

CHAPTER I

The rhythmic thudding of hundreds of heartbeats crowded Dagan's head. Thump, thump, thump...

Hypnotic. Enticing. The draw dangerous, inevitable...if he'd let it.

It was always this way when he first appeared on patrol. Primitive urges locked down, it should be a night like thousands of others in his long life. But this one, the worst.

All Hallows Eve was a pain in the ass.

Hunkered on the rooftop of a warehouse in the Bowery, he coolly eyed the noisy line of humans snaking the sidewalk of Club Nocte, waiting to gain entrance.

Why would Blaéz ask him to check out this area first?

Besides the foolish mortals disguised as what they imagined went bump in the night—and they sure made it easy for the real scourges lurking within the depths of the decrepit backstreet to lure them in and snuff out their feeble little lives—he didn't sense any sign of supernatural disturbance.

Dagan scanned the alley again, his focus narrowing on a couple. The male dressed in a long, black cape, his arm thrown over the shoulders of a nun in a short habit, hurried the female along. Moonlight underscoring his face pale and a mouth with pointy canines. Count Dracul. Of course.

The twosome headed deeper into the disreputable area with no idea of the dangers that prowled the night. With demonii out in droves hunting prey, it was always a mess leading up to this night.

Despite the distance, he could clearly see and hear the wannabe vampire. The idiot pushed the nun against a wall, hands fumbling under her tunic. "Let me sink my fangs into you, pretty one..." His voice deepened, probably his idea of vamp talk. Dagan's lips twisted in cynicism.

"Yes, my dark prince." The nun laughed, arching into him, her black veil falling back and exposing her smooth, tan neck. "Bite me—make me immortal."

The man snickered, sucking on her neck instead. Lost in their world of make-believe, she had no idea of the true danger lurking nearby. How absurdly effortless it would be to walk up to her. *He* wouldn't even have to say a word, and she'd be his for the taking.

Go. It's what you want, the dark thoughts unfurled in the pits of his mind, coiling tighter around him. Satisfy the hunger that plagues you.

His powerful mental shields shuddered. His fangs lengthened.

No! He was a Guardian, sworn to protect humans, not kill. With shaky hands, he pulled out a half-smoked cigar from his pocket, put the thing between his lips, and struck a match on the wall. Palms cupped around the flame, he lit it. Inhaling deeply, he let the scented, sedative smoke saturate his lungs and cloak his thirst.

For now.

As he blew out a thin stream of smoke, the acrid sensation of insidious evil coasted over his skin. The mystical Gaian sword tattooed on his biceps stirred in warning. His gaze sharpened, rapidly sweeping past Dracul and his nun, honing in on the two figures lumbering toward them. They slowed near the recessed doorway where the couple tugged at each other's clothes.

"By Hades," the tall demonii rasped in delight. "I do enjoy this time of year more than any other. I want her."

“What the—?” The man pivoted. “Get lost, assholes!”

Guttural laughter ripped the air. “We cannot oblige. See, we want not just her but *you*, too.” The shorter, heftier demonii punched the human in the face. The tall one snatched the woman around her waist and licked her face.

Dagan killed his smoke. Before her screams tore through the night, he immobilized the four with his mind. Pocketing the cigar, he flashed down, freeing the humans from his hold.

He summoned his pulsing weapon. In an eddy of gray smoke, the obsidian sword took shape, the mystical inscriptions glowing briefly as he swung the deadly blade, decapitating both demoniis in one lethal stroke. They fell to their knees, bodies disintegrating within seconds.

“Whoa!” the man gasped. “That’s so cool.”

Dagan pivoted. The couple gawked at him in a drunken stupor, like he was a savior or something for rescuing their foolish asses. Grim Reaper would be more fitting.

“Leave,” he snapped, letting his eyes glow.

Without a word, they stumbled off. In their inebriated state, they’d undoubtedly assume it was all part of the Halloween scene. As he dismissed his sword, an eerie, icy sensation slid over his psyche. Not demoniis...something else.

Motionless, he waited, letting the cerebral wave surround him, then a crackle, like ice shattering, fury slid over him. And he knew.

There you are, asshole...

It had been a long damn wait for the psychic killer to show up again.

Slipping through the shadows, he followed the strains of violence abrading his mind. None could hide their psychic signature from him for long, yet this mortal he’d been hunting for several months had done just that. This time, he’d get the slippery bastard.

He passed a rundown motorcycle club with flashing neon lights. The stares that came his way from the bikers hanging outside didn’t bother him. His extreme six-foot-eight height, and his waist-length hair he usually wore in several warrior braids always drew notice.

Moments later, he slowed, the trail dead-ending outside a warehouse. The scent of fresh blood beckoned him like a beautiful siren and his jaw clenched. The alley remained quiet, but not for long. Two homeless humans began bickering deeper in the alley.

Before they arrived and mucked up the psychic vibration of his prey, Dagan studied the three dead bodies. Two were reduced to nothing but fleshy meat-sacks, bones and muscles pulverized. Blood and gore dripped out of their ears, nose, and mouth. The other had been stabbed in his side. If it were just the knifed man, Dagan would have walked. Humans killing each other were not his problem.

The pile of rags with the knife wound shuddered. A low moan left the vagrant as he stumbled to his feet and tripped over the bodies. He cursed drunkenly. “B-bastard, tryin’ to take my food.”

“Hold it.” Dagan grabbed his arm. The ripe fumes coming off him had Dagan keeping his breathing shallow. “What happened?”

The homeless clutched his bleeding side. “He t-took my cart, stabbed me—”

“Who else was here?”

“Want my cart back. Satan. He kill ‘em bodies. Three bodies. Pooffff—one gone.” He swung his arms wildly, spittle flying everywhere. Dagan hastily evaded the saliva rain. “Gonna use his weapon...kill—kill!” He made stabbing motions. “Want my cart back—want my cart.” He zigzagged off.

It had to be a demon. Only they were pulled back into the Dark Realm at the time of true death.

One of the dead snagged his attention, though. Frowning, Dagan lowered to his heels near the pulverized body and slipped his hand beneath the man's shirt. Sure enough, he found the telltale ridges that ran down his shoulder blades where wings should have been. A Fallen.

Shit. This killer would be dangerous to not only the human populace but the Guardians, as well. In a flash, the last moments of the man's life passed through Dagan's mind...

A surge of fear as he rose into the air. He couldn't breathe. His skull compressed. Unrelenting pain spread. "Don't—don't do it..." a plea, then resonating silence... Death.

Nothing to point Dagan to what the killer looked like or who it was. However, the same bitter iciness he'd been tracking these last months prevailed in this place.

He mind-linked with Aethan, needing the Empyrean's abilities to clear out this psychic killing before the human authorities came across the bodies and led them down a path that would cause Michael to go bat-shit crazy. *Downtown. Have a mess here.*

The killer struck again? the warrior asked.

Yes. Two bodies.

On my way.

As Dagan rose to his feet, another scent teased his nose, fruity with a hint of spice...and something more. He drew it inside him, studying the new clue.

Rage, so much rage...yet, beneath it all, like a mile of grit, despair and anguish abraded him.

A familiar shift in the air and Aethan took form beside him. The cold moon highlighted the warrior's multihued blue hair he'd pulled into a ponytail and glinted off the small silver hoops in his earlobes.

Hands on his hips, Aethan surveyed the death scene, expression grim. "With this kind of power, we'll all be at risk."

Didn't he know it? With a nod, Dagan dematerialized, tracking the fading vibration.

Shae Ion blew away the strands of hair dipping into her eyes and stared through her viewfinder at the homeless man seated on an up-turned crate a short distance away. Several stray cats circled between his legs. The moon cast a pale light on the moment, giving the scene a raw, realness to it. Despite his poverty, the old man dropped crumbs of whatever he was eating for the strays. Her camera shutter whirred as she captured several shots for her *Nightlife* series.

As a freelance photographer, she traveled to places the world forgot existed. Besides, *National Geographic* demanded the best, and she needed her work to be gritty and beyond exceptional to get their attention. More, being self-employed gave her the time she needed to search for her mother.

She lowered her camera and rubbed her burning eyes. Six months had passed, and still nothing. Hiring a PI had been a waste of time. He'd come up with not a single lead. Now she'd been reduced to this. She only hoped Harvey came through for her.

A gut-wrenching thought knocked the breath out of her lungs. *Oh, God, please, don't let her be dead—*

Rough hands grabbed her shoulders. Her Nikon crashed to the asphalt. Her heart slamming against her ribs, she jabbed her elbow into her assailant's throat and spun around.

The guy stumbled back. His eyes glowed, streaked with red. "What's a pretty little human like you doing all by her lonesome in this place?"

"Waiting to stake your ass." She gave the demon a wide berth, the iron blade she'd concealed in the back waistband of her jeans now gripped in her hand. Oh, she knew what he was. Born with extrasensory awareness, it made her cognizant and wary of the demon-kind living in this world. Otiums, Harvey called them. They appeared human and preferred a quiet life. It was why they'd defected to Earth and away from the cruelty of their world. But then every species had assholes who terrorized the innocent.

"Wanna play, little human?" he taunted and leaped for her.

Going low, Shae struck out with her weapon, slicing him across the chest. Growling, he dove for her, knocking the blade from her hand. She countered with a flying kick. He grabbed her foot, yanking hard. Using his body as leverage, she flipped backward through the air, breaking his hold and landing on her feet.

In a move she didn't even see, his fist struck her in the solar plexus, sending her flying to the filthy ground. She lay there, unable to breathe, scalding pain scouring her body, so sure she'd fractured her ribs.

"Shae?"

At the horrified voice, she simply shook her head, eyes squeezed tight.

"Hell, I'm sorry—"

"I-I'm okay...will be..." she wheezed. Crap, even speaking hurt. Had this demon really been a malevolent one, he would have taken her blood, her soul, whatever he wanted from her by now.

"Hold still." Harvey, her best friend, laid his hand on her chest, and a slight warmth spread through her at his healing power.

When her lungs functioned again, and it didn't feel like her ribcage was being pried apart with a chest spreader, she opened her eyes and stared into a lean, handsome face. Red-tinged, caramel-hued eyes watched her anxiously.

"Thank the dark gods! I'm really sorry about that last punch, I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

She grimaced, rubbing her chest. It wasn't something she'd willingly want to experience again. "It's okay. I wanted to learn how to fight your kind, so I have to accept all the bruises that come with it. Thanks for the healing."

"No problem." His expression still edged with worry, he tunneled his fingers through his dark hair. "With the places you go, and now what you want to do, I have to be sure you're ready for anything."

She sat up and blew out a rough breath, disarraying the reddish strands of hair falling over her face. "Don't judge me because I'm a girl."

"It's not *that*. It's because you're human."

Right. Her lips twisting wryly, she took the hand he extended, and he pulled her to her feet. She picked up her camera. Darn! The casing had cracked, but at least the rest of the expensive equipment appeared intact.

"Here." Harvey handed her dagger back, then pulled on his leather jacket he'd left lying on the crates near the wall, covering his bloody shirt.

Remorse flooded her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's nothing. I'll heal."

She dropped her things into her backpack. "How did you find me?"

“Where else would you be when RockinHell is in town? *RockinHell*.” He snickered at the band’s name. She smacked his arm. “Don’t be mean. Why don’t you accept the band manager’s invitation and play guitar for them?”

He snorted. “You gotta be kiddin’ me. Play with *that* loser?”

“Ash’s okay—”

“Forgive me if I trample all over your rose-tinted glasses. The guy’s an asshole. He can’t see what’s right in front of him. He’d rather have a revolving door to his bed than you. Hell, if it was me, I’d tell the others to fuck off and come after you.”

Grimacing, she glanced at her scraped knuckles then swiped the blood on her jeans. “It’s been a long time, and I’m okay, honest. C’mon—” She hooked her backpack over one shoulder and her arm through his. “Let’s forget this and go have a drink.”

“S’pose it’s better than stalking.”

She huffed out a laugh. “You give me crap about Ash, and that’s where *you* were this evening?”

Harvey was head over heels for a human girl who had no idea he existed. And he was too terrified to even approach her because of what he was.

“More like every evening. Pathetic, right?” Disgust etched his features.

Smiling, she changed the subject. “Did you manage to get me a name?”

“You sure about this?” Lines of concern creased his brow.

“Stop worrying. Let’s face it, Harv, it’s been six months, and I’ve tried everything to find her...” She inhaled a shaky breath. The seedy places she’d gone to, flirting with men, demons, and Fallen just to get a lead. “This is the only way to find my mother.”

“Fine. Remember, summoning an Edge demon isn’t only risky, if they like the way you look, some of them will demand a shag instead of your blood in payment.”

She snorted. “All they’re getting is money, never *that*. If it’s my blood...” She thought about it. “It’s a small price to pay.”

“Okay, then.” He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Excitement hiked, causing the heat that had recently plagued her to surge in response. She ignored the latter, staring at the name. Finally. “Thank you.”

“No prob—shit,” Harvey cursed, his gaze darting to the entrance of the backstreet. “Shae, forgive me but I must leave. It won’t end well for me, not with *him* here.” His body shimmered.

“Harvey, wait! Who?”

“You’re in no danger, just go back to the club...” His voice faded as he vanished.

What the hell had scared him off? Harvey wasn’t the type to run. She stilled, prickles of awareness skating over her skin. It made her tummy dip, and not in a fearful way.

Shae pushed the paper into her jacket pocket. The sensation continued to assail her, growing sharper. Cautiously, she traversed the length of the alley then slowed. There. Deep in the shadows, a tall, dark figure slumped against the wall.

Leave—run! Her cautious side yelled. A low, tortured groan reached her, reverberating through her mind and clawing at her to help. Aw, crap!

Shae dug into her knapsack, found her blade, and slipped it into the back of her jeans. At least it wasn’t demons, or worse, their turned brethren, the soul-sucking demoniis. Taking comfort in the feel of her weapon, she inched closer.

Dagan cut into another gloomy backstreet. *Aaand* found himself back in the alley where he’d started his patrol.

Farther up, more inebriated humans geared in their Halloween get-ups stumbled out of Club Nocte. The long line remained, partygoers braving the chill, waiting to get inside.

He scanned the place, but the vibe he'd been tracking had gone cold. He bit back a curse. Just great. Except for the demoniis he'd killed earlier, there was nothing that pricked at his senses.

He headed in the opposite direction, deeper into the alley, away from the noise, and staggered to a halt. A mouth-watering scent flooded his senses.

Blood. Fresh human blood.

The seductive aroma seeped through him, tightening his body and saturating his mind like a compulsion. His jaw clenched, his incisors throbbed.

He whipped around, scanning the alley. Pain stabbed his belly, shredding his gut. Hunger took hold. He fell against the wall, struggling against the temptation, eyes shut tight. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to plant his booted feet on the asphalt and not go after the faint ambrosia trail.

Sometimes, he regretted killing that first damn bird which had bound him to his deadly thirst, but he understood too he couldn't have deviated from that fated path any more than he could stop breathing.

"Are you all right?" a husky voice asked.

His gaze snapped to her. She was tall for a mortal, yet the top of her head barely reached his shoulders. He could clearly make out her alabaster features in the gloomy alley, and the noticeable, bumpy Y-shaped scar running down her cheek. He didn't care how good she looked, right then, all he could think about was just how delicious she'd taste...blood infused with strawberries and spice. Decadent.

Familiar.

The predator side of him thinly leashed, he fought for control—battled not to sink his fangs into her carotid. His eyes slit in warning. "Leave!"

"Look, I'm just trying to—"

"I don't need help!" Damn do-gooder humans.

The coppery nectar tugged at his senses, tempting him to will her closer so her rich, warm plasma could slide down his throat. And there, on her left hand, he found the source of his doom. Blooded smeared her scraped knuckles.

His fangs dropped. *Shit*. He held his breath, reached into her mind, and willed her gone...but hit a wall.

What the hell? He could compel anybody.

With his control fading fast, he snarled, "Get the hell away from me if you want to keep breathing."

Stormy gray-gold eyes widened. Then she stunned all hell outta him and glared right back. "Is that supposed to frighten me? A pair of fake fangs? Shouldn't you be out there with all the other cretins scaring the innocents tonight instead of hiding in the shadows like some pleb?"

At the taunt, Dagan didn't think, he hauled her to him, raking those "fake fangs" down her neck, bruising the skin a little, a hair's breadth past her carotid.

The girl squeaked and slapped her palms on his chest. "What the hell?"

His arm banded around her waist, and he sucked on her fast-beating pulse, his saliva already healing the bruised skin. Unable to let her go just yet, he settled for running his tongue over her silky, warm flesh. She smelled of cinnamon and strawberries, a taste he'd long forgotten. A light brush of her psychic powers skipped over him.

She yanked free, surprising him with her agility, and drew back her fist. He saw the punch coming and let it, hoping it would clear the damn haze in his head. She nailed him straight in the face.

Fuuuck! Stars exploded in his skull, stunning him senseless with the power of her blow.

“Don’t ever fucking touch me like that!” Her slanted eyes glowered like a wildcat’s in the dark. Shaking her fingers, she stormed off, muttering in disgust. “What the hell was I thinking trying to help that barbarian? I should have just left.”

Dagan stood there, dazed, his blood strumming.

What the hell was *he* thinking? He hadn’t lost control like that in millennia.

The urge to go after her, taste her skin again, and satiate his hunger rode him hard, except it would lead to her death. At the thought, something inside him bolted shut.

He rubbed a shaky hand over his throbbing jaw, his damn twitching cock betraying him, then pulled out his cigar—and cursed. He’d left her with memories of his near lapse. Dropping the smoke back into his pocket, he took off after her fast-disappearing figure.

As if sensing him, which surprised him considering he was thousands of years old and an immortal supernatural hunter, she spun around. Before she opened her mouth, he captured her furious gaze. Eyes the color of thunderclouds lit with gold specks lost their turbulence to stare blankly at him. The oddest sensation crept through him. This felt so wrong. He wanted her to remember him. Yet it didn’t stop him from what he had to do. First, he grasped her hurt hand and laid his palm over her bruised knuckles, letting his restorative power heal her. Then he scrubbed the unfortunate encounter from her mind.

“Oh...” She blinked those stormy-hued eyes at him a moment later, her brow creasing in confusion. Then shaking her head, she pivoted and ambled off toward the noisy club, leaving behind her luscious scent.

Dagan watched her retreating form. And like his feet had a mind of their own, he found himself keeping to the shadows and following her. She thumped on the metal back door. It opened. Smiling at whoever answered, she slipped into a dimly lit corridor. With a thought, he kept it from locking and entered unnoticed.

“I’m so glad you came, Shae.” A lanky blond sporting a mohawk hurried toward her and crushed her to him in a hug. “I missed you, doll.”

Dagan’s teeth clacked down, his eyes narrowing at the male touching her.

“I’m fine, Ash.” She smiled, stepping away from the human—which probably saved his life. Yeah, rules had to be followed, and killing mortals was a big no-no.

She is not yours.

No, she wasn’t. Could never be.

Reining in the possessiveness that had sprung up out of nowhere, he dematerialized from the club. He didn’t mix with mortals, let alone stalk them. Undoubtedly, he was losing his mind from not feeding.

He dematerialized to the Catskills Mountains. As he reformed in the dense forest, he instantly picked up the coppery odor of a wounded animal, its lifeblood pulling at him. He followed the trail, then it all turned fuzzy. He was at the cougar’s neck, incisors tearing through flesh and sinew. A red haze filled his mind as blood, warm and thick, flowed into his mouth. He ravenously gulped the liquid nourishment when a shuddering breath cut through the bloody miasma.

No! He reared back, his heart thundering against his ribs in horror as the dying animal collapsed to the ground. Fuck! He scrubbed his unshaven jaw. Normally, he

didn't kill the creatures, but this scene drove him back to his blood-crazed past. Instead of the big cat, human bodies lay around him.

Numbed to his very soul, knowing what he was truly capable of, he flashed to the rapidly flowing river nearby and dove into its icy depths. But nothing could wash away the guilt.

He was a killer. It had become his way of life, a cycle he had no way of ending.