

CHAPTER 1

The castle pulsed as if happiness exploded through it.

Flowers were everywhere. Even the windowsills of the back stairwell hadn't escaped the intruders.

Týr tugged off the tie constricting his windpipe as he jogged up the narrow steps to the second level, nearly knocking the purple and white joys of nature spilling from the vases to the floor. Hell, a person could suffocate from all the gaiety floating around. The things he endured for his fellow Guardians.

Blaéz and Darci had tied the knot earlier that evening. Sure, he was happy for them, but all this cheeriness abraded his psyche like sandpaper. Two minutes tops, and he was outta here.

Sounds of footsteps. Dagan's quiet voice drifted to him. "You're heading out on patrol?"

Damn. His escape hadn't gone unnoticed. "Yeah." Týr didn't look back, just continued upward.

"This event's certainly been an eye-opener."

More convo he didn't want. Especially of this sort. "Why? You gonna follow soon? Not sure of your mate yet?"

Dagan snorted. "We're fine."

The male knew him well enough not to rise to his baiting. Týr was grateful that they'd finally put aside the eons-old cold silence between them, but he wasn't in the mood for chit-chat. The tension in him grew, stirring the raucous rustling in his skull—a harbinger of a time he didn't want to remember. As if he could ever escape those memories.

Tie dangling from his fist, he strode down the softly lit corridor to his quarters and shut the door behind him. The oppressive stillness of the darkened room grated on him, as did all the love in the air downstairs. With his mind, he flipped on the music system in the living room, and the thumping sounds of Metallica reverberated against the wall, crashing into his head.

Since his heightened senses made everything clear as fuck, he didn't bother with the lights and made his way to the door past the huge fireplace.

In his gloomy dressing room, he flung the tie on the dresser, the tuxedo he'd worn as best man following seconds later. Exhaling deeply, Týr rubbed his face, his palms brushing his jaw. He grimaced at the sharp sting of the arc-shaped wound there. Two days, and it still hadn't healed. Fury slid through him, dark and deadly. The asshole who'd dared mark him had hidden under cover of night like a fucking coward. But Týr was patient. No enemy escaped him for long. Ever.

He opened the closet running the length of the wall, got out his leathers, a black Henley, and boots. Back in the familiar comfort of his patrolling gear, biker jacket in hand, he switched off the music and headed out. His footsteps thudded on the marble floors of the elegant corridor, dotted sporadically by old suits of armor and priceless paintings on the cream walls.

Yo, Norse, you heading out on patrol? Aethan mind-linked with him.

Yeah.

You with Ely tonight?

Damn, Týr'd forgotten about their newest Guardian recruit and his babysitting duties. He'd have to put tracking the shadowy bastard on the backburner for tonight. Might as well get in his turn. *Sure*.

As Týr rounded the balustrade to the main stairs, he easily picked up on the chatter and laughter from the guests lingering in the rec room on the ground level where the reception had taken place.

Hell, the wedding was over. They should all go home.

A light, familiar fragrance drifted to him, and Týr slowed, his stomach twitching. In the last couple of days, the scent had enclosed him like a net, as if trapping him in a sun-drenched meadow.

Hers. A precursor to happiness.

The female appeared immersed in the sentiment, dragging joy with her wherever she went. Even his fury at his stalker subdued a little.

Another reason he had to get outta here, back to the alleyways where danger trawled in the shadows. He needed to find his normal again—far more preferable.

“Hedori, please, I need to leave.”

“I wish I could help you, Kira, but it's impossible right now.”

Yep, their butler, all-round handyman, and sometimes mates' bodyguard, possessed a helluva lot of patience. If it were him, he'd tell her to chill. There'd been a wedding, an unprecedented event at the castle, and Hedori had things to oversee.

“*Pleease*, Heds,” she wheedled. “It's urgent.”

Týr snorted. Feminine wiles, the most dangerous weapon of all. He'd found that out in the hardest possible way a long time ago.

But she sure seemed desperate.

What was so important anyway? It wasn't even ten yet. Maybe she had another ridiculous, drivel-filled novel to nosedive into or...she'd had enough of his magnificent company this evening.

Nah. Everyone loved his awesomeness.

With wry amusement, he headed down the grand staircase that spilled out onto the huge foyer. The tiered chandelier cast prisms of light over the colorful stained-glass windows running from floor to ceiling. And, along with the usual verdant plants in the foyer, the new invaders—tall, pewter vases, overflowing with various shades of purple flowers—took up space.

Yup, eye-catching, and the perfect backdrop for the she-devil who stood there, her curvy figure clad in a slinky lilac bridesmaid's gown. Her dark auburn hair had been pulled into some kind of topknot. Sure, she was breathtaking, he wasn't blind, just messed up in the head. But that sharp tongue of hers usually ruined the effect of her beauty.

As Týr jogged down to the ground floor, Hedori acknowledged him with a nod, and the ice queen who'd reigned during the reception and tacitly ignored his provocations turned, too. Her hazel-green eyes flared in irritation, the color a startling contrast to her luscious, creamy-latte skin.

“Sire, we have a bit of a situation,” Hedori said. “With the fae here, and guests still about, I cannot leave the castle just yet. Would you take Kira home?”

“No-no, Heds,” she quickly countered. “I'll wait for you.”

He should leave, walk out. Aethan or another could take her, but Týr couldn't resist. “Ah, Fluff, you wound me. Truly.”

Her head snapped his way. “Yes...maybe, if I thought for one second there was a heart or soul buried somewhere deep down under that shell,” she said sweetly, tone

spiked with venom. She faced Hedori again, sweet as treacle. "How long do you think you'll be?"

Hiding his amusement, Týr sighed loudly as if put out. "C'mon, Fluff, let's get you home."

She pivoted so fast, fingers fisting as if she wanted to punch him. "Call me that again, and I swear, I'll—" She broke off, her expression tightening as softer footsteps echoed. Lila Smith, their Oracle and the she-devil's grandmother, rounded the staircase a moment later.

Hedori nodded to them and departed.

"Thank goodness you're still here, Kira dear," Lila breathed. "Would you— Oh, hello, Warrior," she greeted him softly with a regal incline of her gray-haired head.

Lila usually treated the Guardians injured by those annoying demon bolts with her miracle potions and salves since they couldn't self-heal that crap fast enough. More annoying, those open wounds acted like a damn tracking device for the hellscums.

"Oracle," he returned politely.

Lila glanced back at Kira. "I have to go to Seattle for a few days. The coven has a problem and needs my help. It would ease my mind if you stayed here at the castle until my return."

"Gran, I don't know why you worry so much. It's not the first time I've been alone. Besides, I have to go to work. I'll be okay, really."

Týr could sense the Oracle's growing anxiety, though her expression remained serene. It could only mean that whatever had gotten her so worked up was serious. Michael should talk to her. Better if the Guardians knew what trouble was stirring.

Lila glanced at him. "Warrior? Would you—?"

"Gran, no!"

Her horrified yell had Týr narrowing his eyes. He'd be the first to admit that he wasn't fit company for females to be around for any length of time, but she and the Oracle were under Michael's protection, and by default, the Guardians', too.

And he took his damn job seriously.

"It would be my absolute pleasure," he overrode Kira's protest with as much sincerity as he could dredge up.

If it were anyone else they would have undoubtedly stepped back at her death glare.

But his own perverse nature when it came to her wouldn't let him back down. He merely quirked an eyebrow, enjoying her flush of frustration, and sent a quick telepathic message to Aethan. *Babysit Ely tonight. Have to do a favor for the Oracle.*

Would that have anything to do with a certain bridesmaid who wants to leave immediately? the Empyrean shot back, laughter echoing through their mental connection.

Damn smug bastard. As if he needed another funny-man around. Týr shut off their mind-link with a hard slam.

"Are you leaving also?" Týr asked the Oracle, suspending his silent stand-off with Kira.

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind, Warrior."

"Not at all." He crossed to the enormous front door, opened it, and stood back.

"I'll go get my coat." Lila hurried off.

Kira stomped past him with no outdoor wear or scarf. Hell, he'd never known lush lips could thin so much. Týr followed her out into the freezing weather. "Where's your jacket?"

"I'm hot."

"Yeah, you are," he muttered under his breath.

Her head snapped to him, eyes flashing in suspicion.

He cast her an innocent stare.

Scowling, she went back to slaying the trees with her glower.

He shook his head wryly. It must be the drugged air from so many flowers in the castle responsible for him uttering that provocative nonsense.

Ever since he'd first met her a year ago in that dingy club downtown, in an odd way she'd brought light to the shadows that haunted him, distracting him from his nightmarish past. But he was bad news all around.

He destroyed things...people.

Hell, he should back off. But when it came to this female, she was like his very own catnip. He couldn't stop needling her...waiting for a reaction, which her sharp tongue never failed to deliver. *Fates*. He had to stop this madness.

Teeth clamped, he pulled on his jacket and patted the pockets for his candies. He found the two crinkly packages and stilled, eyes narrowing.

Why was she in such a rush to leave? She'd said work, he didn't buy it. Not this late.

He'd heard Echo rag on her about changing boyfriends as frequently as she did her hair color. And recently, she rarely came by the castle. Until the wedding...

Another date with some worthless human loser?

"I'm ready, Warrior." Lila reappeared, her coat on, distracting him from the churning pit in his gut. She shut the door and slid her hand to the crook of his arm, holding on tightly. Kira merely touched his other leather-clad arm with her fingertips.

Dematerializing with humans was always a risk if they suddenly let go.

At her reluctance to touch him, Týr gritted back his irritation, grasped her icy fingers and hauled her close. She stumbled into him and gasped. It sure as hell gave him a punch of satisfaction flustering her. Too late he realized the futility of his actions as his own torture surfaced and her warmth and fragrance wrapped around him like a hug. Her wary gaze met his for an infinitesimal second longer before sliding away.

Hell, she was perfect...while he was a tragedy waiting to happen.

Before thoughts hauled him into a place he could never cross, he let their molecules dissolve, transferring them to their home. As the Oracle's granddaughter, not only was Kira totally off-limits, she was human. Forbidden.

Kira Smith utterly disliked being transported home or anywhere as a clump of molecules. *Dematerializing* as the Guardians called it set her teeth on edge. She really hated the sensation of nothingness.

In the foliage-concealed archway entrance of their brownstone in the Village, the three of them reformed. Kira's woozy head made her pay for this deviation at what mortals could and couldn't do. More, it made her all too aware of *him*—not like she could ignore him, even for an instant.

The former Norse deity drove her batshit crazy with his need to provoke her every time their paths crossed. And right now, she needed clarity.

Kira unlocked the door and ran up the wooden stairs to her cozy, green and pink bedroom. The digital bedside clock glared its time in neon red. Darn, it was almost ten.

She undressed, hauled on jeans and a sweater, then wrestled with the pins holding up the elegant updo she'd sported for the wedding. With the last pin freed, her sprayed hair tumbled down like a bird's nest.

Oh, man. With Gran not here, she'd have to find someone else to do her usual multiple, skinny-braid style she wore to keep her curly locks tamed. But the dark auburn color appeared dull and lifeless. Ugh.

Out of habit, she touched her hair, willing it to a brighter, reddish-brown tone, and the new shade swept through her strands in a glimmer. It was a good thing she didn't have to waste dollars on tinting her own anemic mane. But really, why couldn't she have a more credible ability like tracking missing kids?

"Kira?" Her grandmother appeared in the doorway, pulling her outdoor coat on over her sweater and slacks. "Won't you reconsider staying at the castle?"

With *him* there? After three days in his company and barely surviving his toying...nope, not even if she were homeless. Týr might appear easygoing with that droll humor of his, but as far as she was concerned, he had all the charm of a beautiful, swaying cobra. Compelling, the strike deadly. Avoidance was really, *really* good right now.

She raked the stiff strands loose with her fingers, and started braiding her hair. "I'll be fine here."

"Kira—"

"Gran," she groaned. "We already spoke about this."

"I know. It's just that..." Lines creased her brow, anxiety darkening her beloved features. After a moment, Gran sighed and nodded. "Very well, just be careful."

"I always am." Kira grinned in relief as she tied the ends of her hair. "You are going to be here for my birthday, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Unless—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Unless it's a matter of life and death." It always was. Her grandmother had to be the most protective woman ever, but tonight was different. Kira felt it deep in her bones. "Gran, are you okay?"

She gently patted Kira's cheek. "Coven matters are forever a concern, but I'm fine. Here..." She pulled out an intricately beaded bracelet in turquoise, silver, and black from her coat pocket, Kira's favorite colors, and handed it to her. "I made this for you..." Gran's head cocked as if listening to something. "Ah, my cab's almost here."

Kira heard nothing, but then her grandmother often sensed things. She fastened the bracelet on her wrist and followed Gran out of the room.

"Child, I can catch a cab just fine. No need to shadow me. Go put on your boots. I'll call you when I'm on my way back."

Gran never phoned while secreted at the conclave, something about rules they had to live by. And contact with the outside world was a definite no-no.

Kira had been a year old when her parents died, and now the only family she had was leaving again to go to another of her coven meetings. Despite her grandmother being a powerful Oracle, trouble could still find her, be it human or supernatural.

Sheesh, she wasn't going to send out bad vibes into the universe now. She had more pressing concerns. And the main reason she'd left the reception early. Liam.

He worked at The Shelter and had messaged her during the reception about the homeless child she'd help settle there. Seemed the boy, Tomas, had run off again. Those horrible alleys weren't safe for an eight-year-old. In fact, they weren't safe for anyone. She ought to know.

Liam had also mentioned something about street children disappearing. He must have heard wrong. The homeless—especially the kids—moved about often.

Her cell beeped, distracting her. A quick glance at the display had her sighing. *Elias Mathews*. A guy she'd dated briefly several months ago. Sure, she'd liked him, but despite his suave appearance and charm, there hadn't been any spark.

She had only one dating rule; if the magic didn't appear by the third date, she called it quits. Echo teased her about frequently changing boyfriends, but she wanted the magic. That instant connection when she met her other half. She didn't see the point in prolonging something that would never amount to anything.

Message deleted, she slipped one iron dagger into the sheath hidden beneath her long jacket and another in her boot. Her cell stashed in her pocket, she left the room and ran down the wooden stairs, only to come to a screeching halt at the bottom. The air whooshed out of her lungs in shock at the pale-haired immortal leaning against the unlit fireplace mantel, perusing a book.

Many words sprang to mind as she glared at him; arrogant, infuriating, too handsome for his own good. Yes, he was absurdly beautiful, but it was the hard beauty of a warrior. Power etched the defined planes of his face and carved every inch of his tough body. Even the recent arc-shape lesion he sported on his chiseled jaw didn't mar his perfection. Or negate just how much of a thorn in her side he was.

Absently, he shoved at the overlong wheat-colored lock of hair that persisted in falling over his brow, making Kira want to brush it back. Sheesh. She fisted her fingers, giving herself a mental smack upside the head. She must have lost her ever-loving mind. "Why are you still here?"

Týr looked up and smiled, sarcasm in all its refined glory quirking his lips and animating those slashing, masculine dimples scoring his cheeks. Eyes the most exotic shade of pale toffee glinted from under darker eyebrows. He waved the paperback he held at her. "You really believe this claptrap?"

God, why do you hate me?

Biting the inside of her lip so she wouldn't growl, she marched over, snatched her favorite romance novel from his hand, and got snagged by that overwhelming presence of his. She considered herself tall at five foot ten, but with him around and towering over her, she felt like a midget...one who now couldn't breathe.

Irritated at letting him get beneath her skin, Kira stomped to the dining room table, dropped the book, and reiterated, "Why are you still here?"

A brow rose, disappearing beneath a hunk of pale strands. He eyed her as if she'd lost some brain cells. "Waiting to take you to work."

No. No way!

"Save it," he countered before she even opened her mouth, steel underscoring his tone. "I promised Lila I'd keep an eye on things. I'm it, Fluff. Let's go."

Things? She was a thing now?

Words failed her for the first time in days. Her mouth opened and closed in helpless frustration. Is this how a netted fish felt when cornered by a circling shark?

His gaze drifted over her hair, and the amusement rolled back. "It must be really hard to rein in that temper."

She hated that her emotions showed in such a physical way. Right then, she gave two hoots that glimmers of reds had probably appeared in her braid—a curse that had started a few years ago. Most times, she could control it—except for when *he* was around. Dammit, she had to get rid of him. Liam would be here soon.

If the bane of her life found out that she wasn't actually going to work or learned the truth of what she was about, without a doubt, he'd toss her into the castle dungeon and leave her there to rot until Gran came back.

Like the other Guardians, Týr possessed the same inexorable need to protect those he saw as weaker than him. Except, with him, he'd probably enjoy locking her away.

Kira shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, her fingers wrapping around her cell, aggravated up to her tired brain. What should she do now? She fingered her phone—

Yesss. She bit back a smile at her easy fix.

Týr headed for the door. "C'mon, let's move."

"In a minute, forgot my cell."

"Fluff, don't waste my time—"

"If you have to clock in, go ahead and leave." With an airy wave, she ran back upstairs. In the safety of her room, she quickly typed a message to Liam. She didn't dare call him, not with ears around that could probably hear an ant sneeze.

Meet you at the bar in 30 minutes. Text sent off, she inhaled a huge breath and prayed for patience. Right. The quicker she did as her nemesis demanded, the sooner she could get rid of him. She hurried back down.

Týr stood exactly where she'd left him, midway to the door, eyes narrowed, reminding her that beneath all that pretty gloss he was a deadly Guardian.

He couldn't have heard her texting, could he? Heck, she wouldn't be surprised if he had. Without a word, she marched for the door, yanked it open, and stepped out into the chilly night with him on her heels.

As she turned to lock up, her arm brushed his, and that tingle ricocheted through her again, as if she'd touched a live wire. She inhaled sharply. *Oh, no-no. No tingling. No nothing zipping anywhere!*

The first time it had happened had been earlier tonight when he escorted her to the reception. It had been unexpected, shocking her into silence.

A little off-kilter, Kira clamped her mouth shut and waited since he was already locking the door. Then she held out her hand.

He pocketed the key. "When you're ready to head back, call me."

"So, you keep *my* home key prisoner?"

"Points to the mortal." He swiped the cell she held, tapped in something, and handed it back. "You have my number." With that stellar news, as if she *sooo* wanted to call him, he loped down the steps. "C'mon, Fluff, I need to get back on patrol, and you're still wasting time."

If she killed him— Ugh, the big lout couldn't die. He'd probably just come back after regenerating and make her life even more miserable. Scowling, she followed him to a grove of trees down the street. He stopped in the shadows and waited, a brow arched.

Hanging on to her nonchalance by her teeth, she put her hand on his jacket-clad arm. He snorted, and with a sharp tug, hauled her close.

Kira stumbled into his hard, warm body. She hastily slapped her palms on his chest, putting much-needed inches between them as that unsettling awareness crept through her again. "Must you do that?"

"I live for it." He cut her a sardonic look. "Wait, did you think I had some nefarious plans with that delectable body of yours? Rest assured, I don't."

She wanted to hit him. Instead, she squeaked, grabbing him as he dematerialized them.

As they reformed moments later, Kira groaned and clutched his leather jacket. She rested her brow on his chest as nausea settled, trying to find her equilibrium. As his taunting scent of warm, woody citrus with cool, green pines crowded her lungs, that twisting sensation in her tummy sprang up again. Oh, boy. She didn't want to be aware of him. She really didn't. Struggling for a cool facade, she pushed away and made tracks up the alley.

The stench from corpulent trash bags piled against the building and exhaust fumes was a familiar welcome to the Lower East Side.

Týr shadowed her, equally quiet, probably ecstatic to finally get rid of her. As they neared the Peacock Lounge where she worked, he slowed his steps. "See you at one."

With the threat hanging in the air, he disappeared into the night like the creature of darkness he should be. Instead, he looked like some sun god, all shiny-bright and golden.

Kira stared after him. Humans had it so wrong. The gods existed, and she rubbed shoulders with them most days. But this animosity between Týr and her was likely her fault. Every time he said something, she took umbrage. How else could she keep him at arm's-length?

He was trouble.

A year ago, in Club Anarchy, she'd been on her way to the restroom when she first laid eyes on him. Even before she knew who he was, she'd been drawn to him. Sure, he was ridiculously handsome, possessed a tough, sexy body and had a dangerously dark charisma, but something about him had tugged at her. Then she'd seen him in action. Seen that smirk of his as the women crowded him. Yup, drawn right back.

Only, he'd shown up at *her* table a little later, and on her birthday had snapped at her to get her ass moving since he was there to see her safely home.

Her, he barked at, but the others, he let them drool over him.

Whatever attraction she felt had died a swift death. She wanted a match to her heart. And he wasn't it.

"Please tell me you've changed your mind about your leave and have come back to work early?"

At her boss's harried tone, Kira grinned, leaning her forearms on the mahogany-stained wooden counter, lucky to get a space there. As usual, the bar was packed and noisy, the smell of grilling burgers and malted beer flooding the place. "Nope. Just here to meet someone."

Brian's overgrown, bushy, gray brows popped in surprise. "You have another date?"

Actually, Elias had been her last date—many months ago—not that her boss was interested. She laughed. "You say it like it's a bad thing. But, no."

He sighed. "Just my luck. I'm about to lose one of my best waitress-slash-bartenders."

"I've been with you for nearly seven years and your sometimes-bartender for the last three. It's time for a change, Brian. The big, wide world calls."

He set a soda in front of her, waving off the money she held out. "I'm sure," he grumbled good-naturedly. "But it won't stop me from trying to change your mind with the two weeks I have." He moved off to serve another customer.

Kira traced a finger down the misty can. A new job?

She hadn't realized that she wanted one until a few weeks ago. After helping out at The Shelter, she'd understood that she'd found something worthwhile to dedicate her life to instead of encouraging people to become future candidates for Alcoholics Anonymous. As if the world didn't have enough problems.

First, she needed some time away to get rid of this restlessness crawling through her. Maybe she'd travel a bit. Her parents had left her financially well provided for. She didn't need to work. And bumping into Tomas had shown her a new way, but he'd run off again.

The main door opened. People swarmed inside and out of the cold like buzzing bees. Too fidgety to remain still, perhaps it would be better if she waited for Liam outside.

"Brian," she yelled. "Raincheck on my soda. I gotta go."

Kira scurried off, dodging the people surging into the bar. And crashed into a tall guy. "Sorry—" She leaped back. "I didn't see..." The rest of her apology died when she looked up at him.

Sporting bronze hair shorn almost to his skull, the guy cast her a cursory look, then sidestepped her and moved on, stopping a few meters away to survey the crowd. Dressed all in black, he looked like he should be hanging out with the Guardians, killing evil demons and such. Yep, he'd probably give them some competition with his badass vibe and striking good looks. However, the sense of familiarity sweeping through her had her brow knitting in confusion.

As if sensing her scrutiny, he glanced back. A shallow cleft notched his chin. Piercing emerald-green eyes narrowed for a second before he made his way back to her. "You're not working tonight?"

Huh? Kira shook her head, trying to put a name to his face. "No, I'm off..." Dammit, of course. It had been a year, after all. "Riley?"

"Yes. Sorry, it took me a moment to recognize you with the different hair color."

"And you took off all yours," she teased.

"Yeah." A short laugh escaped him. "Can we talk?"

Wow, he sounded serious. In the many years she'd worked at the Peacock Lounge, she'd had several customers who needed a shoulder to cry on. "Sure, but I can only spare a few minutes. I promised to help a friend, and I'd hate to cancel at the last second."

"I see."

Though nothing showed on his face, Kira had the distinct impression something troubled him. Maybe it had to do with the girl he'd mentioned the last time he was here. "You and your girlfriend okay?"

"What? No-no." Instantly, his expression softened, and a genuine smile lit his face. "We're fine."

Okay. Kira glanced outside through the glass door at the bike double-parked in front of the bar. Nope, she didn't have time to talk. "I'm really sorry, Riley, I have to go. My friend's here. How about tomorrow night? Around 6 or 7?"

Riley frowned. "Yeah, tomorrow's fine. See you then."

She nodded and slipped out into the frigid night. Man, what a strange night this was turning out to be. Týr watching over *things*, and now Riley turning up and wanting to *talk*.

"Hey." The lanky teen leaning against the Suzuki lifted a hand in greeting.

"Right back at ya," she called out, crossing to him.

Liam Montgomery straightened from his bike, giving her a quick smile. He raked back disheveled brown hair, badly in need of a trim.

Kira had met him several weeks ago at The Shelter where he worked part-time. She'd gone there, hauling a reluctant Tomas with her, and Liam had somehow managed to prevent the wily eight-year-old from bolting. He was good with Tomas.

"No sign of him yet?" she asked.

Liam shook his head and handed her the extra helmet, his expression troubled. "I checked around The Shelter. Nothing. He's definitely gone."

"The information you got about the children disappearing from the streets. You do realize the homeless don't stay in one place for long, right?"

"Yes, I'm aware of that, but it's what I overheard Darwin, the guy who runs The Shelter, tell someone. They're even disappearing from inside. I wouldn't have messaged you otherwise."

“Okay. Okay. I want to speak to Darwin.”

“Kira,” Liam groaned. “It’ll only land me in trouble for snooping.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t mention your name. They don’t even know we’re friends. Darn it, what was Tomas thinking? I warned him about the dangers out here.”

Her dread grew, knowing exactly what else trolled the backstreets. Tomas was a child. He couldn’t fight off soul-sucking demoniis.

“Let’s hope he’s at his usual hangout.” She pivoted for the Suzuki and grimaced. “Did I mention I really hate this contraption of yours?”

“A few times.” Liam chuckled then slid a leg over the seat. “We could grab a cab, but this beauty”—he patted the handlebars—“is good for quick getaways.”

Boys, men, they were all the same when it came to their wheels. But he had a point.

“Wait, you can fight, right? Just in case. I mean, these aren’t for show?” She poked his leather-clad biceps.

“A little. I also have this little badass”—he pulled out his slingshot from inside his jacket pocket—“And I can even sense those foul-ass dirtbags from Hell.”

At his self-disparaging humor regarding his ability, Kira shook her head. He put away his weapon and kick-started the monster. She wondered what his story was. Liam didn’t talk much about himself, but she sensed a sadness in him. After she found Tomas, she would try and help Liam.

Her helmet on, she cautiously straddled the pillion. Right, three things to concentrate on tonight; brave this bike, find Tomas, and hopefully, avoid a certain pain-in-the-ass Guardian whose territory she’d soon be invading.