in the dark.

The female took one look at them, then at Aethan and an ear-splitting shriek filled the alley. He couldn't blame her if she thought him one of those deadbeats. Dressed all in black, and with his intimidating height, he probably looked more like the killer he was than those two who had no doubt seduced her into leaving with them with their pretty-boy faces. Too bad for her, she'd chosen wrong.

The blond demonii punched her in the jaw, silencing her. Smirking, he grazed the unconscious female's neck with his fangs. "Back off, or I'll kill her."

They thought to threaten him? Not only did the fuckers gorge on souls, but also blood, judging by the length of their fangs.

"By the time you reach us, I'll have torn out her jugular," blond dickhead said. "There's little you can do, Guardian."

"Pity. How long would her soul sustain you?" Aethan asked. "Mine's better. Lasts longer, too." He held out his hands to show he held no weapon.

The demoniis' eyes slitted. He could see the wheels turning as they contemplated how fast they could kill him for the coveted prize. Dumb shits.

The dark-haired demonii's gaze lowered to Aethan's belt. "The dagger, throw it here. And anything else you have in your pockets."

With a shrug, Aethan tossed his obsidian dagger onto the dirt-encrusted asphalt near the demonii's feet. Then he emptied his pocket of a few sticks of gum.

The blond laughed, kicking the obsidian away. He flung the female aside, and they came at Aethan like unleashed bullets. Dodging the attack, he lashed out, his fist connecting with a jaw. A roundhouse kick, and one of them crashed into a wall.

A fiery missile zinged past his face. He jumped back. Shit, too close. A hit by a demonii-bolt, and he might as well lie down and let them have his soul.

"Not so brave now, are you?" The dark-haired one advanced, sporting a macabre grin at how easily they'd cornered a Guardian. The scourge's hand moved in a wave, pilfering

the earth of its natural energies and turning them into deadly bolts. The fuckers may have lost their abilities at their true death, but they still found a way to compensate.

Damn scourges. Too bad they didn't fight fair. He'd been quite prepared to extend their lives by a few more minutes. He willed his obsidian back to him, and in a move so fast, he nailed the dark-haired demonii in the chest. A raucous snarl filled the backstreet.

Aethan summoned the mystical weapon tattooed on his biceps. The thing shifted, a tingle running down his arm. He lunged after the blond as a six-foot-long obsidian sword took form in his hand. He spun around, the blade hissing in a deadly arc, and decapitated the demonii set on fleeing. The scourge disintegrated within moments. Just a thick, black, glutinous mess remained for a second before it, too, disappeared. He didn't bother looking for the wounded demonii, knowing he'd flashed out of the alley.

Aethan let his sword shimmer and settle back on his biceps. He picked up his dagger, and walked over to the brown-haired female lying on the ground. Crouching beside her, he examined her for injuries. She appeared to be fine, except for the light bruise on her jaw.

He scanned her for a psychic vibe. Nope. Nothing. Not even a hint of a spark. She didn't possess the *pyre and rime* abilities he'd been searching for the past few weeks. He'd hoped she was it and he could be done with this damn job. Scrubbing her memories of the last hour, he woke her and willed her on her way.

Brief flashes of lightning brightened the dismal alley, revealing the grimy walls. He rose and sheathed his dagger on his belt, and his shoulder twinged, reminding him of the injury he'd sustained last night in another demonii fight.

He headed out of the alley and up the street. In the distance, opposite Club Anarchy, he spotted the familiar figure of his fellow Guardian. Týr's pale hair gleamed beneath the streetlight. The warrior might be easy on the eyes, but he was as lethal as the blade tattooed on his biceps.

Once a god from the Norse pantheon, Týr's virulent rage towards demons and their altered brethren, the demoniis, was all that kept his jets going. You couldn't blame him when he'd once been at their mercy, imprisoned in the deepest pits of Tartarus, for centuries. But judging by the way the females obstructed his path and the easy grin on his face, the warrior had found a way to ease his nightmares.

Unlike him. No matter how many demoniis Aethan took out in the name of protecting mortals, his nightmares never ceased. Just the thought of them and his shields fractured.

'*A'than!*' The childish whisper tore into his heart. He staggered to a halt, images flashing through his mind. The ground drenched with blood...*so much blood.*

Urias. He struggled to shut down the memories. But he could do little about the ache that bled through him, even centuries later. There was no off switch for that.

Inhaling a harsh breath, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You okay, man?"

Shit. No one should be able to creep up on him like that. He dropped his hand to find Týr beside him. "Yeah, fine." He ignored the hard stare Týr pinned him, and continued up the street. "Anything on the psychic female Michael wants found?"

At the mention of their latest job, Týr shoved his hands into the pockets of his leathers. "Enticing as they are, scanning all the females in this city for abilities of *pyre and rime* is not my idea of a good time."

"Yeah. Flat on their backs is more your thing."

“Not just that. Up against a wall, bent over...I’m flexible. Or they usually are.” A smirk rode Týr’s face. He stepped around a suspicious-looking puddle. “What’s so important about a female possessing powers of fire and ice, anyway?”

“Can’t say. Maybe he just wants to stop her from burning down the city.”

“Michael’s too tight-lipped when it comes to shit like this. Who the fuck are we gonna tell? The demons?”

Aethan shrugged. He really didn’t care for the latest job Michael had dumped on them. Being among mortal females was not at the top of his to-do list. “He’s probably trying to stop a prophecy or some such disaster. It’s the first time he’s thrown a job at us—”

“—without the ritual meet and greet,” Týr finished, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “A prophecy? Damn! It would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

Noisy laughter drew Aethan’s attention to the line forming alongside the faded, graffiti-covered walls of Club Anarchy. This early in the night, the popular nightspot for mortals and demons teemed with revelers. Beneath the stench of garbage, the faint trace of sulfur drifted to him. He could easily follow the smell to its source, but since it led to the Otium demons waiting to get into the club, he didn’t bother. Several of them chose to live among the humans now, preferring a quiet life—unlike their turned brethren, demoniis, who trawled clubs like these looking for their next prey.

“Humans,” Aethan muttered. “Can’t understand their fascination with danger.”

“Never understood them myself,” Týr agreed. “But the females sure are one helluva temptation.” He shot Aethan a shit-eating grin that didn’t reach his eyes. “You called one to slake off that edge, yet? Just say the word, and I’ll cover your patrol.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, *rrright*.”

Aethan bit back a retort. He didn’t need a reminder of how close to the edge he was and, worse, that Týr noticed. While he now had total control over his powers, the same couldn’t be said of the restlessness pushing at him. The damn feeling had plagued him for days. He had no idea what the hell it was.

Reaching into his coat pockets, he realized he’d thrown his gum away. *Damn*. He rolled his taut shoulders, the ache flaring up again. The fight earlier had done little to ease the power roiling beneath his skin. A constant reminder of why he could never escape what he was. A crack in his psychic shields, and he’d not only flatten the entire island of Manhattan but take every single life with it. Not something he cared to think of.

“I don’t get you, Empyrean.” Týr pulled a pack of M&M’s from his jacket pocket and poured several into his palm. He sorted through the colors. “What’s wrong with being with a human? Find a female. Get that power level down to green. It’s a helluva lot more fun than running your feet to stumps.”

Perhaps. But another faceless person? Another bout of empty sex? His belly churned at the thought. He’d rather have stumps.

A limousine cruised to a halt in front of the club. The doors opened to a dissonance of voices, music, and laughter. Males and females stumbled from the car, and the sharp whiff of illegal dust floated to him.

Týr popped several of the yellow candies into his mouth, his attention on the noisy humans. “They make it so easy for trawling demoniis to hunt them.”

Aethan turned away, only to find a female obstructing his path.

His gaze skimmed over her. She was an incitement for dark pleasures, all right. Big

breasts covered in a leather Band-Aid were teamed with a crotch-short skirt beneath her long coat. Long red hair fell around her face in wanton disarray. A seductive smile tilted her mouth. Heavy on the cosmetics, her hot blue eyes swept over him with avid interest.

“Can’t hide that angelic shit, after all.” Týr’s annoying murmur rang in his ear. The bastard was enjoying this.

Being an Empyrean, Aethan could do nothing about the way he looked. But if any of the angelic allure his race was born with leaked out, the humans would be unable to resist the pull—the very thought had him tightening his psychic shields. He was the farthest thing from the humans’ concept of an angel. Hell, he didn’t even have wings, so why was he cursed with this crap?

“I’ll tell you a secret.” The female raised her sultry peepers at him. “I can see the future. It’s your lucky night, handsome.” Her husky voice dropped an octave. She stepped closer and slowly ran her hand down his chest. Her gaze wandered to the grinning son of a bitch next to him, and her smile grew. “Or we could *all* go someplace else...”

Aethan breathed in the scent of her lust. A muscle worked in his jaw at the temptation she presented. He pushed back needs that had no place in his life, scanned her for a psychic vibe, and found nothing.

“Trust me, you don’t really want me.” *Not unless you have a death wish.*

He peeled her hand off his coat and stepped around her. Her gasp of disbelief that he’d turned her down followed him as he headed up the street. These females had no idea how dangerous he was. They might as well stick their finger in a live socket if they thought *he* could give them what they desired.

“You’re one stubborn bastard.” Týr’s laughter drifted to him. “Me, I’ll take the pleasurable way out.” He cast a quick look back at the redhead. “Would’ve been something, nailing her. She was game to be tag-teamed, too. Hell, shield in that cursed power of yours if you’re afraid of hurting her, and we’ll all be good to go. But you’re just too selfish to share.”

Afraid of hurting her? Týr had no idea what he was capable of—why he could never take a human as a lover. And his possessive nature was his own damn business.

Aethan rolled his injured shoulder again, easing the tightness, and paused. A group of teen thugs with pierced lips stepped into their path, aggression oozing from their pores.

Eyes cool, he returned their stares.

“Sure you want to take us on?” Týr calmly exchanged the M&M’s for his obsidian dagger. At the sight of the wicked looking blade, the teens’ heads dropped and they scurried away like rats. “Annoying little punks,” Týr muttered, re-sheathing his dagger. “So, you gonna go see Lila?”

Aethan shrugged. “Why would I?”

“Stop messin’ around, man. Go see Lila and get that damn shoulder fixed. You can’t leave something that dangerous untreated—”

“I’m good.”

“Well, then... Good to know.” Týr slapped him on the shoulder. Hard.

“*Godsdammit!*” Aethan expelled a harsh breath at the pain blazing through him. “I should incinerate your damn ass!” Despite their quick healing abilities, lesions caused by demonii-bolts weren’t so easy to cure. Lila, an oracle from the Village, was the only one who could treat those wounds with her potions that drained the evil taint out of them.

Týr laughed and shook his head. Taking a black beanie out of his jacket pocket, he pulled it over his pale hair. “Go see Lila, man, or you’re gonna be a direct fucking GPS for the demonii shitheads—” He broke off, his eyes narrowing. “We have company.”

With his heightened senses, Aethan felt the brush of ice against his skin. He could smell the familiar strain of rotting evil that surrounded the wounded demonii who’d escaped him earlier.

Time to end this. “This one’s mine. Later.”

He headed for a recessed doorway and dematerialized.

Echo Carter wrapped her arms around her waist and paced along the top step in front of the well-lit cathedral, trying to keep warm while she waited for Kira. The chilly sea breeze stung her nostrils as she debated going back to her car and cranking up the heater to full blast. But being trapped in the vehicle for a half hour? Ugh. She far preferred the cold. It helped ease the dull ache in her temples.

Her head still felt heavy and fuzzy from her restless night. Dreams she didn’t want to remember throbbed in her mind, so she concentrated on a tugboat gliding over the ominous waters of the East River. A streak of lightning raced across the dark skies, briefly enveloping everything in a portentous silver light.

The night wind stole under her denim jacket and beneath her sweater like an icy caress. She buttoned up the front and slid her hands into her pockets. Her fingers wrapped around the two stones she carried around like talismans, their warmth seeping into her. But it wasn’t enough. She seriously needed a distraction to clear her head and rid her body of the chill.

Her cell beeped. Eagerly, she retrieved the phone from her pocket and sat on her backpack, avoiding the cold cement step, only to find it was a text from Damon.

Away on business. Get Kira to stay with you. You know why. Call if you need me.

P.S. Don’t do anything stupid.

She snorted. Everyone had bad dreams. It didn’t mean she needed a babysitter. Damon’s postscripts, however, never changed, even if his messages did. The way her guardian hovered, you’d think she was thirteen instead of twenty-three and living on her own.

But she couldn’t blame him. All that mattered to her was finding Tamsyn’s killer and ending the son of a bitch. That had to be the *stupid* thing Damon worried about. She rolled her eyes.

A man, rushing past her, snagged her attention. Echo watched him skid to a halt. Above average height, this one embodied the perfect male, with bronzed skin, dark, wavy hair, and a sculptured jaw. Black shades covered his eyes.

He made a U-turn, giving her a closed mouthed smile. Well now, she *had* asked for a distraction. Sliding the phone back into her pocket, she rose to her feet. She’d deal with this before Kira got back, and she knew the perfect spot for this little rendezvous. With a casual, seductive sway of her hips, she tossed him a sultry look over her shoulder and glided toward the back of the cathedral.

He followed.

Of course he’d follow. They always did.

She popped her jacket buttons free as she rounded the rear of the building and headed for the alcove where the statue of an angel with massive wings stood. When he grabbed

her from behind and slammed her against the cathedral wall, she sucked in a breath, pain jarring up her arm to her shoulder. She twisted around. The acrid stink of sulfur flooded her nostrils. Bile rushed to her throat, telling her exactly what this thing was.

“Ah, little mortal. So good of you to choose this place—” He stopped, confusion flickering across his face, frowned, and leaned in to sniff her.

Oh yeah, her cursed pheromones always worked in her favor. They threw them off track and gave her the crucial edge she needed. But the black sludge that coated her hands as she held him off warned her this one had been wounded.

“You smell different. Must taste.” His tone slurred. Something wet and rough slithered along her neck. *Crap!* The slimy saliva on her skin sent a shudder of revulsion through her. But she didn’t let that distract her. Once his foul-breathed mouth claimed hers, life as she knew it would be over.

Nope, not happening. She had no plans to die at the hands of this fiend.

“Pity I have to cut our fun short.” His face cracked into a menacing smile to reveal pointy canines. “Your light’s mine.”

That’s what he thought.

“If you want it, come and claim it.” The familiar words rolled out of her mouth. Darn, she had to stop watching *The Lord of the Rings*. But Aragon was so—

Argh, kill first, then think about the sexy Aragon—she kneed the demonii hard in the crotch, breaking his hold. Spinning around, she kicked out her leg in a fast sweep, knocking his feet out from under him. He stumbled to the ground. About to go in for what would have been a routine kill, the demonii sprang up. He flung his shades aside. Eerily red eyes flamed with fury.

“I’ll drain every drop of your blood before I rip out your soul!”

“Promises—promises,” she taunted.

He came at her. Echo palmed her dagger and met him head-on. She went in low and rammed the blade into his sternum. The demonii fell to his knees, eyes widening in surprise.

“Didn’t see that one coming, did ya?” Vengeance burned in her as she grabbed him by the hair and slashed his exposed throat, severing the carotid artery. Blood, black and thick, gushed out.

Her breathing harsh, she let the body fall to the ground. Disappointment burned through her. This fiend hadn’t killed Tamsyn. The stink of the sulfur now coating her skin lacked the coppery, sweet odor of vanilla she was after. No matter. It meant one less evil fiend roaming the streets and robbing the innocents of their souls.

The body decomposed and vanished within seconds. No sign remained that the demonii had ever existed. The oily ooze on her dagger had disappeared, too, when a frisson shot through her. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck rose in warning. *Oh, hell. More of them.*

Survival mode on high alert, Echo whipped around in a defensive strike and met steel with steel. The metallic sound reverberated through the cathedral’s garden. The sheer power of the blow vibrated up her hand to her injured shoulder. Pain streaked through her but didn’t slow her down.

She attacked. He countered.

This one was too strong, too canny. She lunged at him, but he grabbed her in a move that made her head spin and imprisoned her in an ironclad grip against a wall of muscle.

It took her a second to realize the stranger had no intention of disarming or hurting her. He merely shielded himself from *her* attack.

Irritated, she glared up. The impact of the man facing her over their crossed daggers hit her like a blow to the stomach. She stumbled back, dragging in lungfuls of air. Wild as rainstorms and earthy as sin, his scent crowded her. She blinked, sure the vision before her was a fantasy induced by her sleep-starved brain.

He was so tall, he had to be at least six-seven. His long, leather duster parted to reveal muscular, leather-covered legs. All that black he wore was the perfect backdrop for a wickedly handsome face. The hard, sensual curve of his lips and that focused way he studied her told her he would know every carnal pleasure there was.

A tiny shiver of awareness darted up her spine, but she brutally clamped it down.

The chilly breeze tossed back strands of his long hair to reveal the glitter of small silver hoops in his ears. But his hair—she'd never seen anything like it. It was as if nature had stroked it with every shade of the blue spectrum then laid a careless dash of ebony between those strands.

The air around him shifted. Power rolled off him in aggressive waves. But his eyes held her spellbound—gunmetal gray irises took on streaks of white—a caveat, a warning not to attack him again.

Oh, Mr. Goth-man could send out all the signals he liked. She wasn't easy to intimidate.

“Who the hell are you?” she finally snapped.