

CHAPTER I

Dim lights cast a sickly, pale glow over the dingy alley, adding to the portentous sensation crawling through Aethan. As if some disaster loomed, one he couldn't quite get a grip on. He glanced at Blaéz, strolling at his side. The warrior's calm demeanor revealed nothing.

"Something feels off," he said, his unease growing.

"Indeed... You made a decision yet?" Blaéz asked as they bypassed several dumpsters lined against the grimy brick wall. The things reeked as if a pack of rats had died there.

"About what?"

Blaéz cut him a cool, detached stare. A purple bruise marred his jaw. With his penchant for brutal underground fighting, Aethan wasn't surprised.

"Is it that you really don't know, or that you haven't decided?"

Aethan frowned. His disquiet hiking in leaps now. "Celt, you talk in riddles. How the hell am I supposed to know what you're talking about? Did you have a vision or what?"

The male's precog ability was unparalleled. Hell, everything he'd told Aethan several months ago when he'd first met his mate had transpired—*shit*. Fear twisted his gut. "Is it Echo?"

"No." Blaéz turned back to stare into the night. "No precog needed for this one. But it does indeed concern your mate."

Aethan stopped and pinned his fellow Guardian an annoyed glare. "Just spit it out, man. What the hell is it?"

Blaéz slowly faced him. He was as tall as Aethan, a little on the leaner side, and deadlier than a detonating bazooka jammed into one's mouth with his ability to kill with a thought. But dammit, any slower on the response, and Aethan would probably die of old age!

"Heard the females talking. Your mate and her friend, Kira..."

"Yeah?" Aethan prompted, clamping down on his teeth to stop from shaking the words out of the warrior.

"It's Echo's big day next week. Her birthday. Females, from what I've seen on TV, get excited about the day. And presents."

Fuuuccck! Suddenly feeling faint, Aethan inhaled a lungful of reeking air and slid his hands into his pants pockets. This was worse than a damn demonii bolt striking him in the chest. What the hell did he do now?

Echo had told him her birthdate some time ago when she'd asked him his, but he hadn't put much stock into remembering it. Hell, when you live forever, birthdays no longer mattered. He continued to walk up the alley, trying to think of something amazing for his mate...and came up blank. He really didn't want to screw this up.

"Would you know—"

"Google."

"Right—" Aethan broke off. A familiar insidious prickle slithered over his psyche. *Demoniis*. The turned brethren of demons were on the hunt again, trawling for prey, for mortal souls to replace the dying ones they'd already harvested from humans.

Eyes narrowed, he scanned the night air for the source... His heightened hearing caught the faint, pained cry of a female. Trouble.

Aethan dematerialized in a scattering of molecules and followed the distressed cry. He took form moments later in The Bowery and tore down the dimly lit alley, following the sensation, and skidded to a halt. Blaéz appeared beside him.

The abandoned warehouse across the street sat too still, too dark. The icy, malevolent sensation abrading his psyche grew stronger. Beneath it, he smelled the coppery odor of blood...but no humans.

“What the hell are they up to now?”

Without answering, Blaéz strode toward the barricaded entrance and climbed through a gaping hole in the door. The warrior was all about the fight, the more brutal, the better. Pain was the only thing he felt after losing his soul and emotions several millennia ago while incarcerated in Tartarus.

Aethan followed, scaling through the gap as the mystical tattoo on his biceps pulsed at the evil surrounding him. The stench of sulfur saturated the confined space. He stopped beside Blaéz in the shadows. His gaze pinned on a horde of demonii congested on the other end of the warehouse, jittery sounds escaping them. Their eerie red eyes glowing like lights in the dark.

“I sent you to this world with one damn task,” a voice bellowed. “But you thought to abscond—”

“Rahvert, I did not mean for it to happen,” a demon male whimpered. The leader of the pack punched him in the face. The sickening crunch of bones breaking filled the place. Blood gushed from the trapped male’s nose. The demonii holding him snickered.

Blaéz vanished. He reappeared on the other side of the warehouse and threw himself into the horde, breaking the gathering apart, his fist plowing into a demonii’s jaw.

Aethan flashed across to them as another charged him. He punched the scourge in the face and sent him reeling back. Then he saw the woman—a demoness—and a demonii with his mouth fastened to her neck. Damn fuckers! They couldn’t reap a demon’s dark soul, but their blood was fair game! Aethan yanked the asshole away, rammed his face into the wall and tossed him aside.

The female fell into a tangled heap on the cement, bleeding profusely from her torn throat. A moan of desolation ripped through the warehouse from the trapped demon.

A stocky demon glared at Aethan. The silvery light spilling in from the window highlighted the jagged red and black scar running down his face from his brow to his jaw. It appeared as if someone had tried to cleave his head in half then stuffed a whole lot of salt into the wound before it had sealed.

“You two are those do-gooder Guardians protecting this weak mortal species.” Scarface sneered. “*This*”—he waved a hand to the fallen demoness and the weeping male—“has nothing to do with you.” He flashed to the female and yanked her head back. Her eyes had taken on the red hue of demon-kind in death.

As if Aethan didn’t know what they were. He didn’t care. She was an earthbound demon—an innocent—one of the many who sought to make a safer life in this world, away from the tyranny of the Dark Realm. But *safe* wasn’t in the cards for them it appeared. Seconds later, her body shimmered and vanished.

“You brought this filth into a place under our protection,” Aethan snapped, nodding to the agitated demonii.

Scarface laughed. “The rules of this world don’t apply to us, asshole.” With a dismissive wave of his fingers, he turned to the several twitchy demoniis near him. “Deal with them. *Their* souls would last you longer.”

Did the bastard think they were that easy to kill?

Three demoniis rushed Aethan from the horde, and two went after Blaéz. Dumbasses! All should be gunning for Blaez, not him. While he had to *summon* his power, Blaéz just had to latch onto their minds.

Aethan sidestepped the attack and propelled his body through the air, lashing out with his booted foot and nailing the demonii in the throat. A choking gurgle escaped the scourge. More circled him. Aethan summoned his mystical, six-foot-long obsidian sword that usually resided in a tattoo on his biceps. In a smooth glide, his weapon shifted, taking shape in his hand. He wheeled around and decapitated several of the scourges then went after the demonii cowering against the wall who’d fed off the female. And drove his sword into the fucker’s chest.

“*Nooooo!*” Scarface’s shocked yell filled the air. He grabbed the falling and fast decomposing body, dropping to his knees. The corpse in his hands disintegrated into dust.

He jolted to his feet, face consumed with rage. Hatred. His red-hued gaze stabbed holes into Aethan. “You killed my kin—my brother. I will make you suffer before I destroy you.”

Scarface pivoted, a blade flashed, and he ruthlessly sliced across the carotid of the weeping demon. Blood sprayed like a geyser as he tossed the male aside. The remaining demoniis descended on him like a swarm of infected buzzing bees.

Celt, shield, Aethan sent a telepathic warning to Blaéz, who was fighting off two more on the other side. The warrior smashed his fist into the throat of a demonii, threw him across the hall, and dematerialized.

Aethan lowered his shields and his power of whitefire consumed him. It sizzled through his body like a surge of lightning, connecting with his sword. If caught in its wave, none stood a chance. He wielded his weapon in an arch. White light hissed and whipped out like a lariat curling around the scourges and slicing them in half. In a swirl of black smoke, Rahvert flashed out before the deadly light touched him.

Shit!

As the bodies crumbled into gray dust, Aethan let his sword settle back into a tattoo on his biceps. Silence surrounded him. He couldn’t sense Blaéz around either.

Inhaling harshly, Aethan left the warehouse and cut through a dank passage. Two stray dogs rummaging through the trash growled as he passed. He cleared the foul thoroughfare that connected to a backstreet and headed up. Several Harleys lined the curb outside a bar farther along. Movement flickered in his peripheral view.

Blaéz stepped out from the shadows. “Followed the scarred one for a bit,” he said, running his fingers through his cropped hair, his pale blue eyes cool as the moon, “but he vanished back to the Dark Realm.”

“It matters little. Next time I see him, he’s dead.”

“Indeed. I need a drink.” Blaéz stopped outside Dante’s bar. “You coming, or you heading back to the castle?”

It was close to three in the morning. He should leave and go back to Echo. His chest tightened just thinking about her. Every day he left her to do his job, he worried. Since she’d awakened from her coma a few weeks ago, after being unconscious for several

months, she tired easily. She would probably—hopefully—be asleep and not waiting up for him. It was becoming damn hard to leash the voracious need that seared his blood whenever he was near her and keep their lovemaking gentle.

She was his mate, the other half of his soul, and he wanted her with a hunger that continued to grow. But he would never risk hurting her with his brutal needs. It was better this way. She needed the rest.

Besides, no matter what he'd told Blaéz, he had to find out what the scarred demon was up to.

"Yeah, I'll join you for a while." Needing information, he pulled out his cell. A text was worth a shot, even if he didn't get a response. A'Damiel, or Damon as he preferred to be called, an immortal who'd once been Echo's guardian, could be a damn pain in the ass, and adept at ignoring him.

A demon with a distinct black and red scar down the right side of his face, know anything? Goes by Rahvert.

He hit send, pocketed his cell, and followed Blaéz into the joint. The acrid stench of tobacco smoke, sweat, and liquor thickened the air. Balls crashed into each other on a nearby pool table, adding to the clamor. A seventies melody flowed out of an ancient jukebox in the corner, and a few couples swayed to the music. Leather-clad bikers in various sizes and shapes surrounded the bar and the pool table.

A familiar figure sat at the back of the bar in the shadows. Týr. The former Norse God and fellow Guardian sported a frown instead of his usual smirk.

Týr, along with Blaéz and the other Guardians, had once been protectors to an important young goddess who was abducted by the worst evil out there in a blood-spattered battle that destroyed an entire Sumerian temple. Banished from their pantheons, they'd been imprisoned in Tartarus for five brutal centuries until their escape.

Like Aethan, they were now Guardians of the mortal world, having sworn their allegiance to the ancient goddess Gaia eons ago to keep this realm safe from supernatural evil.

Blaéz sauntered over and straddled the chair opposite Týr. "This place's not your usual stopover, is it?"

"Did you ever think," Týr murmured, studying his obsidian dagger and ignoring Blaéz's comment, "that these weapons belong to our mates, not us?"

"Is that what you want? A mate?" Aethan cocked a brow, taking the seat next to Blaéz.

Týr snorted. "Like a demonii bolt to the head." He cut Blaéz a smirk. "Anyone claim your blade yet?"

Blaéz leaned back in his seat. Shrugged. "Need a soul for that to occur. So I'm covered."

Silence descended at the austere reminder of what the warrior had lost.

Týr replaced the dagger with a pack of M&M's from his pocket, poured some on his palm, and selected the reds.

Aethan signaled the dark-haired waitress eyeing them from the bar. She brightened and sashayed over with a sway of her hips. "What can I do for y'all?"

"Whiskey, neat," Blaéz said, totally uninterested, taking in the smoke-filled place.

Aethan ordered water.

Her green eyes shifted back to Týr, her smile amping up. "Ya need anything?"

None could mistake the invite in her tone.

Týr looked up and studied her for a second, his expression unreadable, which in itself was strange. The warrior loved the females and made it known. Týr shook his head.

With a bounce in her step, she left. Aethan had no idea what she saw in the Norse's expression because it was shut tight and locked down.

Blaéz drawled, "Tired of Club Anarchy's offerings? This place hardly caters to your type."

"I don't have a *type*, Celt. Females are all the same to me." His brow furrowed. "You two reek of sulfur..." He glanced at Aethan. "And you would have usually hightailed it back to the castle by now. What's up?"

Reveal just how afraid he was of hurting his still recovering mate if his edgier needs snapped his control? Yeah, not happening.

"Had a run-in with a scarred demon and his horde in a warehouse." Aethan explained what had happened.

"So, he's after you now?"

Aethan shrugged and rested his forearms on the scratched, wooden table. "What demon we cross swords with is *not* after us if they escape?"

Týr nodded. "Good point—"

The waitress reappeared. She handed out their drinks then set a Red Bull Týr hadn't ordered near his elbow and gave him a warm smile. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No." Short. Terse. Ignoring the new drink, Týr retrieved the open can near his elbow and took a deep swallow.

Her smile slipped, but it didn't stop her from leaving a napkin near his arm. "In case you change your mind."

Týr frowned at the cell number written there as she glided off.

"It means call her," Blaéz taunted, taking a sip of his liquor.

"I know what the hell it means—" Týr picked up the napkin and hid it in his palm. It caught alight. The small flame died, and he dropped the black crackly bits to the floor. He met Aethan's gaze. "Did you find out anything else—what the demon's looking for?"

"No." Aethan unscrewed his water and chugged some back. "He wasn't very accommodating in that regard."

"A demon targeting you is fucking bad news. You have a mate. You don't want her in danger again." Týr pushed to his feet. "Michael should know about this."

Aethan's jaw hardened as he rose. No fucker would ever come near his mate. This time, he'd take out everyone. He didn't care who got caught in the crossfire.

Several minutes later, Aethan materialized on the portico of the castle on the Guardians' island estate just off Manhasset Bay. As was his habit, he scanned the boundaries of the grounds for any breaks in the protection wards. Not that he needed to worry. Hedori, their all-around handyman and butler was proficient at building those spells. But Aethan did it anyway, his protective instinct in full force when it came to keeping his mate safe.

As Blaéz and Týr headed for the kitchen, Aethan made his way upstairs to his third-floor quarters. He mentally unlocked the door and entered his suite.

A low rumble reached him as he crossed to the bed on the far side. Echo's cat raised his head from where he'd once again claimed his spot on her pillow above her head. His furry, soot-dark tail stroked the arm she rested beside her cheek. She was asleep and lying

on her stomach. Her raven hair had grown past her shoulders. Silky black strands concealed parts of her face.

"It's good you keep an eye on her," he told Bob, who gave him a cool, amber-eyed stare before shutting his lids again. Since Aethan had no plans to go to bed, he let the cat be.

Echo had shoved the covers aside, and her nightshirt had ridden up in her sleep to reveal those tiny panties she favored. The sight of her honey-hued limbs and her tantalizing bottom covered by the scraps of white silk had his blood heating like a match to kindling.

Ignoring his straining cock, he pulled the covers over her again. Unable to help himself, he lowered to his haunches and swept the hair away from her face. Gently, he stroked her cheek, skimming his fingers along the shallow dimple on her chin.

It still left him breathless that she was his, a miracle he never expected to find living on this realm. While he hadn't been thrown into Tartarus for being responsible for a tragedy of indescribable proportions, but banished to this world after the death of his little sister, he'd been trapped in a hell of his own, until Echo.

She stirred as if sensing him. Her gorgeous mismatched eyes flickered open. One a fiery amber, and the other a cool, pearl-gray, now bleary with sleep. She met his gaze, smiled, and reached out a hand to stroke his jaw. "You're back." Her voice was huskier with sleep.

"Yeah." He turned his head and kissed her palm. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay, I—"

"No, you need the rest." Before she put that lush mouth on his and shattered his rigid control, he pressed his lips to her knuckles. "Go back to sleep. I have a meeting downstairs."

Aethan left the bedroom and headed back to the main level. Moments later, he stepped into the small room on the ground floor that was the archangel's study. An L-shaped bookshelf aligned the walls in one corner, and a huge mahogany desk sat adjacent to it. Two leather armchairs took up space near the small fireplace.

With just Týr, Blaéz, and their leader present, the place was crammed. Aethan stopped at the entrance to the room and rested a shoulder against the doorjamb.

Michael glanced at him. His eerie blue irises reminded Aethan of a cracked mirror. Silvery light seeped out from the fractures. Echo had once said it was as if Michael's soul showed through. His mate could see auras, so no surprise that she'd made that call.

A frown marred Michael's brow as he sat on the edge of his huge desk. "This situation can become a problem for us. I can't have one of those hell-bound demons causing chaos on this realm. Yes, I know you can take him out," he told Aethan, "but who knows what other trouble he's been stirring."

"Then I guess our patrol just got interesting," Týr said, slouching in his chair. "Everything's been too damn quiet recently."

Aethan's cell rang. He pulled it out from his pocket. Damon. He straightened from the jamb. "I have to take this."

Stepping through the open French doors and onto the small terrace, he answered his call. "Yeah?"

"I wouldn't worry too much about him," Damon said. "Rahvert is a bloody rabble-rouser, causes trouble wherever he goes. He beat up his female, and she disappeared—"

“So he’s here searching for her?”

“That’s about it.”

“What does she look like?”

“Not really sure. Dark hair, blue eyes, that’s all I got.”

Aethan hoped wherever she was, she continued hiding. “Thanks.”

The male paused, remained connected. His voice quieted. “How is she?”

Aethan knew he wasn't asking about the demoness. More, he realized there was no way Damon would make contact with Echo again, despite the fact that she'd been his ward for over a decade. No matter how many times Aethan asked him to. “She’s improving. You know, if you’d see her, just for a minute, it would make her happy.”

A slight pause that seemed endless. “Take care of her.” Damon rang off.

Dammit. Aethan stared at his silent cell. He had no idea what the hell Damon’s issue was with not seeing Echo again. But there’d been a wealth of emotion in the male’s voice. Aethan wondered briefly if the male was in some kind of trouble.

Slipping his phone back in his pocket, he walked into the study. At least he didn't have to worry about any dangerous demon on the hunt for him. This one should be easy to take out.