

# CHAPTER I

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It had been a hellish night.

Blaéz pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled roughly. The guffaws of laughter, sounds of chatter, and balls clashing on the pool table in Dante's Bar grew, adding to the cacophony in his head.

He sank deeper into his seat in the shadowed corner of the bikers' hangout, his back to the wall, and frowned at the bit of whiskey left in his glass. His mind still on the deadly battle that occurred earlier in the night between his fellow Guardian, Dagan, and a Fallen who'd dared to claim the warrior's mate. It had been brutal, but Dagan had finally taken care of the insane bastard.

Blaéz's jaw hardened. Apparently, not even the sanctity of a mate-bond was safe with arseholes like the Fallen around. If anyone came after Darci, he'd detonate the fucker in a heartbeat.

The door chimed and swung opened, and as if the icy air had rushed in and froze every atom of noise, the dead silence that followed, pulled him out of his dark thought. Blaéz snorted. He didn't need to look to know who had walked inside, despite the familiar scent of bergamot and green pine drifting to him. The effect of Týr's outrageously good looks on the unsuspecting masses was a tad amusing, considering it slid straight off him.

The warrior strode across the cracked linoleum floor to where he sat. The din restarted.

Týr's eyebrow rose. "Now this is strange, Celt, you idling about here since we knocked off from patrol five minutes ago." He dragged out a chair.

"Hardly. Just needed a little time to assimilate after all the shit that happened." He sucked back the rest of his drink, savoring the fiery trail it left in its wake.

"Hmm, there is that..." The former Norse god sprawled in his chair like some big cat, his dark eyes glinting with humor. "But, this isn't like you. Usually, you'd be high-tailing it off to the castle and your mate."

True. But Blaéz didn't respond as a dark-haired waitress in heels sashayed over to them. Any more tilt on the hip-jut, and she'd probably topple over. She set another shot of whiskey near his elbow and turned to Týr. "Hey, handsome, what—"

Her eyes glazed over. Her brain had probably shut off. It took several blinks, as if to make sure what she saw was indeed real, before her cognitive skills appeared to reboot. She breathed, "Can I get ya anything?"

"Bottled water," Týr said, frowning at the pool players on the opposite side of the bar placing their bets.

"Spring or still?"

"Still."

"Ice or no?"

Blaéz snorted, which was lost on the dazed girl. Týr's attention remained fixed on the biker who'd tossed a coin to start the game. "Just get me the water."

"Okay." She tripped off.

"Chickens, the lot of them," he muttered. "Playing for change. I mean, a single bike? I'd bet my millennia earnings against all their bikes *and* win the damn things."

Blaéz's eyebrows rose to his hairline. That was a serious pile of dough. The ancient goddess, Gaia, to whom they'd sworn their fealty, had indeed been generous in her compensation for signing on as her Guardians. Just as well Týr picked his battles when it came to bets. He wouldn't dare do so with any of the Guardians, he'd probably be an immortal pauper then.

Apparently, no longer interested in the bikers' game, Týr pulled out a pack of M&M's from his jacket pocket, dropped the candies into his palm, and looked up again. "So?"

Blaéz shrugged and leaned back in his seat. "Needed a drink. It's been quite a night."

"Yeah..." Týr popped the selected orange candies into his mouth and chewed, putting the package back into his jacket pocket. "It's been a brutal one. Glad for Dag it's all over, but bull on the excuse, man. Seriously, what's going on with you?"

And that brought his thoughts right back to why he'd stopped off at Dante's for a drink.

Blaéz met those rarely unamused, toffee-colored irises nailing him with a serious stare. How did he explain about the uneasiness that had been plaguing him for the last two days? Týr would probably think he was about to be hauled back to Hell again.

He asked instead, "You and Dagan good now?"

Something dark flashed in those pale brown eyes, an emotion Blaéz couldn't quite decipher. Hell, the warriors all had personal demons they'd tried to shut off after their escape from Tartarus—he, more than anyone, knew that.

Týr didn't respond as the waitress with the hip-tilt reappeared. She set his bottled water in front of him. "Thanks." He dropped a ten on the table, then opened the frosty bottle and swallowed some. Finally, the snail-moving waitress trudged off.

"Yeah, we talked..." He plucked at the damp label on the bottle. "Dag and I. We're finally back on par. Yeah...we're good."

Yes, both warriors seemed more at ease these days. However, neither Dagan nor Týr had volunteered any information regarding what had caused the rift between them. Blaéz didn't ask.

"So. How goes the wedding plans?" Týr set the denuded bottle aside, squashing the wet sticker.

Blaéz frowned, moving the empty glass to the other side of the scarred table. "I don't know if I'm doing the right thing—about the wedding, I mean. It's something I want Darci to have. But..."

"But what?"

"Hell, her brother barely tolerates me. He probably thinks with no signed document claiming us as mated, it isn't real."

Even though Declan had plugged his dislike and undoubtedly still thought Blaéz was too dangerous, an uneasy accord existed between them now since it made the one person they both loved happy.

"You're soul-joined. The woman's yours. If he's an obstacle, then change his mind—you have the ability."

"Right." Blaéz grunted, rubbing the overnight stubble on his jaw. "You obviously haven't given thought to the fact that Darci would probably never speak to me again." Before Týr uttered another illogical solution, he added, "Her sister-in-law, Grace, told me about the wedding scrapbook Darci kept as a young girl. I want her to have her dream, and *that* I can do. I don't want to take away her humanity and make her life like ours—where small yet important matters are forgotten. Do you recall when your birthday is?"

Týr's eyebrows drew together in a V. "I was born in the summer...I think."

"Same. And we don't even know the dates. You get my point?" He pushed to his feet. Ignoring his new drink, he pulled out three twenties and dropped the bills on the table. "Later."

"I'm done here, too." Týr joined him. They headed outside.

As they passed the bikers hanging near the motorcycles and puffing up a pungent storm of smoke, Blaéz slowed down, scanning the side street. At the sudden prickles coasting his skin, he changed direction and headed deeper into the alley instead of finding a darkened place to dematerialize back home. Away from the humans, he moved in preternatural speed, skirting the dumpsters and several fallen crates spilled in his path.

"O-kay, so we're heading for Club Anarchy instead of the castle." Týr's droll tone drifted to him. "You need...entertaining?"

"Not at all." Blaéz halted, the itch bearing down his back intensifying. He searched the dark alley with its looming warehouses. "Something doesn't feel right, and hasn't for a while."

"Well, then, let's find out what shit's stirring and clean it out." A dark grin appeared. "It's been my kinda week. Blood, gore, and chances of more decapitation? Perfect."

Blaéz shook his head at Týr's penchant for bloody violence and surveyed the rooftops of the warehouses. "You sure have a way with words. Hallmark should be grateful they don't have you on their team."

"Maybe I'll compose a sonnet for the wedding."

Blaéz heard the smirk in his tone. "Like I want to hear your drivel."

"Don't knock my verse 'til you've heard it, you uneducated SOB," he retorted, and cheerfully strolled where even angels feared to tread. "Roses are red, violets are blue—"

"For fuck's sakes! They're bloody purple."

"Stop with the interruptions. Don't care if they're pink, it's how the damn rhyme goes. Roses are red, violets are blue, Darci's so lovely, how in the hell did she end up with a fucker like you—" His amused gaze shifted to Blaéz. "Okay, it needs some fine-tuning, but I should be good to go on the big day."

"Not if you want to keep your head." Blaéz slowed down, his attention on the throng of people lumbering out of the club. A flash of light hair caught his gaze and an eerily familiar sensation skated over his psyche. "Shit."

"What?" Týr asked, scanning the crowd, too.

Without answering, Blaéz took off across the street. Since the demon bouncers knew the Guardians, he sprinted into the club, avoiding the partygoers in the dimly lit corridor, and shoved the metal door open. The pounding rock music reverberating against the walls barely made an impact as he dodged bodies fumbling about in the darkened club, skidding to a halt on the landing. He scanned the interior. Despite the imminent arrival of closing time, the place still swarmed with revelers.

"Fuck, Celt, who the hell are we chasing? At least then I know whom to kill," Týr growled from his side.

"I'm not sure...I think I saw Finnén."

Týr cut him a sharp look. "Your twin?"

His expression grim, Blaéz nodded, probing the upper VIP level with his mind for his kin's familiar vibe.

"Perhaps you saw someone else who looks like him?"

“Perhaps. He wouldn’t dare show his face in this realm knowing I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if he came after us again.”

Blaéz continued searching the dim club, but with the annoying laser lights bouncing about like buzzing insects, it was damn hard to pinpoint anything. He let his senses drift through the rowdy mass, seeking the familiar smell which always made his stomach roil—one of bitter chocolate and harsh spice. His gaze arched in on a tall male standing amidst the crowd, near the packed dance floor. He tore down the stairs. People scattered out of his path, and he grabbed the guy by his arm.

The blond spun around, his blue eyes sparking in irritation. “What the hell, man?”

Blaéz stared at the human. Dammit! Not Finnén.

He’d been so bloody sure. He pivoted and headed for the stairs.

“Damn dickhead!” the man’s annoyed voice drifted to him despite the noise.

“Guess that was a bust,” Týr said as they headed outside.

“Indeed.” A little relieved that his kin wasn’t around and had probably heeded his warning, Blaéz headed up the alley.

Yet the sense of impending doom lingered.

Hell, it could be anything. In his long life, he’d made enemies, most of them demonkind. If only his damn precognition would reveal to him a hint of what the fuck was coming his way. At least then he’d be prepared if shit did fly.

## CHAPTER 2

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Oh, man! Darci rubbed her damp palms down her jeans, still wrapped in a miasma of happiness. She was getting married in twelve days.

Two and a half years ago she'd thrown away the scrapbook of her dream wedding in a fit of despair, believing she'd never get married since she didn't seem capable of falling in love. And it wasn't like she hadn't tried. Then she met Blaéz...

A soft smile touched her mouth. He was everything she'd ever wanted, she just never expected to find him on her doorstep one midnight six months ago.

However, her excitement faded a little as she roamed past the fireplace in the massive, two-story library with its vaulted, mural-painted ceiling, too edgy to remain still, her mind back on her brother.

Declan had taken an instant dislike to Blaéz the moment they met. Unknown to her, he'd already been aware of their bloodline's dark prophecy—a fatal curse attached to the one woman born in every generation. As the current female alive, the prophecy stated that if she and an immortal Celtic warrior met, death would occur soon after she released his soul.

Blaéz hadn't known about the curse initially, but he'd been furious that Declan had furtively set her up on a date with his friend to part them. However, Darci had refused to give Blaéz up, probably adding to her brother's antagonism. Things had eventually worked out. Now, a tense truce existed between the two men.

It's why she wanted the wedding to go off without a hitch. Maybe Declan would finally see just how happy Blaéz made her.

Sighing wearily, she stopped near the bolted French doors and stared out into the cold, gloomy night. With less than two weeks left to pull this off, she'd accomplished only half of the things on her to-do list because of jam-packed bookings due to the festive holidays. She still had the florist, caterers, and the wedding cake—darn! She pressed a hand to her suddenly woozy tummy. Twelve days wasn't enough time.

*C'mon, Callahan, you can do this. You worked in a library run like a boot camp. This should be a piece of cake.*

Right. Determination driving her, Darci headed back to her mahogany desk and dropped down onto her seat, then took a huge gulp of her apple juice to fortify herself. She set the crystal on the wooden surface, her attention back on the list.

1: *Dress*. Check. Hopefully, she had one final fitting left.

2: *Bridesmaids dresses*. Check. Echo and Kira had been quite excited when she'd asked them to be her bridesmaids.

3: *Caterers*? She bit her lip. Two had told her they'd let her know, despite being fully booked. Tomorrow, she'd follow up.

4: *Photographer*? Daniel? Cell phone photos of her wedding—ugh! Wait, Shae worked as a photographic journalist, maybe she would do it? She'd ask her.

5: *Church*? Darci sighed. With the date so close, she really hoped Declan came through with a priest and church. Actually, it meant a lot to her that he'd offered to help.

6: *Reception?* Maybe they could have that at the church hall? She quickly sent a text message to her brother. Since it was her family's old place of worship, she didn't see a problem there.

7: *Flowers?* Confirmation tomorrow. Or she'd be having a flowerless wedding on the street if she couldn't get a venue.

8: *Cake.* She only wanted *Fantasy Cakes* to do her wedding cake since she first came across them in a magazine years ago. When the receptionist had called back and said there'd been a cancellation, Darci was ecstatic, considering they'd been fully booked. She got a date for an appointment, rang off, and then jumped up and did the happy dance.

Absently, she bit the blunt end of her pencil, her attention lowering to the page beneath her notes with the two drawn columns. She pulled out the guest lists and ran her gaze down the names. On her side, she had twenty-four people—family, friends, neighbors, and old colleagues.

However, studying Blaéz's side of it, she worried her lip between her teeth. When she'd asked him, he'd shrugged and said that everyone at the castle was enough for him.

It totaled nine. Michael, Aethan, Echo, Týr, Dagan, Shae, Jenna, Kira, and Hedori. Nik had said he didn't know if he could attend. The Guardian Race was a no-go. Apparently, he avoided cities and crowds like the plague—Blaéz's words—if it wasn't work-related. After meeting Blaéz and experiencing everything they'd been through with his ties to Hell and the demon after him, Darci realized it wasn't personal. The warriors carried their very own nightmares from their time imprisoned in Tartarus.

She tapped the pencil against her lips. Blaéz had made no mention of his family. Finnén would be a definite no. As for his mother, Darci doubted very much that he'd invite The Morrigan, but she'd ask.

The loud ticking of the antique clock on the mantel pulled her out of her thoughts. Almost four a.m. Blaéz should be home soon. It amazed her how easily she'd gotten into the routine of working during the night and sleeping when Blaéz did—well, not that she had much choice when her warrior wanted her in bed beside him while he took his rest.

Smiling, she rose from her seat and gathered the old volumes from the table that Lore, a divine angel and Echo's tutor, had used earlier. She made her way to the spiral staircase at the far end of the room that joined the upper level of the library to the ground floor. Stopping near the concealed doorway beneath the stairs, she nudged the panel between the books shelves with her elbow, and the door clicked open.

Soft footsteps sounded. Hedori came down the stairs, wearing a dark gray shirt and black pants. His steel colored hair was pulled back in a braid. "Let me help you with those."

"Oh, no, it's okay. I'm used—"

"Not if I'm around." He took the books from her and followed her down the few steps into the underground level of the library.

The musty smell of aged paper and leather crowded her nose. Gloom surrounded her briefly before she switched on the sconce's light. It still made her hyperventilate that these eons-old scrolls and tomes were so casually left on wooden shelves and not put in protective glass casings. But given that the entire floor was under a protection spell, these literary works didn't leave the library. At all.

Hedori left the volumes on the huge table in the center of the room and crossed to the opposite shelf. As Darci packed the tomes away, she glanced back at him. “How’s Jenna doing?” she asked quietly.

“She worries as we wait for the Guardians and Shae to return from dealing with that Fallen, Aza.” His expression dark, he picked up a large leather-bound book and made his way back to the table. He set it down and carefully paged through volume. The thing appeared as if it would crumble if a page were turned too fast.

Darci left him to his research and shelved her books. By the time she came back for the last one, he was reading something in a language she couldn’t decipher, but she recognized the drawing. It looked like the tattoo she’d seen on Shae’s wrist, a series of knots with one side open. “What is that?”

He blew out a heavy breath, his unusual orange-green eyes dark with worry. “Trouble. But just in case, I want to see if there’s a way to undo it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a mate mark the Fallen had imprinted on Shae without her knowledge.”

*What?* Shock froze Darci for several seconds. If someone had done that to her, she would be furious as hell—heck, she’d want to kill him.

Her stomach knotting, she left Hedori to his reading and headed up to the second floor quarters she shared with Blaéz. And prayed this ended well for the couple. She really liked Shae, and Dagan seemed to finally shed the remoteness that normally surrounded him like armor.

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As Blaéz took form on the portico of the castle situated on their island estate just off Manhasset Bay on Long Island Sound, a chilly wind blowing inland from the Atlantic swept over him.

He opened the door and stepped into the warmth of the brightly lit foyer with soaring, floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows and marbled statues sporadically placed between several tall shrubs. The tempting aroma of roasting beef and other things he’d soon discover wafted in the air.

However, he had another destination in mind, the only one that counted right then. He jogged up the grand staircase and headed to his quarters, their soul sharing revealing exactly where he’d find his mate.

Blaéz walked into their softly lit bedroom and made for the first door near the enormous fireplace, halting in the dressing room doorway. There, near the open closet, stood his entire reason for living. Wearing only her underwear, obviously about to head in for her shower, Darci pulled out something from the shelf. Pale blue flannel pajamas covered with cavorting brown pups. Sure it was winter and cold, but he didn’t agree with her choice of sleepwear. Far too concealing for his taste.

Silent as a stalking cat, he prowled over, slid his arms around her waist, and kissed her nape. She shrieked, her head snapping around. “Darn it, Blaéz!” She smacked his arm, glaring at him over her shoulder. The few freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose drew him like winter’s fire. “You scared the life out of me.”

“Who else would dare touch you this way, hmm?” He ran his lips over the adorable defects of nature, then took her sleepwear and tossed the clothes back into the closet.

“Wait, I need—”

“You don’t.” He wrapped his fingers in her curly, honey-brown hair, tilted her face to his and kissed her deeply, exploring her mouth with his tongue. She sighed, leaning her back into him.

Finally able to settle into himself again after the tension of the night, he undid her bra and dropped it to the floor, revealing every inch of her creamy-caramel skin and

delicious curves. He wanted to lick her from her lush lips to those beautiful toes, and as he contemplated the floor, bed, or shower, she reached behind her and rubbed his groin. His cock jerked resentfully at being trapped in his leathers. Before he gave into his desire, he wanted to enjoy his sexy-as-hell-mate first.

He squeezed her full breast and rolled her nipple with his thumb, but needing more of her, he slipped his other hand into her underwear and parted her dampening cleft, running a finger down one silky fold and slowly up the other side. Her breath hitched, her nails digging into his forearm as he lightly stroked her.

“Miss me?” He sucked on her neck and the fast-beating pulse there. Being so much taller than her five-foot nine, he could easily see down her front. With his booted foot, he spread her legs, forcing her busy hand away from his cock and giving himself more room to play.

“I’m waiting.” He nipped her earlobe with his teeth.

“What? Yes-yes! I missed you. God, Blaéz, please...”

He loved when she pleaded, loved knowing only he could bring her to this point. Without a word he spun her to him, her striking, brown and yellow irises, edged with green—the colors that always reminded him of sunflowers—darkened in need. He lowered to his heels, drew off her panties, and tossed the silk aside. Then he parted her folds with his tongue, and drew her clit into his mouth, sucking lightly on that sensitive bundle of nerves. A soft moan escaped her, her fingers grasping his hair as if to keep him there.

Not yet. He had plans for her—for them.

He rose, swept her into his arms, and strode into the enormous gray and black bathroom. In the shower stall, he set her on her feet, and she grasped his arm.

“You okay?” he asked.

Her cheeks flushed, she nodded and then she wrinkled her nose at him. “I was fine until someone jumped me.”

“Jump you?” He raised a brow. “Hardly, *a leannan*. Do I plan to fuck you hard and fast with my tongue and fingers in a few seconds? Absolutely. Afterward, I’ll make love to you slow and long with my mouth, body, and my cock until you’re screaming my name. But jump you? Never something so juvenile.”

Her mouth opened then closed, her cheeks blazing red. A smile tugged at his lips that she still blushed when he talked dirty to her. She turned on the faucets, dousing him with a splash of cold water that he sorely needed since he burned for her.

Arching an eyebrow at her, he stepped out and discarded his clothes and boots in seconds, before rejoining her in the steamy stall. The too-hot water gushed over him, nearly blistering his skin. Fuck! He bit back a curse. How his mate could stand this heat, he had no idea. But it was a torture worth enduring to have her with him.

As he reached for the soapy loofah in her hand, her worried gaze lifted to his. “Did everything go okay with Dagan and Shae?”

He nodded. “When we got there, they’d already taken care of things.” He stroked the sponge over her breast. “The Fallen’s dead, and the goddess vanquished.”

“Oh, thank goodness!”

One corner of his mouth kicked up in amusement. “My bloodthirsty mate.”

“No one deserves to go through what she—what they *both* did. Imagine withholding food from someone? Even if it is blood.” Her eyes sparkled with anger. “Yes, the goddess deserved no less.”

“Indeed...” He cupped the weight of her other breast in his palm, his thumb teasing her pert nipple. Lowering his head, he ran his tongue along her clavicle, licking the notch at her throat. Hell, he needed her desperately.



“Wait.” She pushed him back. He growled. Smiling, she took the sponge from him, squeezed more of her lilac-scented gel, and trailed it over his pecs and down his abs. He didn’t trust the glint in her striking eyes.

“Did you know,” she began, “that—”

Before she could finish, he picked her up and braced her against the tiled wall. Her long legs wrapped around his hips, and with her thighs spread open, his cock slid easily along her damp folds, brushing against her clit. Her breathing quickened, and her pupils dilated. Yes, much better.

“Did I know what?” he murmured, kissing her jaw.

She blinked, water dripping down her gorgeous face. “Er... that couples tend to abstain from sex until the wedding night?”

He cocked a brow. “And you’re telling me this why?”

One shoulder lifted as if in a shrug. “No reason.” She traced a finger over the mystical Gaian sword inked on his biceps, the mark defining him as a Guardian of this realm. “I read that in a bridal magazine earlier today,” she murmured after a few seconds, her tone airy. “Besides, you’re immortal, so it doesn’t apply.”

Blaéz narrowed his eyes. What? Mortals could abstain and he couldn’t?

Just because his all-consuming hunger for her seemed to grow by leaps and bounds didn’t mean he had no willpower.

“Very well. If it’s part of the nuptial rules, then no sex until the wedding night.” He dropped her but held her arm when she stumbled.

She blinked the water from her eyes, her lovely mouth falling open. He arched a brow, hiding his amusement. Did she think he couldn’t read between the lines? She wanted to follow human custom; he’d damn well give it to her, no matter his protesting cock.

A moment later, she gave him a tiny smile, one he didn’t trust and wanted to kiss right off those tempting, luscious lips.

“And the one who breaks with tradition first?” she asked, trailing her fingers over his abs and lower.

Ah. A bet. Right.

“Don’t worry, I’ll think up a suitable payment for you,” he teased, ignoring her tormenting fingers stroking the head of his cock.

“I’m sure you will.” Darci rolled her eyes, then reached up and kissed him on the chin. “I’ll see you in a bit for the morning meal.” She walked out of the steamy shower, leaving him with a raging hard-on.

Groaning, Blaéz turned the faucet to cold and thumped his brow against the tiled surface. Maybe he should go take a dive off the cliffs and into the freezing Atlantic and ease his cock back to a bearable state, since unfulfilled desire would be his bedfellow in the coming days.

But for the mate he cherished and would do anything for...naturally, he’d agreed to a case of blue balls. Blaéz shook his head. Awesome!