

Chapter 1

Did the bastard really want to die?

Riley snagged a shot glass and filled the ordered green poison. With Satire's jam-packed from the rush of tourists, it was the only thing nailing his feet to the floor from an all out fight.

He had another damn tail on him! And this one was brave enough to sit in his bar and eyeball him for the past hour.

In this world, his kind tended to blend in with mortals and usually kept below the radar for a simpler life. But not this asshole. He had no idea he was dancing with death right now.

Already on edge, his body wound tight as restlessness clawed at his psyche, Riley sent the absinthe sliding toward the demon down the counter. The male grabbed the thing and tossed it back like water.

The demon's human girlfriend leaned against his arm and peered at Riley beneath her lashes. He met her sultry stare as he readied a line of shooters for a noisy trio of college kids.

Oh, yeah, his looks and badass rep were the perfect draw, got him the females. So easy to accept her invite but he wasn't interested in a quick backroom bang.

He was in need of something violent. Bloody.

A dark haze stole into his mind, knowing his damn past would never leave him alone. His fingers clenched. A loud shatter, and glass rained onto the scoured wooden counter. Blood and vodka ran over his hand, drenching the crystal fragments.

"Rile-man, you okay there?"

A six foot two hulking tattooed male with a buzz cut, appeared at his side. Zacarias. His friend, manager and sometimes bouncer.

A terse nod. He looked up from his bleeding hand, his gaze colliding with those of his watcher.

Anger unleashed, he scaled the counter in movements too fast for human eyes and was across the floor in seconds. Grabbing the dark-haired demon by his shirt, Riley shoved him against the red brick wall. "Why the fuck are you on my ass again? Do you want to die?"

All the demon guards hounding him in recent months were seriously pissing him off. No matter how many he sent back to the Dark Realm wounded or dead, more just took their place.

This idiot didn't even try to fight back. His gaze grew languid, his smile seductive. "No. But I know what I *do* want," he purred, walking his fingertips up Riley's chest.

The haze turned red. Riley slammed his fist into the demon's gut. The male squeaked in pain. Startled gasps erupted from the customers. Before he could get in another shot, someone grabbed his arm and yanked him off the cowering demon, who hurriedly slunk away.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Zac snapped. "You want to draw notice, you're sure going about it the right way. So the guy came on to you, it never drove you

homicidal before.”

Riley elbowed Zac off. *Not a guard—not a damn guard!* He’d hit an innocent demon—one of those docile Otium demons who’d escaped the tyranny of the Dark Realm for a better life here. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

“Get your damn self together,” Zac growled. “You don’t want to start an all-out fight in the bar. Go walk the streets, find something outside to kill, and cool the crap off.”

Breathing hard, Riley walked out of the bar and into the crowded street, the familiar reek of seafood enclosing him. Avoiding the noisy tourists and drunks loitering about, he cut through the back alleys in the French Quarter, rife with the stench of decaying waste, and headed for his apartment a few blocks away.

Unable to expend the rage roiling inside him, he pulled out his cell phone from his pocket and made a call. A female answered.

“See you in ten.” He rang off.

Pandora was one of the few humans who knew what he was. She didn’t want the ties either, just some fun time, and she was the perfect submissive when he needed that edge. Tonight, he was definitely in the mood for something darker.

A second later, the sounds of a roaring V8 engine split the silence. A blood-red Corvette Stingray came to a squealing halt in front of his building, the acrid burn of rubber stinking up the night air.

He scowled. “Damn maniacal drivers!”

The door flung open. A petite, but curvy female jumped out and flipped back yards of wavy, inky-black hair, giving him a tantalizing glimpse of her face. Her tan skin revealing her mixed-race ethnicity, her lush mouth flattened in a tight line.

Cursing, she kicked the tire then pressed her cell phone back to her ear. “I swear, Zayn, if you tell Mother you spoke to me, I will personally call all your girlfriends and tell them they aren’t *the* one...” She laughed evilly. The light, raspy sound grazed his senses with an unexpected sensuality, and had him slowing to a halt in the shadows.

“Yeah, that’s me, spawned from the devil, but Daddy wouldn’t appreciate the comparison...” She listened then snorted, impatiently pushing back her heavy fall of hair. “Liz loves me like her own. Stop complaining and tell Mother you haven’t seen me because I’m not coming to another boring party... *Who?*— Why would I care if Piers is back in town, he’s your friend...”

She marched alongside her car, hip-bumped the door closed as she listened, the streetlight casting a soft glow over her irate features. “Yes-yes, I’m always careful...” Despite her tart response, she cut a quick look around.

Riley stilled as her dark gaze skimmed past him then darted back to the spot where he allowed his form to blend in with the shadowy trees, the cover of night his camouflage. A frown marred her smooth brow.

She sensed him? How, he had no idea. Obviously, all her senses were in working order.

The faint reek of decaying swamp and sulfur drifted to him. Riley narrowed his gaze. They weren’t alone. And this little human probably couldn’t smell the bile-inducing stench of evil—had no idea how close to danger she truly was.

He willed her to get back in her car and leave. She did nothing of the sort. Instead, she popped the trunk, tugged out a large suitcase, and dumped it on the sidewalk. Then she sat on the thing and continued her call as if basking in the Maldives.

Un-flippin-believable!

Him, she sensed, but the evil drawing closer just flowed over her pretty little head.
For hell's sake, did she not get a whiff of the damn stink?

Saia Sen-Grayson shifted on the uncomfortable luggage she sat on, scowling as Zayn prattled on. Not even a day had passed since she'd left home, and her brother was already hounding her. Whenever Zayn called, it was always because of Mother.

He hadn't said so, but Saia just knew. Absently, she rubbed the engraved silver ring on her fourth finger with her thumb.

"Piers asked about you, Sai. Shall I bring him to Liz's?"

"Zayn, you do that, and the threat about those calls to your girlfriends will become reality. I have to go—"

"Saia, wait-wait—"

She ended the call. Why would she care if Piers were back after several years abroad? Just because she'd once born a teenage crush on him, didn't mean she was still hung up on Mr. Moneybags.

Gah, she hated being the only daughter at times.

Her family suffocated her with their idea of protection. Her brothers would undoubtedly prefer her locked at home like some Victorian maiden. And then there was Mother, looking to marry her off to a *suitable* man from the moment she'd turned twenty a year ago. Saia wondered if there were something wrong with her at the alarming rate her mother produced "appropriate" men.

Her mouth tightened, recalling the disastrous meeting with suitor number twenty-eight two nights ago. He'd wanted to marry as soon as possible to dispel suspicions of his sexual preference. *That* had been the last straw, and she'd finally moved out of the mansion and in with her Aunt Liz, who'd been hurt in a mugging a few days ago.

At least it gave her time to decide what to do. Plus she could keep an eye on her aunt.

Her cell rang again.

"Not talking to you, bro." Saia rose to her feet. As she stuck her phone into her skirt pocket, her ring started to heat up. Warmth pulsed through her body in alarming little zips of flame.

Wonderful. First Zayn. Now something evil this way crawled.

Warily, she eyed her silent surroundings. Moonlight highlighted the few cars lining the sidewalk. Her gaze lingered on the shadows of the oak trees covered with Spanish moss several feet away, and she felt as if someone was watching her. But nothing moved there, just the trees, branches, and leaves.

Best she get her butt moving before whatever it was arrived. She reached for her luggage when hands yanked her back. Saia shrieked, her heart lodging in her throat as she crashed against a brick wall that breathed. In pure survival reflex, she elbowed the attacker in the belly. A low grunt escaped him.

"Let me go!" She let fly another vicious whack.

"Stop that," he snarled in warning. "I lose my prey, you will pay, little hunter."

Hunter? If he knew about hunters, then obviously, he knew what else was out there. Crap, she had to get away from the madman before whatever evil trawled this place found them both.

"I'm not a damn hunter, you imbecile!"

"No?" He ran his nose down her neck. "Hmm... You certainly smell like one."

What the hell? Sure, her dad and older brother were supernatural hunters, but they didn't stink.

Saia struggled harder. His powerful grip tightened painfully around her upper arms. Snarling, she kicked the pain-in-the-ass's shin. "Let me go, or I swear I'll hurt you."

He laughed—he actually laughed at her—the fiend!

Then he said in a voice so low it made the tiny hairs on her arms rise, "I'm saving your ungrateful hide. Stay here, don't move, or I'll cuff you to that tree while I take care of business. And know this, little hunter, I *so* love a woman tied for my pleasure."

At the deeply carnal promise, a tingle of heat spread through her body.

God, she must have lost her ever-loving mind!

Saia cut him a furious look over her shoulder—and felt as if someone had whacked her in the gut at the compelling face highlighted by the streetlight. All hard lines and sculptured jaw.

Mussed, shaggy, bronze hair appeared as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Tiny twin hoop piercings glinted in his left ear. And tats crawled up both biceps disappearing beneath his t-shirt sleeves.

The guy had to be easily around six and a half feet tall. Sheesh! She barely reached his shoulders.

Her gaze met his. A dark eyebrow cocked, startling emerald-green eyes stared right back at her.

Ugh, he was irritatingly gorgeous.

He looked nothing at all like her over-blown, steroid-pumping date from two nights ago.

Glued to him like a fly on duct-tape, Saia became aware of his lean, tough body aligned with hers, and the tantalizing scent of lemongrass with a hint of woodsmoke invading her nose.

Of course, he'd smell good, too.

Pity he was off his rocker.

She slit her eyes in a threatening manner, no need for him to know she really hated fighting, let alone hurting anyone. Or that she had a deadly stiletto tucked inside her boot, one she was quite capable of using despite her aversion to violence.

Her ring started to warm further. Oh crap! Evil was close.

"Lemme go!" She tugged her arm, growing frantic.

He went motionless. Those impossibly green eyes looked away from her, scanning the dark street. The next minute, he shoved her behind him and flashed. It was the only way she could think to describe what he did. One minute he was with her, the next he was gone.

She hastily withdrew her iron stiletto—deadly to demons if stabbed in the heart—and palmed the thing. Her family had given her both the ring and the blade on her fifteenth birthday since she hadn't taken after her father, hadn't inherited any of his psychic ability like her three brothers had.

For her own safety, Saia understood she needed to know when supernatural evil was around.

Best she got outta here. As she reached for her bag, a body flew through the air and crash-landed—*nooo*—not her poor luggage. She leaped back, cringing as it flattened.

He appeared and grabbed the demon. A vicious punch followed, they moved too fast,

hurtling to the asphalt but the Corvette hindered her sight.

Peering into the dark street, she couldn't see anything. Only grunts and snarls filled the air. Then a loud screech. She had no idea whether her tormentor had killed a blood-demon, the ones who drained a body dry, or the more horrifying evil entity—the body-stealing Caligos that had been spotted recently in The Quarter. Nor was she waiting to find out.

Before her demented protector came back, Saia shoved her blade into her boot, grabbed the handle of her battered Vuitton, and thrust open the wrought-iron gates leading into the secluded, red-bricked courtyard. The thing squeaked. She winced, hoping *he* hadn't heard that.

The yard was dense, shadowy with tall shrubs and an array of potted palms and ferns hanging from the balconies. The usually pretty place looked a little spooky right then.

She hurried for the front door to her aunt's apartment.

“Not so fast.”

Aw crap!

He grabbed her arm and spun her around. “You ruined my kill.”

“Are you terminally insane?” she spluttered, her gaze dipping to the tantalizing shallow cleft on his chin. “Just how did I do that?”

“By crossing my path...distracting me, and allowing my other prey to escape.” Those cool green eyes trapped hers, became flinty with resolve. “You owe me.”

“Owe you?” She glared, her irritation piling. “I owe you nothing. Not a damn thing!”

“I'm taking it anyway.” He wrapped his huge palm around her nape. Lowering his head, he ran his tongue along her bottom lip.

Saia stilled in horror. Yes, it most certainly was horror, not awareness churning her stomach.

How dare he?

Then he bit her. Hard.

“*Oww!*” She dropped her bag and slammed her hands into his chest, but he was about as movable as a monolith. With an annoyingly quick move, he secured her wrists to her back with one hand and yanked her close. She felt every rigid muscle in his body. Then shocking all hell out of her, he drew her abused lip into his mouth and sucked it.

Unexpected desire took her fast, her knees caved. If he hadn't had her trapped against him, she would have landed at his feet in an embarrassing pile of goo.

“Don't ever put yourself in danger like that again,” he snapped. “Understand?”

Saia blinked, licking her swollen lip. Reality walloped her upside the head. She was too close to him, a guy she didn't even know—a stranger for crying out loud, who'd just been too intimate. And she didn't care how sexy that chin dimple was. She yanked free.

“Put myself in danger?” she spat. “It's you who grabbed me like some mental whack-job and kept me here. If you hadn't, I would be safe inside my building. And you bit me!”

“Mental?” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Whack-job?”

“As I said, out of your bloody mind,” she expounded.

He went motionless. “Wait a minute. You live here?” He indicated the two-story, semi-detached colonial building with the twin white doors and green shutters leading to the two separate residences. “*Here?*” He said it like it was a curse.

“Not that it's any of your business, but I do now.”

The guy looked as if she'd slid her blade between his ribs. Like he'd stopped breathing.

Whatever. She sure wasn't waiting to find out. He'd bloody bit her!

Glowering, Saia grabbed the Vuitton handle again and dragged her mistreated case to the left white door, slamming it shut behind her.

Riley stood there in the empty courtyard, feeling as if someone had yanked out his brain then stuffed it all back in his skull again, except nothing lined up right. His mind was in utter chaos and his body throbbed hard with need.

By the nine flippin' hells. She lived here? Next door?

He had to get out of here.

However, he scanned the place for the blood-demon that had escaped him. Nothing. The other he'd killed with relish. Assholes probably thought to get a nice long drink from the little socialite.

Riley flashed and took form beneath a grove of trees near the lake in City Park. The cool, brackish scent of the water and damp soil eased him some.

What the hell had induced him to bite her?

Oh, yeah. *Mental* and *whack-job* would do that.

He'd just wanted to teach her a lesson for the name-calling, but his own reprisal followed. Hell, he should have left the moment he saw her. Then he wouldn't be in this precarious position of knowing what she tasted like—her lip soft and lush against his tongue. And wouldn't you know it, his sexual boredom took on new life. His groin hardened painfully behind his zipper.

Dammit! He didn't fool around with his neighbors, too much was at risk. He'd just have to keep out of her way. Ignore her.

With this little mortal, nothing more could ever happen.

You could always clear her memories of you.

For some reason, that thought didn't sit well with him, especially considering the numerous memory wipes he'd performed in his long life with all his hook-ups.

Shutting her out of his thoughts, Riley hunkered on the soggy bank, his mind back on what he had to do. Ripples of water slapped gently at his boots as he stared at the watery gateway. Would it convey his message into his old realm of Stygia?

Only one way to find out what the hell was going on, why the sudden influx of guards were shadowing him.

He stroked his open palm over the gray, liquid surface.

We need to talk. He sent the telepathic missive to Gaelin, using the body of water as a conduit. Seconds passed. And like a catalyst, at the faint connection with his old world, memories of his last time in Stygia spilled open...

Debilis. Even in his adult life, the name haunted him. *Weakling.* His jaw clenched.

As a child, he'd developed late both physically and psychically. While others his age had come into their abilities, he, the "runt," had become an embarrassment. So much so that his own sire had cast him out.

They thought him weak.

He was just a late starter.

Bastards. The lot of them!

A shimmer in the air pulled him back from destructive memories. A form took shape, revealing a blond demon. As the male strolled closer, Riley snapped, "What the hell took you so long?"

Gaelin stopped several feet away, the faint odor of sulfur clinging to him. He cocked a dark golden brow at Riley's snarly tone. "Let's see, being pinned down by two centaur demons determined to get a piece of me—yeah, was a little tied up." He brushed his damp hair and grimaced, staring at his moist fingers.

"What's going on?" Riley forced himself to calm down. "You haven't been around lately, but assholes from Stygia have?"

Instantly, Gaelin's teasing manner vanished. He wiped his hand on his pants. "I've been meaning to get to you, but work kept me bound." Since Gaelin was a tracker in the Stygian militia, it would. "Your name's come up in the citadel."

"Who?"

"The same one who tried to separate your head from your body when you left Sheol for the human world."

Baric. Why did that not surprise him? For some reason, the demon hated his guts. He'd followed Riley to Earth and tried to finish the job of killing him. It couldn't be because he'd defected to the human world. That didn't make sense when thousands of demons had done so. Only the intervention of that blue-haired Guardian, one of those hardass immortal warriors who protected the earthly realm had stopped Riley's death.

"Let him come. I'm not the boy who left Stygia a millennium ago."

"Réomer," Gaelin sighed, using Riley's birth name. "Baric's been sending out spies and collecting intel on you. I don't think he works alone. You've been far too long in this world. Your strength will not endure much longer. Even now, I feel your psychic hunger."

Gaelin's statement bit ass big time. Without the need to hone it, his psychic strength had waned over the passing centuries. That didn't mean he couldn't kill the bastard. He'd probably get sliced up in the process. So be it. Never again would he be the weak, pathetic little fool Stygia thought him.

"Is that all?"

"I am trying to keep your ass in one piece, Réomer, but you don't make it easy. Your sire would have you return—"

At his stony look, Gaelin shut it and shook his head.

Riley had no interest in what his *sire* had to say. The only father who mattered, the one who'd raised him, was dead, killed in the clan wars eons ago.

"Then you're going to be real pissed about this... Your sire's dispatched two more guards."

Blood heated and thundered into Riley's head. "Tell that sonofabitch I need nothing from him!"

"Now, now—" Gaelin sported a wry grin. "You know I can't actually call one of the most dangerous of The Original Seven a *sonofabitch* and live."

Riley cut him an annoyed look. Gaelin shifted on his booted feet and slipped his hand into his pockets. "Réomer, they haven't been sent just to keep an eye on you this time. They've been ordered to retrieve you. They'll hurt you if it means getting the job done."

Retrieve him? Like some forgotten package? The fuck they would.

The bastard had tossed him aside as a child, and now he wanted him back? Well, too damn bad, and too fucking late.

Riley flashed from the park and headed back to his apartment.

Gaelin followed, his voice a disembodied sound in the mist. "Réomer, your two-thousandth year of birth approaches in less than a month."

“So?”

“Have you forgotten what you are?”

Riley’s gut tightened. He understood exactly what he was. But like a damn H-bomb, his legacy hung over his head. He had no desire to inherit anything from his sire, especially not *that* curse of darkness.

“If shit falls and I with it, so be it.”