

AVENGING ANGEL
BOOK 4: ROYAL GRACE

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CHAPTER ONE

“Shall I kill him?” the Angel’s fingers hovered over the hilt of the sword glowing hot and bright in the leather scabbard around his hips.

Eyeing the Fae courtier resplendent in dark blue velvet, Evie was seriously considering it. She’d had it up to *here* with the Fae.

“Your Highness,” the Fae courtier said with a sigh, “I require an answer for my Prince.”

The courtier and three attendants had stepped out of a Portal in the Seven-Eleven parking lot in Redondo Beach. Without so much as a ‘hello’ or ‘how do you do’ he’d shoved a crown in her face and declared Evie the rightful Queen of the Red Kingdom.

Evie had responded to this announcement with a string of expletives that had impressed even Gaius, the Earthbound warrior angel at her side. She did not want a kingdom. She wanted a six-pack of beer, a burrito, and a slice of pizza. Preferably pepperoni. Hence the visit to Seven-Eleven.

“I think I would like to kill him,” Gaius said, inching closer.

The Fae seemed unimpressed. In fact, he looked bored. Like he’d drawn the short straw for this job and just wanted to get it over with.

“Your highness,” the Fae said, motioning the courtier holding the poofy red cushion and delicate gold crown to come closer. “Your Prince, your Court, and your child await you in the Red Kingdom.”

Evie’s wing’s flared, “I do not have a child! Or a Prince. Or a Kingdom,” she snapped.

Any Kingdom. Having been given the Heavenly Avenging Angel pink slip after sacrificing one of her wings to save a group of innocents — and one not so innocent life— a few months ago. Seems the Celestials frown on earthbound Angels making deals with their Fallen amigos.

Maybe the Celestials actions were justified since that act had triggered a tsunami of events leading to a possible war between heaven and earth.

The Courtier didn’t quite roll his eyes but almost. “Now that you have adopted the mantle

of the old Queen, your Highness, Fae recognizes you as the rightful heir to the Red Kingdom. At least until such times as the princess is old enough to rule.”

“What does he mean by mantle?” asked Gaius fingering his sword hilt and taking a firmer stance.

Evie stretched out her black wing. “*This*. The Red Queen gave it to me as she lay dying. I thought she was asking for vengeance after being murdered by her half-sister. Since that same half-sister had just freed the rebel Daemon who want to take over Southern California and possibly the world, I was happy to accept. Turns out the Queen was recruiting me to the Fae.”

She didn’t have to tell Gaius about the change the wing had wrought in her angelic DNA. The entire Heavenly Host knew the whole sordid story. Gaius had cheerfully called her an ‘abomination’ the first time they met.

Evie yanked Gaius out of the way as a black double-cab pick-up rumbled into the parking lot. They were hidden behind a *glamour* the Fae had crafted, shielding them from prying eyes and CCTV. Though since this was Southern California, it probably wasn’t necessary. L.A. was used to weird people in strip mall parking lots.

Though the sight of four silver-haired men and women dressed in exquisite velvet trousers and jackets crowding around two winged beings might give even jaded South Bay residents pause.

“Take your crown and go away. In case you haven’t been paying attention, we’re a little busy with a Daemon infestation,” she said bluntly. “I haven’t got time for Fae nonsense and I am not a queen.”

Unless it was Queen Bitch these days because honestly, her world was sucking big time.

The Courtier snapped his fingers and one of the attendants held out the small portrait of a chubby-cheeked little girl with red curls. “Your child...” he started to say.

Evie had her sword out before he could finish the sentence.

“She is not my child,” she hissed, holding the point under the man’s chin.

He stood his ground. “You are blood of her blood now. Your High...”

He stopped as Evie narrowed her eyes.

“Madam,” he corrected himself as he waved the other courtiers back. “These events are under neither my control nor yours. If I may make a suggestion?”

What that suggestion was going to have to wait.

A pair of winged Daemon vaporated into their midst and tried to brain Gaius and Evie with maces.

Maces!

“Shit!” shouted Evie blocking the blow and slicing through the weapon’s handle with her glowing sword.

“*Excrementum!*” echoed Gaius in Latin, mirroring her move.

With one mighty down sweep, the two of them were airborne and winging it toward the ocean. The Daemon pursued waving their mace-less wooden handles.

The Fae wisely stayed where they were.

The sea was only a few blocks from the convenience store. Good thing she’d ignored Gaius’ demands for Buffalo Wild Wings in Torrance.

She and Gaius lead the Daemon away from the houses and commercial beachfront around the beach towns crowded together. She knew the coastline well thanks to Trick. Trick McKitrick. Reaper, love of her afterlife. Born in the dusty days of pioneer Arizona, he loved the sea. He was the one who had shown her the secret coves where mermaids and Selkies still came to play.

The Daemon pursued but did not seem particularly intent on catching them. What they thought they could do without their weapons, Evie wasn’t sure. Daemon came in many shapes and forms. Two legs, four legs, two arms, *four* arms but all with wings. This matching pair had lion-shaped heads, one with a mane, one without, on human-shaped bodies.

“Something is shadowing us,” Gaius shouted. “In the sea.”

He pointed and Evie saw a V-shaped wave paralleling them, running against the current.

Damn. The Daemon weren’t chasing them. They were *herding* Evie and Gaius to the ocean.

She signaled Gaius to land on a narrow beach at the base of a sheer cliff on the Palos Verde headland. Ironically it was near where she and Trick had battled his demon master and the Fallen Angel who had taken Evie’s wing. Fingers crossed tonight would have a more positive outcome.

The V-shaped wave turned in the same direction. The Daemon hung back, beating their bat-like wings and hovering over the sea.

The uncanny wave rolled in with the breakers. It crested high, revealing an impressively

large black and white dorsal fin. Its skin shone in the bright moonlight.

“Is that an Orca?” Evie asked.

It certainly looked like one. Tall dorsal. Piebald coloring.

The creature rode the crest sliding smoothly up onto the beach and stood up.

Stood up.

On legs.

“*Ammázza!*” exclaimed Gaius. “*Quid est?*”

“If you’re saying ‘what the hell is that?’ I am with you. Because what the hell is that?”

“Those,” corrected Gaius pointing.

Another wave smashed into the beach washing up three more piebald beasts. They slid in on their broad, smooth bellies and jumped to their feet brandishing tridents.

Not only did they have legs, but arms too.

The one in the lead released a high-pitched screech through the blowhole on its head. All four charged. Their legs were set forward on their bodies giving them a hunched appearance but damn, they were fast.

Evie and Gaius spread their wings for an aerial attack. Before they cleared the ground, dozens of tentacles shot up from the beach. They knotted around the angel’s calves and in a heartbeat had pulled them hip-deep into the sand.

Evie swept her sword out and down, slicing through the tentacles as easily as fresh sushi. Not that it did much good as more and then more appeared. A dozen wrapped around her sword arm, pulling it away from her body. They tried to grab her wings but pulled back as if stung. Both wings – black and white -- generated their own energy field. It was not wise to touch them without permission.

Flailing wildly, the tentacles fastened around her waist and hips as the first of the Orcamen barreled into her. Screeching through his blowhole, he angled the short, thick trident to stab.

What happened next was more by accident than design. Fighting against the pull of the tentacles, Evie used the sting of the black wing to slice through the ones pinning her sword arm. With one hard pull, she tugged free. As she did, her sword fell forward and before she could shift it, the Orcaman impaled himself on the blade. The beast’s own weight and the force of its charge drove the blade up to the hilt until they were face to face.

The thing was an unsettling mash-up of human and orca features: eyes closer to the center of its face than a normal killer whale, the wide mouth framed with pink lips.

A gust of air sighed from the blowhole and the beast collapsed.

On top of Evie.

She fell, the air whooshing out of her own lungs as his full weight pressed her into the sand. Technically as an angel maybe she didn't *have to* breathe but she did and for a panic-filled few moments she couldn't. More tentacles erupted from the sand.

Evie channeled the panic into anger, letting the energy of that anger burn through her. This angry energy was a new and not necessarily a welcome change since she took the Red Queen's black wing. But it could serve a purpose. Her new Fae half liked anger. It liked it very much.

Power surged through her black wing, giving her the strength to push up and out. Evie twisted into a half roll until the Orcaman slid to one side. Pressing against the sand with her white wing, she propelled herself to her feet, spinning her sword as she straightened, slicing the tentacles reaching for a new hold.

How many tentacles did this thing have? She'd cut literally a hundred by now.

As if in answer to her question, the sand exploded around her. The ground rumbled and she was suddenly staring into the enormous eyes of a pasty-white bullet-shaped creature the size of a Buick. It reared back exposing a beak-like mouth and roared. Hot, fishy breath washed over Evie stinging her eyes with sand and salt. Tentacles sprouted from every inch of its body. A thousand of them.

The creature's unexpected emergence derailed the charge of one of the Orcamen, tumbling him backward head over heels.

He was on his feet in a heartbeat, agile as a gymnast despite his unlikely shape. Orcaman screeched through his blowhole and the tentacle thing twisted to look at the beast before wriggling to the side, tentacles waving like an army of wacky inflatable tube men.

The Orcaman stabbed at her. Evie slid her blade through the points of the trident and twisted. Instead of letting go, the Orcaman held on, rolling over and over with the motion of the blade before pulling the trident free.

Evie lunged, aiming for his chest. This time he purposely caught the point of her blade between the prongs of his trident, forcing it down. Twisting to the side she delivered a side kick

into his abdomen. He gave a gratifying “Oof” through his blowhole. She spread her wings. Sweeping them in one massive stroke. The forward momentum of the wings pushed her back far enough to free the blade.

At that point the Sand Squid, as Evie decided to call it, lurched over and aimed dozens of tentacles at her. She wrapped herself in her wings and the tentacles drew back at their touch. The enormous beast shuddered and groaned.

She opened her wings to find the Orcaman waiting. He stabbed with his trident, but Evie turned to shove the black wing between them. Her wings were not feathery fluff. They were shields. Impenetrable to all but another heavenly blade.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Sand Squid furiously digging its way back into the sand, probably so it could come up beneath her.

Orcaman threw his trident aside, blew a furious scream through his blowhole, and charged her like a linebacker. He was hoping to knock her over and either use those sharp white teeth on her throat or hold her down for the Sand Squid to capture.

Evie rose into the air on a down sweep of her wings. She swung her sword in a hard arc. Her blade sliced through the Orcaman’s neck, beheading him in one stroke. The squid stopped digging and stretched out its tentacles trying to grab her. Evie flipped back into a loop and came down just behind the eyes and beaked mouth. She drove her sword to the hilt into its skull. Please let there be a brain in there somewhere.

The creature thrashed wildly, throwing Evie onto the beach. She rolled, coming to a painful stop on a pile of rocks that had tumbled from the cliffs above. The creature thrashed wildly on the narrow beach, but it was over quickly. Her sword had served a killing blow. The tentacles flailed a few more times before falling limp.

She could see Gaius from her position. He’d killed another of the Sand Squids and one of the Orca-men. The last remaining warrior had a trident in either hand and was trading blows with Gaius.

Evie took a deep breath, allowing her senses to speak to her. Both her angelic and Fae wing were sensitive to demonic presence. Typically, they sent little sparks of warning energy skipping along her nervous system. Neither wing was reacting that way. Her sword was angry but that’s because Evie was under attack. The weapon sensed the danger the Orcamen represented to its mistress and reacted instinctively.

Despite the contaminating presence of Fae blood, Evie did not enjoy killing for no good reason. If these Orcamen and their squid pals weren't demons, perhaps they could be reasoned with. If she could get the last one to stop trying to impale Gaius

“Gaius don't kill him,” she shouted, taking to the air and swooping low to hover behind him.

“You jest!” he shouted back, trading blows with the beast.

A tentacle shot out of the sand to wrap around Evie's foot, it jerked her through the air and began to try to hammer her back and forth. Momentum and gravity were working against her, so she let herself go limp. Hanging by her knees, she sliced the tentacle in half.

This time a much smaller Sand Squid wriggled up.

The Orcaman let out a piercing series of whistles and hoots and the creature scuttled toward the sea.

Evie let it go.

The Orcaman continued to press his attack, staying close and not giving Gaius a chance to get any leverage with his sword. Gaius flipped his sword back and smacked the Orcaman between the eyes with the hilt. The creature staggered.

Evie swooped behind it and pressed her sword into his back.

“Stop,” she said. “We don't want to kill you. Talk to us.”

She knew it would understand her. Angels could speak all languages.

She pressed the point a little harder.

It blew a stream of wet air from its blowhole and twisted back to front. Jaws wide, he lunged for her throat.

Gaius drove his sword through the top of the creature's skull in the same move Evie had used on the Sand Squid. He jerked it free. The Orcaman stopped, eyes wide, mouth still open to bite before dropping to his knees. With a last sighing whistle, he fell face forward in the sand.

Gaius took a deep breath before speaking. “He left me no choice.” Thrusting his sword in the sand to clean the blood and ochre off, he said, “They are not demons. You guessed this, yes?”

Evie nodded.

A shout of “Hey!” made them turn.

Trick trance jumped down from the cliff waving an arm.

Evie waved back, and her heart gave a little leap of joy at seeing him. Then it sank to the

souls of her feet. Trick McKitrick. A reluctant Reaper she had willingly sacrificed so much for. Now, she couldn't touch Trick without causing him excruciating pain. Seems Reapers and Fae/Angel hybrids can't mix.

She loved him still. How could she not? They'd been through so much. Her arms wanted to reach out to hold him. Instead, she took a firm grip on her sword handle.

In seconds, he stood with them.

He pushed his thick brown hair out of his eyes as he stared at the corpses of the Orcamen. "Hell and damnation, this is new!"

"The Daemon are gone?" Gaius asked, scanning the sky.

Trick nodded. "Yep. They took off when they spotted me. Flying toward the PCH."

Evie kept her eyes on the Orcaman, feeling her cheeks flush as they always did when Trick was nearby.

"How did you find us?" she asked. He hadn't been with them as they spied on St. Jude's.

St. Jude's Catholic Church in Torrance sprawled over extensive grounds a few blocks east of the luxurious Del Amo mall. For decades the church had served as the West Coast headquarters for the shadowy non-denominational organization known as the Bureau of Checks and Balances.

Supernatural activity was far more prevalent than most mortals realized. For thousands of years hidden in churches, temples, shrines, and other holy places, the Bureau and its followers had collected resources, collated information, tracked incidents, plots, and incursions, and served as soldiers when necessary. Secretly they kept what balance they could between the forces of light and dark. They were staffed by lay people who joined the BCB as Acolytes, committing their lives in service to the greater good.

The rebel Daemon had targeted St. Jude's with deadly intent immediately after their escape. With a mixture of *Glamour* spells to hide their true forms and *Glimmer* magic to fool and befuddle human minds, they'd assumed control of the church. Not all the acolytes were fooled. Some had run. A few remained behind, risking their lives to feed information to Evie's little group.

He pulled out his phone and waggled it. "Leo put a tracker on your cell phone like the acolytes always did before the Daemon took over the network."

The rebel Daemon under the leadership of Elysia had embedded themselves in the acolyte center of St. Jude's, Evie's former home and the West Coast HQ for the BCB. Elysia had shrouded her blue skinned- four-armed, winged self in the *glamour* of the very human Reverend Mother Mary Elizabeth. The Reverend Mother had contrived to take charge when Father James, the head of St. Jude's and Evie's mentor, went off the farm.

Leo was one of the few worker bees from St. Jude's who had seen the writing on the wall when the Daemon took over and hightailed it out. He was a Russian, only recently transferred from the St. Petersburg office.

"We must remove the bodies," Gaius said in a practical tone of voice. "Shall we burn them?"

Riding the crest of a wave, another of the Orcamen walked out of the sea. The smaller Sand Squid wriggled after him.

The creature held out his hands in the universal sign for peace and pointed at the bodies. Evie motioned for him to approach even as she, Trick, and Gaius took up defensive positions.

He approached his fallen comrades.

"They left us no choice," Evie said. "I asked this one," she indicated the creature Gaius had killed last, "but he pressed the attack."

He or Evie guessed it *could* be she, Orca kept everything on the inside, so it was hard to tell, looked at her and frowned.

Evie shivered. The creature's face crossed the Uncanny Valley of almost human. The utter wrongness of it triggered an instinctive fight or flight response.

"We are not your enemy," she persisted.

"All land creatures are our enemy," he answered, speaking through his mouth instead of his blowhole. His voice was deep and resonant. Definitely male, Evie decided.

"What did he say?" asked Trick.

Reapers did not have the angelic gift of understanding.

"He said all land creatures are our enemy."

Trick barked a laugh, "Oh come on, don't pull an Aquaman on us. *All land creatures are our enemy,*" he snorted. "Give me a break. I'm guessing you're not even from this world."

Evie repeated what he'd said.

The Orcaman frowned. Their mouths were quite expressive. Creepy but expressive.

“The Daemon are our enemies,” she said, sheathing her sword. “If they are threatening you, perhaps we can help?”

“We must bury our dead.” He turned away.

“Think about it,” Evie said.

The small Sand Squid prodded at the large one Evie had killed. It looked from the Orcaman to the dead thing and back. The Orcaman patted its head gently.

It made sad squeaking sounds and Evie felt ill.

Damn the Daemon.

They left Palos Verde and did not look back.

Trick and Gaius headed for home. Home being one of the Baron’s houses in Hermosa Beach. The irony was not lost on Evie that they were now allies with the Fallen Angel who had brought most of this down on their heads.

But beggars can’t be choosers, as her mother used to say. None of them had a place to live anymore.

Evie went back to the Seven-Eleven on the PCH. It was almost midnight, but they were open twenty-four hours. She was hungry, tired, and heartsick. Beer and food would help with the first two problems. Nothing on earth could solve the last.

Shedding the *glamour* and tucking her wings back in their magical pockets she saw the group of Fae courtiers lounging against one side of the building. All of them had oversized Slurpee’s in one hand and what looked like burritos in the other.

At the sight of her, all four froze mid-slurp with identical deer-in-the-headlight looks. The lead courtier tried to speak but inhaled a bite of food and began to choke.

“Highness.”

“Highness.”

“Highness.”

The other three whispered looking for a place to set their food and drink and probably bow.

“Idiots,” she said almost laughing. “Take it easy. I’m not the queen now. Finish your food.”

The lead courtier's eyes were watering. Evie patted him on the back, holding his Slurpee as he wheezed and coughed.

"Your highness, forgive us," he gasped. "We meant no disrespect."

She waved his comment away. "Relax...uh, what's your name?"

"Lehric," he said bowing his head, adding, "Your servant, your Highness."

"Okay, Lehric. I don't need a servant right now. I need a beer. Several. I'm going to go inside, get food, and then I'm going home. It's late. I'm tired. We can continue this discussion another time, okay?"

She handed him back his Slurpee.

"Yes, your Majesty. Very gracious of you, your Majesty."

"I am not *your* majesty and you are a pain in my ass," she said over her shoulder as the doors whooshed open. "You know that, right?"

"Yes, your Majesty," said the Courtier politely.

Evie sighed. Honestly. Why is being dead so much more difficult than being alive?

CHAPTER TWO

Evie rested her elbows on the burnished metal railing ringing the rooftop patio, beer bottle in one hand, looking down on the Strand. The three-story showplace was nestled in with the other multi-million-dollar homes along the coastal pedestrian promenade stretching between Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach.

The irony of her current situation was not lost on Evie. She was living in one of the Baron's houses. A five-bedroom, six-bathroom *cottage* as he called it worth six million dollars on the current market. The irony lay in the fact she and the world were in this mess precisely because of him.

The Baron was a Fallen Angel who lost a wing when he lost his heavenly status thousands of years before. He'd needed a replacement. Specifically, Evie's wing. Apparently, angelic wings were a lot like organ donors. You needed a perfect match.

He'd waited a long time for her and was not going to let it go. In a deal with Trick's demon master, he planned to kill Evie and take her wing. Trick took the death meant for her. To bring Trick back, and save a lot of innocent lives, Evie sacrificed a wing and her heavenly Grace.

Her choice set in motion a harrowing chain of events.

Short version: a horde of ancient Daemon were released from their angelic prison

To stop the Daemon – who felt they should now guide mankind's destiny – Evie was forced to partner with the Baron to storm one of the gates of heaven to free his witchy wife. Ms. Witchy Wife has the power – hopefully -- to recapture the Daemon. That heavenly storming effort took the energy of three souls. One of them, Father James. He was Evie's mentor, friend, and formerly the West Coast head of the Bureau of Checks and Balances.

With Father James gone and Evie busy storming the gates of Heaven, the Daemon leader usurped control of the Bureau and St. Jude's. In those few hours, Evie had lost not only her support team but her home.

Goodbye cozy apartment. Hello, former enemy's house.

The marine layer was hanging far offshore tonight, leaving the stars shining brightly above the Pacific.

Evie sighed. Today would probably be much like yesterday. Minus the appearance of Orcamen and Fae Courtiers, please God. And the one before that, and the one before that. Except for yesterday's attack, the last two weeks since Elysia had usurped control of St. Jude's had been quiet.

Quiet in a scary way.

Evie and her gang of misfits had accomplished precisely zero in their quest to rid Los Angeles and the world of the rebel Daemon intent on changing humanity. An attack on St. Jude's was out of the question since Elysia threatened to kill the innocents working for the BCB inside the building.

This hadn't seemed to bother Gaius who insisted the good of the many outweigh the few. This came as a surprise to no one. Gaius was a former Roman Centurion accustomed to indiscriminate slaughter. Given current events, his warrior-angel status was seen as a plus by the rest of the group.

Lucky for the Acolytes and other workers, Evie was in charge.

She heard the door to the terrace slide open. She didn't need to turn around to know Trick had joined her. His energy preceded him, washing over her in a warm, sensual wave. She wanted to slide her arm around his waist, pull him close and kiss him deeply. Breath in the wonderful smell of sage and desert air that seemed to cling to him.

Instead, she smiled, lifting her beer. He held out his own, clinking bottles. He joined her leaning on the railing, keeping about a foot away.

Her heart constricted, tightening in her chest like a noose. The distance a sign of their new relationship. If he got any closer, his skin would start to blister. They'd been so very close before Evie had taken the black wing.

"*Sooo*, walking orcas. That was a first," drawled Trick.

"Yep," Evie breathed, not trusting herself to say more.

"I suspected Inuit mythology. Had a few run-ins with their shamans back when I was working for my demon master. Met a Tupilaq." He shook his head, making a face. "Nasty piece of work. Inuit monster made from animal parts and human corpses. They set it to sniff out a specific enemy."

"Let me guess," said Evie getting herself under control. "They sent it after you."

Trick chuckled, taking another drink of beer. "Always a favorite with shamans, me. Then

there's the Kigatilik demon. That one specifically kills shamans." He gave an evil chuckle. "Used that on the one that had sent the Tupilaq after me."

"What the hell were you even doing in the arctic harassing the locals?" Evie demanded.

He waved a hand in the air, "Can't remember exactly. Gold? Oil? Something like that. No walking orcas though. Not a one. I looked through a few sources but couldn't find anything like them."

Oh, for Melinda and the busy worker bees at St. Jude's, Evie thought. Melinda Tahl headed the research and technology division at St. Jude's. Before the Daemon took over, Melinda's people were miracle workers. Identifying and tracking all manner of supernatural races and creatures. She'd have sent a photo to them and gotten an answer on the Orcamen in no time. Poor Melinda. She'd stayed, believing she was still fighting the good fight.

"Do you think the Daemon brought them specifically for us?" she asked Trick. "Seems like a lot of effort with no guarantee we'd hang out at the beach."

"But you did go to the beach. You and Gaius followed the Daemon right there."

Evie shrugged, "Guess so."

"And remember, the Dameon are still new to the modern world. They've been prisoners for ten thousand years. Learning to trust all this new technology takes time."

"The old ways," said Evie. "Curses, demons, hexes."

"Yeah. Not for long though. They're fast learners."

Evie's head jerked up as her white wing extended of its own accord. Her free hand went to her sword hilt only to stop as the familiar wave of energy reached her.

Trick set his beer bottle down, tensing.

"It's okay," she told him.

The Baron sailed silently from the sky to land on the roof, a slight woman cradled in his arms.

The witch Sofia.

His wife.

The woman immediately walked to Evie and hugged her tightly.

"How fine to see you again, my fierce angel," she sighed in a breathy voice.

They hadn't met since the night Evie and the Baron brought her back to earth.

Evie was not much of a hugger, but she did her best to return the embrace. “Thank you. Good to see you on your feet.”

Sofia stood back and swept an elegant curtsy. “I am much recovered.”

“Yes, yes,” said the Baron, waving one hand brusquely. “We’ve been attacked.”

Evie’s other wing popped out. “Tell me.”

“Daemon came to the house accompanied by a SWAT team of Acolytes from the BCB. One attacked from above. The other below.”

“We were watching the tele-vi-si-on,” Sofia added, pronouncing the word slowly. Her words were heavily accented but at least Evie could understand her.

After the rescue, even with Evie’s angelic gift, her words were nothing but jumbled nonsense.

The Baron was currently in his Malibu mansion about an hour up the coast from the Hermosa Beach house.

“They were able to get through the wards,” the Baron said. “That should not have been possible.”

“No, it should not,” agreed Sofia in her deeply accented voice. “Next time I will set up the wards myself. I was not up to it when we first arrived.”

She meant when she first arrived back on *earth*. Sofia was an ancient witch imprisoned in a heavenly sarcophagus for nearly ten thousand years. Evie had been a partner in her rescue.

She hadn’t seen the witch since they returned from that journey. Evie thought she looked much better. Well, she could hardly have been worse. Slim, and slight, the ancient witch’s long brown hair was held back in a simple ponytail. She had a hint of color in her cheeks, a little more roundness to her body. She wore a blue dress with stars that came to midcalf and a silky kimono-sleeved navy tunic over it. She was barefoot. Evie had a feeling the Baron was carrying her everywhere she would let him. Not because she could not walk but to keep her close.

Evie glanced at the Baron. He was looking at his wife with such warmth it was almost painful. Evie had looked at Trick like that. And he at her. Before...

She shrugged off the memory.

Trick scanned the skies looking for pursuit. Daemon could fly almost as fast as angels. “How did you get away?”

The Baron whistled sharply. A half dozen owls descended from above, silently perching on the metal railing of the roof.

“I have sentinels.”

“Holy Harry Potter,” breathed Trick looking at the tawny birds.

The birds stared solemnly back.

“They gave me enough warning to grab our escape bag and Sofia. I hid in the clouds as they descended upon the house.”

Evie walked over to the side of the terrace facing the street. No sign of SWAT teams sneaking up on them.

“Do you think they know where we are?” she asked the Baron.

“Possible. You should be prepared with anything you wish to take. Just in case.”

Evie’s stomach sank into her socks. “What about Father James? Wasn’t he with you?”

The owls screeched, making Evie jump.

The Baron looked up but made no move to grab his sword.

Gaius sailed down, as silently as the owls. He had his sword ready.

“Danger?” he asked.

“Not at the moment,” answered Evie. “The Baron and Sofia were attacked by a group of acolytes and Daemon at his home.”

“That is not good,” said Gaius. “Do we know how they found him?” He addressed his question to Evie, keeping his face turned away from the Baron. Whatever earthly or celestial angelic bureau had sent him to help Evie with the Daemon problem, told him to follow her lead. She’d ordered him not to attack the Baron. Gaius was not pleased. No surprise there. His answer to most situations was ‘kill it/him/her/them.’

“How could they know which wards you had? Magical ones I mean.” He had magical knowledge far beyond Evie’s. She couldn’t set a ward if her afterlife depended on it.

“Your man Leo set up the digital security. I crafted protective wards to hide our position.”

“They are Daemon...” Evie started to say

The Baron shook his head. “No. Not enough. I am divine.”

“Or was,” mumbled Trick.

The Baron ignored him.

“Perhaps they have a divine being working for them?” asked Gaius.

All eyes turned to him.

“It was long before my time. But... I would guess not all angels fought for heaven.”

“No,” said Sofia, joining in for the first time. “They did not. Even among the Watchers, there was dissent. How many Watchers approached you, Miss Grace, initially?”

“Four.”

Sofia pursed her lips.

“There are more, aren’t there?” asked Evie with a sigh. “A lot?”

“No. Not many. But more than four.”

Gaius cocked his head, uncannily looking like the owls in the same position. “What could they hope to accomplish? The Baron is not actively seeking to overturn them.”

Trick pointed at Sofia.

The witch dipped again into a curtsy.

“Ah, I see. They wished to secure the witch. The Daemon believe her powers will be used to imprison them again.”

“That’s their fear,” said the Baron. Turning to look at Trick, he flexed his wings. “I did, however, provide Mr. McKitrick and your pet Russian with bypass spells in case of an emergency.”

Evie turned to Trick.

“Don’t look at me,” he said putting both palms out. “I didn’t hand over any codes.” He jogged to the terrace door disappearing inside.

A short time later, he reappeared pushing a yawning Leo ahead of him.

Leo was tall and lanky, pale-skinned with sleepy gray eyes and a shaggy head of dark brown curls.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he noticed the owls. “Ahh!” he squawked, jumping back and colliding with Trick. “Why are there birds?”

Trick wriggled around the tall Russian. “They belong to the Baron,” he explained. “Go. Sit.” He pointed at one of the patio chairs.

Leo sank down rubbing his eyes again. He was wearing a white ‘I heart California’ tee shirt and a pair of baggy plaid sleep pants. Evie thought he looked tired. Beyond woken up-in-

the-middle-of-the-night tired. His normally bright eyes were dull and ringed with dark circles. His cheeks were sunken, his normally clean-shaven face rough.

Trick quickly explained about the attack.

Leo shook his head, "It is not possible for them to break the digital code on the electronic alarms."

"Could they have hacked into your computer?" Evie asked. "The tech team from St. Jude's is still in residence. You guys all have similar skills."

Leo sat up, his mouth set. "No. No, no, no," he slapped the large patio dining table with his hand. "We do not have *similar* skills, Miss Grace. My firewalls are impenetrable. That is why I was brought over from St. Petersburg."

Trick made a placating gesture. "Whoa, cowboy. Take it easy."

Leo slumped back into his chair as though the outburst had tired him. "I am sorry," he mumbled. "Very tired."

"I can see that," said Evie.

The Baron tilted his head to one side as he gave the Russian tech a searching look.

The owls perched behind him on the balcony rail mimicked his tilt and Evie had to stifle a laugh.

"The sigils to bypass my entry spells are in your files as well, are they not?" he asked.

"Yes, yes of course," said Leo. "But my equipment is secure." He winced, moving his hand to rub his back. "I follow the protocols. CIA, Russian security. I know these."

Sofia approached, slowly circling the Russian. "Your equipment is secure, yes. But...are you?"

"I am loyal," said Leo in a hoarse, angry voice. "You cannot doubt me."

"I don't," said Evie. "You're a true friend."

"I am," he asserted, wincing again.

"Are you in pain?" Trick asked. "You keep making that face."

"I am making no face," asserted Leo, his accent thicker.

"Yeah, you are," insisted Trick.

Leo's jaw tightened and his brows drew together.

"There," said Trick pointing. "That face."

Evie had seen it too.

Sofia raised her hands, closing her eyes. A white glow emanated from her palms. Everyone stayed quiet except for Leo. He twisted around trying to see what she was doing.

“What? What is it?” He jumped out of the chair. “Ow, ow, ow. Is that you? What are you doing?” He had both hands pressed to his lower back.

“Let me see.” Trick pulled up Leo’s tee shirt.

“I don’t see anything,” said Trick.

“Me neither,” said Evie joining him. She ran a hand over Leo’s skin. “I don’t feel anything.”

Sofia narrowed her eyes, squinting. “Something is there.”

Trick let go of Leo’s shirt, took a step back, and stared at the Russian. “I wonder...” he started to say.

“Wonder what?” asked Evie, “spill it.”

“Well...I wonder if they got the digital codes and pictures of the sigils directly from Leo.”

Leo looked shocked. “No! How... why...I am loyal. I am good ...the acolyte...” He reverted to Russian, speaking angrily before putting a hand to his eyes. He said something else in Russian before switching to halting English. “I am...I am not well.”

And with that, he fell out of the chair.

CHAPTER THREE

Evie grabbed Leo just in time to protect his head from connecting with the concrete. She eased him full length onto the ground.

“Trick?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

“I think they got the information from Leo.”

Before Evie could protest, he said, “Not with his knowledge. The Daemon have a spy in the house.”

He reached under Leo’s arms. “Evie, take his feet. Let’s get him downstairs.”

Together they maneuvered him to his bedroom on the second floor.

They laid him on the bed, taking off the moccasins he’d put on after Trick pulled him out of bed.

The Baron, Sofia, and Gaius followed. Even the owls soared into the hallway landing in a row on the hall carpet.

She gave the Fallen Angel a look. “Do we really need the birds?”

He shrugged. “They are still in guard mode.”

“*Whoo, whoo, whoo,*” hooted the birds, swiveling their heads back and forth.

Evie shook a finger at the Baron. “Do not let them poop on the carpet.”

The Baron looked down his nose at her. “Must I remind you, Miss Grace, this is *my* carpet. Whether my owls relieve themselves on it is not your business.”

Evie rolled her eyes. She was not going to get in an argument with the Fallen Angel about owl poop.

“Okay,” said Trick, drawing everyone’s attention. “This is what I’m thinking. When I was with my demon, he had a *spinnengeist* bound for his use. A spider ghost. Handy little magical parasite. Quite rare. Very hard to acquire. Spinnengeist fasten onto their victim and spin a web to connect to their mind. Sort of the supernatural version of a spy camera. Spinnengeist see through the victim’s eyes, sending images to its master through a psychic connection. If my theory is right, it *watched* Leo set up your new digital security system and input the protective sigils. My question is, how did they know to target Leo? A spinnengeist needs not only a specific

victim, but items belonging to that person to lock onto a scent or vibration or whatever the hell they use.”

“Melinda,” Evie said immediately. “She was Leo’s boss and she’s still in charge of technology and research at St. Jude’s. She must have told the Daemon she suspected Leo of helping us.” Evie felt a little knot of pain saying that. She’d liked the woman. Loyal to St. Jude’s and Father James. Or so she’d thought. When the new regime had taken over the Acolyte HQ, she’d fallen in line without a quiver.

“They could have tracked him here,” said Gaius. “We have been expecting an attack since we took up residence. In fact, is it not odd no one has come?”

Trick shook his head. “Not at all.” He held up a finger. “One, if my theory is right, they have a spy in our midst.” He held up a second finger. “And two, we’re not much more than an irritant at this point. Sofia is the target. They know she’s out. Only she has the spells that could force the Daemon back into the Imp’s Bottle. After all, she did it once before, why not again?”

The Baron moved closer to his wife, putting one arm around her waist and extending a wing as if to shield her back.

Trick looked down at the unconscious Leo. “First things first. We’ve got to get the parasite off.”

“Because of the dreams,” stated Evie.

Trick looked grim. “No. Because the spinnenghast is a parasite. The spider siphons energy from the host until eventually, it kills them.” He began cutting away Leo’s shirt with his dagger. “Have you met an *affengeist*?”

“I haven’t.” Evie looked at the others.

No one said anything.

“Monkey ghost,” Trick continued. “They control their victims’ actions. You know, instead of looking through their eyes. Both gheist are like chameleons, matching anything near them perfectly. The synchronicity and speed of their movements make them almost too fast to catch.”

Trick finished cutting away Leo’s shirt while Evie loosened his sweatpants. She slid them off. Luckily for the man’s modesty, he was wearing boxers underneath.

Leo’s skin felt clammy.

“He doesn’t look good,” Evie said, more to herself than Trick. “How could we not have noticed?”

“I did,” said Trick. “I thought he had a virus. Sore throat, headache, low-grade fever. That sort of thing. Leo was taking ibuprofen and soldiering on. He’s not a whiner.”

“Right. How could *I* not have noticed?” she said in the same tone. “Father James had accused her on more than one occasion of being too self-absorbed. Ignoring those around her. He wasn’t wrong and it looked like she hadn’t improved. He’d be disappointed in her.

“There are signs,” said Sofia, her accent was sibilant and thick. “Vivid dreams.”

“He probably thought they were fever dreams,” said Trick.

Trick began sliding his hands slowly over Leo’s skin. “Remember, the key word is chameleons. They blend in perfectly with their surroundings, no matter what’s near them. And crazy fast.”

Evie watched intently, asking, “If it’s so fast, won’t it just run away and hide somewhere in the house?”

Trick kept up his slow examination of Leo’s skin. “Can’t. It’s attached to its victim by the webbing.”

Evie joined Trick. Running her hands carefully over his body. “What if it just scampers around underneath.”

“Good point. Let’s try and balance him on his side.”

Using their knees, they got him on his side. Trick took the front, Evie the back.

“What am I looking for again? Or feeling for, I guess.”

Evie heard a little snicker from Sofia. Looking over she saw the witch had her hand over her mouth, her eyes twinkling.

“Okay. What?” said Evie. “Why are you laughing?”

“So...what is the word... charming? Yes. Charming. Watching you feel for the little pest. Such a small delicate conjuring compared to the affengeist. So difficult to find.”

Trick stopped what he was doing. He looked at Sofia with a frown.

Sofia gave a wave of her hand. “Please, carry on. Do not let me interfere in your investigation.”

Trick let Leo fall onto his back. He came around the bed to confront Sofia.

“Ma’am,” Trick said, his Western drawl thicker, “if you can do this better.” He made a sweeping bow. “By all means take over.”

“No, no,” she said obviously trying not to laugh.

“Oh, I insist,” said Trick.

His tone made the Baron pull his wife closer.

“Leo is our friend, and he is suffering,” said Evie, joining Trick. “If you can help, we would appreciate it.”

“Really?” Sofia said as if this was a surprise. “Shall I? Very well. If you truly do not mind.”

Evie was beginning to lose patience with the witch. She knew far more than all of them combined about curses and hexes. She could have offered to help right from the start.

Gracefully extricating herself from her husband’s grip, she indicated Evie and Trick should move away from the bed.

She held out her hands and a thick leather-bound book fully a foot tall *poofed* into the air.

Evie jumped in surprise, her sword already half out of its scabbard before she could help it. Trick put a hand on her shoulder and she re-sheathed the weapon.

The book floated at chest height in front of the witch.

“Allow me to look up this spider ghost in my grimoire.”

The book flipped open, pages turning as she wriggled her fingers over it.

“*Habentis maleficia,*” snorted Gaius

Trick looked to Evie, eyebrows raised.

“Witchcraft,” she mouthed almost silently.

“Ah,” he nodded.

“*Cloaca magicae,*” the Roman Centurion said loudly. He spun on his heel stalking out of the room, scattering the owls as he strode by.

“Sewer magic,” Evie translated. “Or words to that effect.”

The Baron’s wings gave an angry flutter and his eyes sparked.

Literally sparked.

The temperature in the room sank. The Baron’s sword was black ice, his magic bitterly cold.

Evie sighed. Keeping those two apart was no picnic.

Gaius did not like the Baron. Period. The angel's fallen status labeled him indelibly and forever as the enemy. The Roman saw his purpose in black and white. You were good or you were bad. The good lived. The bad died. Preferably at his hands. There was very little wiggle room in between.

This attitude was common in both Earthbound and Celestial Angels. Or so Evie had found. Personally, she thought life and life after death were colored in far more subtle hues. Those beliefs had not endeared her to the higher-ups. Not that she cared. As a detective, Evie always had trouble following the chain of command. That attitude hadn't changed significantly in death.

Sofia closed the floating book with a snap, *poofing* it into a cloud of dust. Sweeping her silky tunic to one side, she slid the sash from back to front revealing a dozen small pouches, their drawstrings looped over the belt. She laid a finger delicately on several in turn. For a moment she went back and forth before settling on two that she quickly unstrung and handed to the Baron.

He held one in each hand as she untied the strings and dipped her fingers inside. Sprinkling twos measures of dust in her left palm. Standing over Leo, she began to whisper.

The words slid over Evie's skin like ice water. She couldn't stop the chill as it crawled slowly down her spine then right back up again. Her white wing rustled uneasily. Her black wing, on the other hand, hummed with pleasure. Predictably, it liked dark magic.

The room turned cold. Evie saw Trick's breath turn to vapor as the temperature dropped from chilly to freezing in a few heartbeats.

Sofia continued her whispered chant. Bending closer to Leo, she slowly followed the lines of his body from the top of his head to his bare feet, hovering over his skin with an open palm.

The temperature slid even lower. The owls in the hall huddled close together. Frost began to form on the bedroom window as a chilling fog swirled out from under the bed, quickly rising to their calves.

Moving her fingers in intricate gestures, Sofia lowered her hand until she touched Leo's back. Ice crystals flowed from her fingertips onto his bare skin forming complex patterns of pentagrams, circles, arrows, and crosses. Cupping her other hand, she slowly sprinkled the dust

from the pouches over the designs. The dust motes swirled in the air before drifting down to fill the patterns with light.

Leo moaned. One of those moans where it was difficult to tell if came from pain or pleasure

The crystals increased, growing exponentially. They spread over his body, even into his hair and onto the soles of his feet. They continued to expand and increase in such density that Leo appeared encased in a suit of crystal.

Sofia kept chanting. Moving her hand purposefully over Leo's body, she stopped at the base of his neck. A small smile creased her face. From a sheath at her waist she withdrew a tiny dagger no longer than Evie's index finger. Keeping one hand in place by his neck, swift as a cobra strike, she stabbed down, the thin blade penetrating the ice.

Leo began to shake.

"Hold him!" she shouted.

Trick and Evie leaped to the bedside.

Evie sat on his legs. Trick leaned his weight on Leo's shoulders.

The Russian tech continued to thrash, shattering the ice covering his body.

Sofia kept pressing the knife into Leo's neck. Blood pooled under the coating of frost, running down his skin to drip on the bed.

Her chant sped up until it was impossible to tell where one word began and the other ended. More blood spurted from around the knife.

Trick and Evie exchanged worried glances.

The owls all moved closer as did the Baron.

Leo's thrashing became convulsive. Without warning, he stiffened, straight as a board. A burst of green goo shot out from the wound in Leo's neck splattering the ceiling. His body went limp.

Evie slid off his legs, guessing Sofia had accomplished her goal.

The witch held up the small blade. Impaled on the end was a ghoulish sight. A black spider that looked like it was covered in spiny thorns. Instead of eight legs, Evie counted twelve. It had a small head with oversized fangs, long and straight, too big for its body. It hung unmoving from the little blade.

“There,” said Sofia, handing the tiny dagger to Trick. “If you will be so good as to burn this cursed rubbish until nothing is left but ash. Then scatter the ashes in the ocean. The saltwater will ensure it cannot reassemble.”

Trick gingerly took the disgusting thing from her, holding it at arm’s length.

“Now,” she said sharply when he did not immediately leave. “And bring back my dagger.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stepped smartly out the door.

Melting ice crystals were sliding off Leo onto the bed. Evie checked his pulse and breathing. Both seemed good. She grabbed some towels from the ensuite bathroom. Every bedroom had its own full bath. The Baron’s house was gorgeously appointed. After all, he’d had thousands upon thousands of years to amass his fortune.

Evie didn’t care how many bathrooms it had. She would have traded anything to be back in her cramped studio apartment at St. Jude’s.

Armed with a handful of towels she began drying Leo off before he could catch a chill. She rolled him first from one side of the bed to the other, stripping off the soggy sheets and blanket. She didn’t bother remaking it. Instead, she threw some soft fleece blankets over him and called it a night.

The Baron and Sofia disappeared right after Trick left. Probably to commandeer one of the bedrooms. As the Baron had pointed out, this was his house.

The owls stayed to watch. Their big eyes stared at her, apparently fascinated by Evie’s every move. Once Leo was tucked in, she spread her wings and shooed them back up the hallway and out onto the rooftop terrace.

They circled the house once before settling back on the metal railing lining the glass walls of the terrace.

She tossed the bedding into the washer in the laundry room. After pulling out another beer and a bag of chips, she settled herself on the couch to wait for Trick’s return from the beach.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Evie, wake up. You’re dreaming. Evie!”

Evie opened her eyes gasping for breath, still feeling the heat of the flames. Trick was leaning over her, his hands on her shoulders, his warm breath on her skin.

“Trick,” she breathed, automatically reaching for him.

He pulled back; alarm written all over his face.

For a single breath, she didn’t understand. Then she did.

Right. They shouldn’t touch. Wait. He’d had his hands on her shoulders.

“Your hands,” she sat up, “Are you okay.”

He showed her his palms. “I’m okay.” He pointed at her and she saw the soft throw draped over her shoulders and chest. “There was enough material between us.”

“Good,” she said trying to sound sincere.

Yeah. There was nothing good about this terrible, awful, horrible change in her afterlife.

He gave her a weak smile.

“You always say you don’t dream.”

“I don’t.”

“Then I’d say this was like when you were dreamwalking me. Waking dreams.”

Waking dreams. Evie felt sick. When she’d first gotten the Red Queen’s wing, she’d acted out her dreams. Act out as in kidnapping and forcing Trick to have sex while she burned his skin with every touch.

Those waking dreams had stopped as inexplicably as they’d begun.

“I don’t want them back,” her voice cracked. “I don’t.”

He spread his hands, “If it had been a waking dream like before, you’d have woken up wherever the dream took you. But here you are on the lounge chair, on the roof. Unless you were dreaming you were on the roof...” he let the sentence trail.

“No. No. It was the vision. The one I had before the Daemon were set free. Los Angeles burning. Angels fighting angels. Humans turning against heaven.”

“Oh, good, so nothing heavy.” He gave her a wry smile and she laughed.

“No. Nothing heavy.”

The sun was just coming up, the sky the palest of blue.

Evie heard a step on the stairs.

Leo, wrapped in fleece blankets and leaning on the banister raised his hand in a weak wave. “Hallo?” he said before abruptly sneezing. He sniffled wetly. “I fear I am not well. Miss Grace, Mr. Trick. What did I miss last night?”

Evie stood so Trick could lead Leo to the lounge.

“So much,” she said and launched into an explanation of the spinnergeist.

“Through my eyes? I am the spy?” Leo was already pale and even paler after he said this. “This is terrible.”

Trick patted his back. “The Baron and his Missus got it out safely. Could have been worse.”

“No, you are not understanding,” he stumbled over the words. “Don't...don't understand. The information... the security information. Not only is it for the Fallen one. I have set up security for the others who ran from St. Jude's. Like me.”

Evie's stomach sank into her socks. “Oh no.”

“Also, the protective wards. For the houses. Miss Sara Reynolds was helping me, Miss Grace. You gave me her name.”

Evie had done just that. Sara Reynolds was a talented witch Evie had met on a case. She specialized in protective wards. The young woman had helped ward the Elemental Wizard Adam Lee's house after a nasty attack against him by a Ku Wizard controlling a nightmare Baku.

“Miss Reynolds went to their homes and set the wards. Then she gave me the sigils.” He pointed at himself. “I put them in their files for backup. *Me*. This spider creature has seen what I did.”

He struggled to sit up. Evie jumped to put a hand under his arm.

“Help me. Please. We must warn them.”

Leo hadn't been the only acolyte at St. Jude's to correctly read the writing on the wall. Perhaps a dozen Evie knew of had run.

She helped him to the bedroom they'd turned into a tech center. Five monitors in varying sizes were lined up on an L-shaped desk they'd found for free online.

In addition to the big monitors, he had three laptops, half a dozen keyboards, plus assorted tablets and a couple of smartphones hooked into the network.

Groaning, he settled himself in a chair and began bringing up files. Trick leaned against one corner of the desk; arms crossed.

Kicking herself mentally, Evie called Sarah. She hadn't even considered the potential danger she was placing the witch in.

The call went to voicemail. Halfway through her warning, the speaker came on.

"Evie, Sarah. What are you saying?"

"The Daemon. They planted a sort of bug in Leo's head. They've seen what he's seen over the past few days. Not sure how far back. They attacked the Baron's house last night. We're checking now on the acolytes you helped. You know, with the protective wards. They may know about you. Maybe not where you live but..."

"Got it. How about Adam? Is he okay?"

She and Adam had started dating shortly before he was murdered by the Red Queen during the ceremony to free the rebel Daemon. Sarah knew he had died. She also knew he was back, death being a rather fluid term in the supernatural world. Sarah had learned of Adam's new life when the Elemental Wizard walked in on Leo during a conference call with Sarah.

Adam and Sarah weren't exactly dating but they weren't exactly not dating either. Dating, like death, was also rather a fluid term in their world.

Adam now served Princess Shao Lin, daughter of the Ghost King, Zhong Kui. He was currently on loan, for lack of a better word, to her merry band of misfits because of a debt the Princess owed Father James.

"He's good. With Father James in Mexico looking for an artifact. I can't say more than that."

"Okay. I'll watch my back."

"And your front and both sides up and down," added Evie. "The Daemon are scary powerful. If you ever need a place to hide, come to us. I'm the one who put you in danger."

"Got it. And Evie? Don't sweat it. I've always got something after me." She disconnected with a laugh.

Evie stepped behind Leo's chair. A row of names was highlighted on one screen.

Leo pointed. "These are the ones."

“Can you call them?” Trick asked.

“Yes, yes. I have a VoIP and much routing to keep from being traced. I shall begin.”

Four calls went to voicemail. Two were nothing. No message. Nothing.

The Baron stopped as he walked by the open door. He looked at Evie first.

Her distress must have been written all over her face.

“Tell me.”

“We can’t reach the acolytes,” she said in a rush. “The ones Leo helped with wards and digital security.”

‘None of them?’

She shook her head.

“You’re going to check them out.” It was not a question.

“Of course,” she said.

“Sofia is creating new wards for this house. I have a property in the hills. We shall go there later today. Mr. McKitrick knows where it is. You may have to regroup.”

Turning on his heel, he left the room.

“Miss Grace? I am sending their addresses to you.”

Trick waved his phone. “Send ‘em to mine, too. Evie and I can split up. Cover more ground.”

Heads together the two of them looked over the list.

Evie released her wings from their magical pocket. “I’ll take the ones in Thousand Oaks, Long Beach, and Pasadena. Those are the farthest.” She flexed her wings. “No traffic in the sky.”

Trick nodded. “Got it. I’ll take the motorcycle. These others are all near the South Bay.”

Leo gave them an anguished look. He didn’t need to say ‘hurry.’ They knew it might already be too late.

CHAPTER FIVE

Evie kept her magical *glamour* firmly in place as she glided silently onto the patio of the small bungalow in Thousand Oaks. Nick Morris, one of the field techs who worked setting up the BCB's hidden monitoring stations on cell towers around LA County, was renting this place.

Sidestepping a half dozen potted geraniums wilting in the sun, she started to peer through the patio doors then stopped. He was standing by the side of the house. Or part of him was. His shade, spirit, ghost, whatever you chose to call it watched her impassively. He raised a translucent arm to point at the door.

It wasn't locked.

Nick's body lay crumpled on the floor. There was no blood. He didn't smell. He should have. Dead bodies are not pleasant things.

Carefully turning him over, she saw the round burn mark that charred his shirt. Beyond a faint red mark on his chest, there was no wound. He was thirty-five years old according to the file Leo had given her. Now, he looked closer to a hundred and thirty-five.

The Daemon had weapons not so different from her Celestial sword. When she executed someone, stabbing them in the heart, the result appeared to be death from a massive heart attack. A Daemon's sword burned into a human's heart then drew their life force back with it. The result left a desiccated corpse like this one. Not exactly low profile.

A breath of cold air blew across her skin.

When she was a Celestially sanctioned Avenging Angel, the powers-that-be sent a death mark for her to track. The mark led Evie to her... what? Assignment? Target? Whoever she was expected to execute to avenge an innocent death. Now the dead sought her out. Asking for vengeance.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

Emotionless, the shade continued to point at his body.

"I see. I understand. You will be avenged."

Kneeling, she crawled on hands and knees around the body looking for any clue the Daemon might have left behind. Her angel vision was far sharper than anything humans or even animals possessed.

She saw a footprint in the carpet. Well, not a footprint. It looked like talons. Eagle's talons to be precise. She'd met several Daemon with eagle's heads

Under the couch she spotted a feather. A small one. Brown near the base, shading to blue at the tip. She put it to her nose and inhaled a distinctly herby smell. Rosemary, sage, pepper.

Bingo.

She zipped it into her jacket pocket. This feather would help her identify the murderer. Every Daeon, just like every angel had their own distinctive scent. She'd find the owner of this feather sooner or later.

"I will avenge you," she said again to the ghostly spirit of Nick Morris.

Though honestly, right now she was ready to channel her inner Gaius and take out any daemon she came across.

Before they lost St. Jude's, she would have called Melinda at the tech center to send a clean-up crew here to Thousand Oaks. That was then, this was now.

Calling the police was not an option. She'd come back later. After checking the other names on her list.

Bringing up the next address on the map app, she spread her wings for Pasadena.

The map led her to a cottage on the far side of Lake Avenue almost at the foot of the San Gabriel mountains. Evie didn't know Pasadena very well. It was not really a haven for demons or monsters. Lucky for the residents here. Very different from some other parts of Los Angeles County.

The house was a small copy of the main house, Craftsman-style in pale green and white. Single-story, set at the end of a long driveway. Lana Lopez lived here alone. She hadn't changed her address after quitting the BCB. Given the cost of rentals in California, Evie couldn't blame her.

The lock on the side door leading into the kitchen had been broken; the wooden frame was splintered.

Evie drew her sword.

Broken crockery littered the floor. A butcher knife was embedded in the wall. Through the kitchen, the little dining table had been upended and chairs lay on their sides.

No shade came out asking for revenge. That was good.

There was a buzzing undercurrent of magic zipping back and forth beneath her feet. Two different discordant currents. Like two melodies fighting for dominance. It grew stronger as she walked to the small hall by the front door. That's when she noticed the smell.

Not of death.

More like unwashed humans.

Evie found Lana curled in a ball on the floor of the walk-in closet in the second bedroom. She lay in a circle of protective wards. The sigils had been painted on all three walls and the ceiling. She must have fought her way here, then sealed the magic circle. They must be very strong wards if the Daemon couldn't break through.

However, nothing stopped them from burning the house down around the woman. That would have solved the problem in minutes. But they hadn't. Instead, the Daemon had drawn a second set of sigils between the first and the rest of the bedroom. A semicircle to imprison her inside the closet. They didn't need to make a complete circle. Unless she could smash her way through the back wall, she wasn't going anywhere. Perhaps they'd decided to leave her for later. Come back with magical backup to question her.

That made sense, Evie thought.

She was unconscious. Judging by her appearance she'd been here maybe three days. They must have had the spinnergeist longer than she and Trick realized. She was filthy, poor thing. Her lip split, one cheek, and both eyes swollen and purple from bruising. She'd fought hard to make it to the safe circle.

The Daemon's sigils were set up to keep someone *in*, not out. That meant Evie didn't need to know the dissolution spell, only negate the magical energy. That much she knew how to do. Running to the kitchen she searched for a container of sea salt. If this woman was a witch or friends with one, she'd surely have sea salt stashed somewhere to cleanse spells.

Bingo.

Under the sink was a cardboard container of Sel de Mer.

Grabbing a mixing bowl she filled it with water, adding a generous measure of the sea salt. Stirring it with her hand she poured the saltwater mixture over the Dameon's sigils. They sizzled and spat before bleeding away to smudges of black ink.

The second circle would be harder. Its purpose was to protect the person on the inside. That meant keeping those on the other side *out*. The magic was strong since the Daemon hadn't been able to break through.

If Lana would wake up, she could dissipate the magic with one sweep of her hand.

"Lana? Lana, can you hear me?"

No response.

"Lana, honey, please hear me."

Still nothing.

The poor girl was out. Evie swore to herself. If she couldn't wake the girl up, this damn protective circle was going to protect her to death.

Now what?

Drawing her sword, Evie touched the point to the edge of the circle. The sigils pulsed an angry red.

Okay. No sword.

No Melinda to call at St. Jude's and ask her to search for a spell or a witch to help.

If couldn't ask Melinda. Maybe she could ask the magic.

Getting down on her knees, Evie placed her hands by the outer edge of Lana's circle. The circle was set to repel those with violent intent.

Closing her eyes, she tried to open herself to the magic. Extending her white wing, she let it touch the edge. Again, the sigils flared red hot. Evie didn't move. She pictured helping Lana. Getting her to a hospital. Making sure she was protected. At the same time, she couldn't stop alternate plans from crowding into her head. Maybe she could ask Sarah Reynolds to come. Or a construction crew to dig her out from underneath. She had to help this young woman. She had to.

The heat left her hands as the circle powered down.

It had worked. The magic read her intent.

Miracles did happen.

Evie scooped up Lana, rushing to the bathroom. Turning on the shower, she rinsed her off first with her clothes on. Getting a pair of shears from the kitchen, she then cut away her clothing, stuffing everything into a trash bag. She kept warm water washing over her in the bath until she was clean then wrapped her towels. In her bedroom, she found some soft pajamas and underpants. Dressing her in those, then she called Leo.

“I’ve found Lana. She’s alive. Hurt but not seriously. Dehydrated. She needs an I.V. for sure. I can take her to a hospital but the Daemon will find her I’m pretty sure.”

The sound of clicking came over the phone. “You are in Pasadena. Pasadena, Pasadena. Let me see...Nothing there. Glendale? No. Los Feliz. Yes. Los Feliz. Ryan. Dr. Ryan Kim is a...a... Veterinary? Verterin...”

“Veterinarian?”

“That. Animal doctor. Helps us before. He. He helped us before. Good man.”

“What about Melinda? If Melinda knows about him, the Daemon know too.”

“Not everyone is telling Miss Melinda everything. Sometimes there is trouble. Injury. Embarrassment. You cannot see but I am making a *byvayet* face.”

Evie’s angel translation skills told her that meant, ‘It happens’ in Russian.

“Okay, text me the address. Can you call this person?”

“Yes. I am calling Dr. Kim now.”

As the angel flies, Los Feliz wasn’t far from Pasadena. Up and over the 134 Freeway to the 5, then follow Los Feliz boulevard. He was on the far side of the town according to the map app.

Dr. Kim was waiting for Evie as she touched down by the back door to the clinic, Lana had stirred a little. Evie tried to explain what was happening though she wasn’t sure how much got through the haze. Lucky for Lana today was Sunday. The office was closed except to emergencies. Evie released the cloaking *glamour* as she stepped onto the back porch/storage area.

“Whoa, tone it down,” said the man, putting a hand over his eyes.

“Sorry.”

When she wasn’t hidden beneath a *glamour* she shone LED high-beam bright to the Acolytes. Those who had sworn themselves in service to the greater good saw her true self

unless she willed it otherwise. If this man saw her glow, he must be more than just a casual helper. He had taken the Oath of Service.

Dr. Kim held the door open. Evie scooted in, following the man as he led the way to one of the examination rooms. A chorus of yelps, barks, and a few meows from the animals undergoing treatment accompanied them.

A pile of blankets and a fluffy pillow softened the cold metal of the examination table. Lana was small but it was made for animals, not humans. Her bare feet hung off the edge. Dr. Kim fastened a wide strap across her stomach to keep her from rolling off.

“I can take it from here,” he said, bringing out a blood pressure cuff.

Evie paused, looking around the cold, white room.

Taking in her expression, he smiled. “Don’t worry. I have a rehydration solution for humans. Once she’s recovered enough, I’ll have my husband Ben help me move her to our guest room. Ben knows of my work with the BCB.”

Ryan Kim was middle-aged. Asian. Clean cut and well built. In fact, he looked fully capable of lifting a recalcitrant St. Bernard onto the exam table without any effort at all.

Nevertheless.

Evie took his hand and angled her head so he would look into her eyes. She stared at him, seeing beyond the physical to his spiritual self. Soul gazing is a real thing for angels both Earthbound and Celestial. Evie needed to make sure he was more than just an Acolyte. Many of them had joined the Daemon thinking they were on the side of the righteous. She was not leaving Lana helpless without a look inside his heart.

He froze as her power swept through him. In his mind she saw...kindness...empathy. He had a good heart. A husband he loved...also...

Evie released his hand.

“You understand what we’re up against,” she said.

“I do. The Daemon are not here to help. I’ll take care of her.”

Evie nodded, knowing he spoke the truth. “Coordinate with Leo, okay?”

She called Trick as she took to the skies. The call went to voicemail. He could be on the motorcycle and not able to answer.

One more person on her list. According to her phone, Long Beach was around thirty miles from Los Feliz. She'd been lucky with Lana. She didn't expect that luck to hold. The Daemon were always a step ahead of them.

And she was right.

CHAPTER SIX

Four Daemon held Trick wrapped head to toe in chains thick enough to hold an elephant.

“Surrender,” said one of the Daemon.

They were in the mud on the Port of Long Beach side of a long overpass. Wavelets lapped at the shore and despite the mud, the air smelled of the sea. The sun was setting and shadows growing long. Thick stands of evergreens shielded their desperate group from a couple of multi-story buildings on either side of the overpass.

Two humans lay unmoving at Trick’s feet. Rope circling their wrists.

Evie smelled blood.

At the Long Beach home of Ryan Kim, she’d found the French windows at the back of the house shattered. A large golden retriever lay just inside. Dead, poor thing.

There’d been a battle, that was obvious. The living room was a wreck. A few blood spatters on the carpet and couch. No Ryan Kim. The Daemon hadn’t made any attempt to hide the body of Nick Morris. They’d left Lorna Lopez in the warded closet, intending to return later. Why would they take this one?

He must be alive and they were hoping to use him as leverage.

She’d tried Trick’s number again.

No answer.

Where had he been going?

She called Leo.

“What news from Trick?” she asked as he picked up.

“He called me from Torrance. Ms. Paulina Ermakova is alive. The Daemon had not attacked her yet. I have found a new safe house. Not on any of my old records. No nasty spider ghosts will see. Mr. McKitrick dropped her off on his motorcycle.”

“What about now? Where is he now?”

There was the soft clicking of a keyboard. “Lawndale was next on his list. Tianna Washington. Here, I will text the address.”

“No. Wait. Can you do a ‘find my phone’ thing for Trick? He said you were tracking our phones.”

“I have disabled it. Because of the spider ghost.”

“Well, can you enable it again? Like fast.”

“There is trouble?” he asked.

“There is definitely trouble.”

As she waited, she brought a blanket from the bedroom and spread it over the dog.

“He is in Long Beach,” Leo said coming back on the line. He texted her a screenshot of a map. “Near Pier H, by the Port.”

“I’m heading there now.”

“Shall I come?”

“No time.”

It was undoubtedly a trap.

Evie hoped the trap included keeping their hostages alive.

On her way, she got a call from an unknown number. She answered it assuming correctly it was the Daemon.

“We have your people,” said a deep, rumbling voice.

“Of course you do,” answered Evie with a sigh of exasperation.

“If you don’t...”

“Stop,” said Evie interrupting the rumbling voice. “If I don’t blah, blah, blah, kill everyone. Got it. See you soon,” and she disconnected.

Tracking the map app to the Port, Evie slowed. She flew slowly over the city trying to catch her breath. Her chest felt tight. As if she couldn’t get enough air. Which was sort of funny. She did need to breathe probably, but she did. Gaius and Trick, too.

They gave a whole new meaning to the concept of the Living Dead. They breathed. They ate. They slept. They loved. It was so funny. Only not in a ha, ha way.

In fact, there was nothing to laugh about at all in her current situation. How could one ex-vice detective turned Avenging Angel hope to win against an ancient, semi-divine band of Daemon with thousands of years to plot their revenge? The Celestials weren’t going to be much help. They were very arbitrary in the stands they took for or against humanity. Who understood the machinations of heaven? Not Evie.

“You don’t have to win the war,” she admonished herself. “Win the day.”

The city stretched out below her. Despite its name, Long Beach downtown was noticeably absent of beachy vibes. Block after block of low-rise office buildings and endless condos crowded the streets. Neighborhoods, some nice, some not so nice tumbled from the shore to the freeways.

She swooped low, skimming over the Ferris wheel by the shore then turned heading for Terminal Island and the Port.

Swooping under the freeway, her sword glowing brightly in the shadow it cast, she realized the Daemon had been planning this takedown.

Flanking the three Daemon were two crocodile/hippo Destroyers. *Ammat* in Egyptian, mythical beast of the Underworld. Only they weren’t so mythical. They were your basic cannon-on-legs. They fired sonic blasts generated by some epic monster furnace in their bellies.

Trick and Adam had fought some in a battle by the Los Angeles River. Evie had been busy negotiating some umpteenth level of Heaven in the search for the Baron’s wife. By the time she, the Baron, and Sofia had returned, the Destroyers were toast.

He’d described the battle. Grenades had been a deciding factor in their victory. Too bad Evie hadn’t thought to bring any.

Barely touching the ground, she paused waiting for the Daemon to make their demands. Something along the lines of ‘Surrender or we will kill the hostages.’

Instead, one of them snapped their fingers.

The ungainly beasts at their side let loose deep-throated sonic blasts. The roar was like standing in front of an artillery gun combined with the sound of the T-Rex in the *Jurassic Park* movies amplified about a hundred times. The blast knocked Evie flying into one of the concrete supports in the overpass leaving what she was sure was an Evie-shaped imprint.

She took to the skies. The other Devourer released another sonic blast. Evie dropped but the shock wave spread far and wide, catching her up and sending her tumbling into the shallow water.

There was such a ringing in her ears she couldn’t hear.

The Devourers charged. They were pretty agile for such ungainly creatures. Their short legs pumped as Evie flew out of their reach, putting the concrete support between her and them.

She came behind the Daemon, fast and silent. One spun, meeting her sword with his own. Turning to fight he swept his wings down bringing him on level with Evie. She closed in on him instead of fleeing, bringing her sword around in a sweeping move she sliced through both his wings.

The Daemon screamed in pain falling to earth practically on top of the hostages.

That's when they made their move.

She'd seen the tiny twitch of movement from the supposedly bound and helpless Acolytes. The Daemon had perhaps made the mistake of thinking these were an ordinary man and woman.

No, no, no. They had given themselves to the service of the BCB.

Navy Seals had nothing on Acolytes.

As soon as the Daemon fell screaming, one of the hostages thrust a slim dagger through the foot of the Daemon nearest her. Scissoring her legs around in a truly impressive martial arts move, the woman swept the Daemon's legs right from under him, pulling the dagger with her as she moved. She brought it across the Daemon's throat. Blood spurted high and thick.

As soon as she moved, the man was on his feet with a blade of his own. He thrust it under the chin of the lion-headed Daemon all the way to the hilt.

"Go!" screamed Trick.

The two humans scabbled through the mud as the Daemon swayed. They were badly injured but not out. Daemon had healing abilities like Evie and Trick They'd soon recover.

Trick burned red hot, his powers were heat based. As in the fires of Hell sort of heat.

The heavy chains melted from him like wax off a hot candle.

The only uninjured Daemon lifted a mace to strike. Trick managed to get one arm free. Grabbing the hilt, it flared like a torch forcing the Daemon to drop the now flaming weapon. Still glowing red hot, Trick grabbed the Daemon around the neck and twisted. There was a sickening crunch and the stink of burning skin.

Evie didn't have time to see any more.

The Devourers had come back and were readying another blast. This time at the human hostages. Evie swept onto the nearest monster, stabbing down with her sword. It cut through the beast's backbone. Hot blood like acid spurted burning Evie's face and hands before she managed to free herself.

The wounded beast screamed in pain as it fell into the mud, rolling over and over. Its body began to glow a bright blue.

The other Devourer turned tail, running into the water.

Evie back-winged like a mad thing trying to put some distance between herself and the creature. Not fast enough. The wounded Devourer exploded.

That's right she thought dimly as the shockwave tumbled her over and over. Trick said Ammat tended to explode when wounded.

Evie bounced off the overpass slamming her head against the concrete. Stunned, she dropped like a stone.

Cold water closed over her. She couldn't move. Couldn't think. The roaring in her ears and throbbing pain in her head blocked out all other sensations.

Well, maybe not all. Something closed around her chest and squeezed.

Squeezed hard.

More on instinct than with any rational thought she swung her sword and started stabbing. The water's resistance worked against her normal power but the sword had a mind of its own, much like her wings. H₂O or not, it wanted to kill something.

Her arm seemed to move of its own accord. Gradually the terrible pressure on her chest loosened. She felt she was moving up. Her face broke the surface and her mind cleared enough to realize she was clamped in the jaws of the remaining Devourer.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

She stabbed with renewed energy.

The damn thing would not let go despite terrible wounds to its sides and back.

Evie heard a familiar "Yeehah!"

A blurry figure, her sight had not yet cleared, landed on top of the Devourer's back.

He had a glowing something in his hands and was swinging it around and around. She felt the surge of heat as it passed by her. It was wrapped around the Devourer's fat neck.

Trick's lasso. He could bind just about anything with it.

Trick leaned his weight back and the golden rope became even brighter. Evie wanted to protest that it was too hot. Her voice, like her brain, seemed to have gotten lost in the fog somewhere.

There was a horrible smell of burning something and the pressure on Evie's chest let loose.

Halfheartedly she pulled and splashed in a direction she hoped was away from the monster.

"Quick, take my hand," Trick said.

She attempted to raise her hand.

"Not the one with the sword, damn it. You're other hand."

She managed a weak wave.

She felt him grip her wrist and then she was bounding through the air only to land with a jarring thump.

Taking a deep breath, she forced her eyes to focus.

She was in the mud under the overpass.

Trick was swinging the lasso, keeping two of the Daemon away from two humans.

Humans. Hostages. Evie's brain clicked back in enough to remember them.

These two Daemon had recovered enough from their injuries to reignite the battle.

One had his sword up and looked ready to charge Trick.

Damn it.

Evie staggered to her feet, her own sword up.

There was a blast of sound. For a terrible, horrible second, she thought, the hippo/crocodile things had come back.

Then one of the Daemon fell.

Two shots in succession and the other two went down.

The evening became very still. The only sound was the lapping of the small waves on the shore and some kind of labored wheezing.

Oh wait, that was her.

Gaius, resplendent in his golden armor, walked over and extended his hand.

With more than the usual effort, Evie managed to achieve a standing position, though she swayed a bit from side to side.

"I got your text," Gaius said.

Evie had texted Gaius as soon as she couldn't reach Trick saying only, "Bring your gun."

Evie had been reluctant to ask Gaius to use his Daemon-killing weapon. That's because, at the time, the Daemon hadn't actually murdered anyone. Threatened yes, but not killed.

After Gaius's dramatic appearance during their surprise encounter with the Daemon at Universal Studios' backlot of all places, had ordered him not to use the gun.

Today had changed everything.

The Daemon had demonstrated they had no problem killing Acolytes.

Evie was taking her halo off and putting it away until further notice.

Trick was hovering over the two humans.

"Thank you, Gaius."

He gave a Roman salute, pounding his chest with the fist of one hand. "I live to serve, Commander."

Evie limped over to join the others.

"Impressive escape skills," she complimented them

"Thanks," said the man. He had to be Ryan Kim.

"We've worked together before," said the woman. "Thank Heaven we were taken together. And I mean that literally." She patted her chest, arms, and thighs. "Ryan and I have weapons made into our clothes. I have five more knives of different sizes sewn into the fabric."

Ryan nodded. "Me too. I know it sounds psycho. But..."

"But," Tianna continued, "these Daemon are bad news."

Evie put a hand softly on Ryan's arm. "I'm so sorry about your dog."

"Bastards," he said bitterly.

"Leo is working on safe houses for you."

They each gave her a curt nod.

"Understood," they said together.

Gaius strolled over, holstering his gun. He regarded the fallen Daemon dispassionately.

"We'll have to get rid of the bodies

CHAPTER SEVEN

Evie popped the top on the beer and drank half at one go.

“Hey, slow down,” admonished Trick. “That’s an excellent IPA and deserves respect from your taste buds. You want to quench your thirst? Pick one of the cheaper brands.”

Evie laughed. “Sorry. I will drink the rest slowly admiring the unique flavor of hops and..” she paused, “uh, whatever else they put in IPAs for flavor.”

Trick gave a snort of laughter.

She sniffed the air, “Do I smell Thai?”

She did.

A dozen takeout containers were lined up neatly on the counter by the sink. Three full orders of Pad Thai noodles, beef salad, and white rice awaited them.

She said a quick prayer of thanks to Leo for anticipating their appetites and ordering from the most excellent Thai food place two blocks away.

While the food heated in the microwave, she tiptoed up to Leo’s room.

Leo was in his room packing a suitcase. His eyes looked like two burnt holes in a blanket as her mother used to say. Ringed with dark circles. His skin was almost gray.

“What are you doing?”

“I have failed you, Miss Grace. I am ashamed. I do not deserve to be here.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Evie grabbed the duffel bag. Unzipping it, she emptied the contents onto the bed. “You’re not going anywhere except back to bed.”

He hung his head. “I am a traitor.”

“You are not a traitor. The Daemon put a hex on you. In our pride, we didn’t think they’d target you.”

“Leo, you belong with us. We can’t manage without your skills. You have to know that.”

He hung his head saying nothing.

“I mean it. Now get back into bed and turn on one of your weird reality shoes.”

“They are not weird,” he pouted.

“They are sooooo weird,” laughed Evie.

Trick paused in the hall.

“The reason he likes to watch those old Ninety-Day Fiancé reruns,” said Trick in a stage whisper, “is half the girls are from Russia.”

“*Ne Pravda!*” shouted Leo. “Not true!”

“Ooooo, burn,” laughed Evie.

“*Ruskiye devushki khoroshiye devushki,*” said Leo. “Russian girls are good girls.”

Trick shoved the clothes and other things to one side, pushing Leo to lie down again.

“*Vy ne dolzhny govorit' o nikh plokho.*” Leo jabbed Trick with a finger. “Don't speak of things you do not know!”

“Sure, pal, sure,” said Trick still laughing.

They went back downstairs.

Gaius already had a plate in his hand and his mouth full.

Evie started spooning Pad Thai and rice onto a plate.

Ripped and torn, bloody and dirty, they looked like a trio of starving refugees from a dystopian movie as they dug into their meal. Technically since they were no longer human or even alive in the strictest sense, they probably shouldn't need to eat. The universe had not communicated that fact to their stomachs. Something Evie was profoundly grateful for.

When she'd eaten the last bite from her share of Thai deliciousness, she took another beer and went up to the rooftop terrace.

The Baron and his wife were sitting at the outdoor dining table, holding hands. A bottle of red wine and glasses in reach. The owls perched on the rooftop railing, facing outward, scanning the skies.

Evie hesitated. She did not like the Baron. Despite or maybe because of their shared misadventures she could not be comfortable around him.

After a moment of wavering, she came out. “I thought you were going to your house in the Canyons.”

“I decided another day here would not be amiss. The house is being prepared for us.”

Evie moved to lean against an owl-free section of the railing. “Prepared? By who? Do you have minions?”

The Baron arched one elegant eyebrow.

Evie rolled her eyes. “Of course you have minions.”

The owls turned their heads front to back, the better to observe the conversation.

‘We must talk,’ he said, indicating one of the empty chairs.

She stayed where she was.

‘The events of the past two days show the Daemon are becoming more aggressive. We, too, must change our tactics.’

‘We?’ said Evie. ‘Since when is there a ‘we’ in this? I thought your help extended only to lending us a house.’

The owls shifted their heads back and forth as if agreeing with Evie.

‘The situation has changed. The rebel Daemon see Sofia as a threat. After all, it was her magic that succeeded in locking them away in the first place. She could do it again.’

Evie looked at the witch. Her face could have been carved from stone.

‘I prefer we do not spend the next few centuries running from Daemon. Sofia believes we can use the Imp’s Bottle to recapture the Daemon.’

‘The bottle is in Fae,’ Evie stated.

Which it was. After the Red Queen released the rebel Daemon from their prison, she sent the Imp’s Bottle back with her consort, Prince Something-or-other.

‘And how is that an impediment now?’ asked the Baron.

The owls turned to look at Evie.

Evie snorted, ‘We don’t have any way of getting to Fae. At least none that I know of.’

The Baron made a sound of impatience. ‘Are you being willfully obtuse?’

‘Look, it’s been a long day. I don’t want to play SAT word games. Just say what you want to say.’

‘Your wing, Miss Grace. You have the Queen’s wing. You have a free pass into Faerie.’

Evie’s stomach sank into the soles of her feet. The Red Queen’s court was pursuing her, practically trying to hand her the keys to the kingdom.

‘Do you think they would be willing to negotiate? Give us the Imps Bottle?’

‘The Fae will negotiate anything.’

The owls shifted their heads as if on cue, looking down over the railing.

‘What could I possibly have that would be worth the bottle to them?’

The owls hooted.

Standing the Baron walked to the railing. He looked down briefly before turning an enigmatic smile on Evie.

The doorbell chime from the front door echoed distantly.

A cold shiver of apprehension ran down Evie's back.

"I'll get it," Trick shouted from downstairs. There was a moment of silence, then, "Uh, Evie, darlin'? Could you come here please?"

The Baron's smile grew broader.

Evie ran full speed down the stairs practically colliding with Trick in the foyer. He was holding the front door open.

A plump toddler stood on the welcome mat. A mane of curly red hair framed her cherubic little face. She was dressed in an elegant, long-sleeved embroidered gown of bright red and orange. It hung in tiny folds to her ankles. As Evie approached, the girl sniffed the air. A smile lit her face and a pair of piebald wings popped out on her back.

"Mahmee," she screeched, holding out her arms.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Awk!” squawked Evie as the little girl tackled her around the shins.

“*Mahmee, mahmee, mahmee,*” chanted the child, rubbing her face into Evie’s knees.

“What the hell?” breathed Trick.

“Mahmee,” said the toddler.

“Mommy?” said Trick. “Is she calling you mommy?”

Evie stood rooted to the spot. Her mouth opened and closed, yet she was unable to make coherent sounds.

The Baron followed by his wife slowly descended the stairs.

Leo threw open the tech den door, a shotgun in his hands.

“What? What is it? Are we under attack?”

Gaius strolled out of the living room surveying the scene.

The Baron joined Evie at the door. “Miss Grace? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“Oh shut up,” she snarled at him. “This has to be your fault.”

A large, scarlet-colored envelope descended to hover Hogwarts-style at eye level.

Trick reached for it then pulled his hand back saying, “Reaper and Fae magic don’t mix. Pretty sure this is Fae business. You better take it.”

“Here,” said the Baron stepping forward. “Allow me.”

The little girl kept nuzzling Evie’s yoga pants murmuring “Mahmee,” over and over.

“You should pick her up,” said Sofia softly.

Evie felt her face take on a deer-in-the-headlights look. “What?”

“Pick her up,” Sofia repeated. “That’s what she wants.”

“But... but,” Evie stuttered, “I have never held a child in my life.”

“Better learn fast,” said the Baron, slicing open the envelope with his dagger. “She’s wearing the colors of the Red Court.”

Dropping the envelope to the floor he began to read. “To her Courageous and Serene Eternal Majesty Evangeline Grace,” he said theatrically. “Humble greetings from the Red

Kingdom. We beg your indulgence for this intrusion. At the command of your loving and devoted consort...”

“My what?” squeaked Evie.

“Mahmee,” called the toddler.

“Your consort, Miss Grace,” repeated the Baron, not even bothering to hide the laughter in his voice. “Your loving and *devoted* consort Prince Arundel Ingalvur Emilion the Eager, Guardian of the Three Rivers.” He looked up from the letter. “There are three more lines of titles for dearest Arundel. Shall I go on?”

“No,” Evie barked.

The Baron cleared his throat. “*Uh-hum*. Blah, blah, blah, at his behest we have come here to the Mortal Realm and the city of Hermosa Beach, in the Provence of Los Angeles, and the Principality of California. The Prince Consort, praise be his name, graciously desires you to introduce yourself to your daughter, the blessed Princess Rosabeth,” he paused. “More names and titles.”

“Skip them,” Evie said attempting to pry off the little arms clinging to her legs. She was surprisingly strong for such a small child.

“Mahmee. RoRo. Mahmee. RoRo,” chanted the little girl.

Trick squatted down to be on eye level with the sturdy Princess. “RoRo that’s you.” He pointed at her. “RoRo.”

She narrowed her eyes and hissed, flapping her little wings.

Trick jumped to his feet.

“She does not like you,” said Leo in a matter-of-fact voice.

The little girl grinned up at Evie. Her plump cheeks dimpling. “RoRo. RoRo. Mahmee.”

“If I may continue,” said the Baron.

Evie gestured he should.

“Etc., etc., etc. His Glorious Highness her father implores in most humble terms that you would honor us with an inaugural visit to your kingdom once you have gotten acquainted with your daughter.”

“She’s not my daughter,” screeched Evie. “She’s the Red Queen’s.”

“Point taken,” said the Baron, keeping his eyes on the letter. “The Red Queen is dead. Since you took her wing, you have also inherited her title under Fae law.”

Gaius cleared his throat, “We encountered a mission from Fae yesterday evening. They said something to that effect. They had a crown.”

“Shut up,” whispered Evie.

“They brought you a crown?” the Baron said, sounding a little upset. “A crown? And you what? Smote them with your sword?”

“Not precisely but close,” said Gaius.

She made a face at the Roman. “Snitches get stitches. Geez. I told them to go away. That’s all.”

The Baron pointed at the child with the gilt-edged invitation. “And now they have sent you this. Perhaps you should have taken the crown.”

Perhaps she should have. Her afterlife was becoming as complicated as a Spanish soap opera. Just when you thought it couldn’t get any more dramatic...BANG.

Evie thrust her hands out in frustration. “I didn’t ask for it or... or...” She indicated the child, “her. I don’t want anything to do with the Red Kingdom.”

“Too late,” said the Baron. “You took the Queen’s wing freely. You now share her kingdom and her blood. There is no going back.”

Evie shot a knife-edged look at the Baron. “She’s your granddaughter. You take her.”

And indeed she was. The Baron had fathered the Red Queen when he bedded her mother. He had not expected a child out of the union. Surprise!

The Baron’s wife took a long breath, releasing it slowly like she was doing yoga.

Evie wondered if she was angry. Or jealous. His union with the Fae Queen had been long after her imprisonment. Or at least Evie supposed so. Time passed differently in Fae.

Sofia was staring at the child with an expression Evie couldn’t interpret.

She bent over and Evie thought she was going to scoop her up. Abruptly she pulled back, crossing her arms over her chest, clamping her hands tightly under her armpits.

The Baron put an arm around her waist.

“She doesn’t know me,” Sofia said in her quiet voice. “I dare not touch her.”

“Evie, just pick her up,” said Trick giving her a nudge with his hip.

“No,” said Evie, wanting to back away but trapped by the child’s eager arms.

“Yes,” said Trick. “She doesn’t like me and besides, I’m afraid to touch her.”

He had every right to be nervous. Since Evie accepted the dying Queen's black wing, she had become poison to Trick. The mix of Fae and Angelic blood was somehow toxic to Reapers. A simple touch from her burned him. A kiss was now impossible.

The doorway was suddenly filled with owls. They flew inside making everyone duck.

The Baron released his wife, one hand on the hilt of his black ice sword.

Gaius already had his sword up and ready.

A young man with wings patterned like a sparrow hawk landed on the doormat. He was carrying a teenage girl in his arms. He set her on her feet just like the Baron had deposited his wife.

"Are we having a party?" asked Leo in a tired voice. He stepped back to sit on one of the stairs to the second floor. "You should tell me these things. I am in charge of the shopping after all."

"Josh?" said Evie instantly recognizing the young angel.

"Mahmee," screeched the toddler.

"Mommy?" said Josh.

"Introductions, Evie," demanded Trick. "Friend or Foe?"

"Friend," she said instantly. She had met the novice Guardian Angel the same night she met Trick.

She looked at the girl. Asian, in her early teens. Lanky with long black hair. Heart-shaped face and full lips.

"Stephanie?" Evie said. The last time she'd seen the girl she was being loaded into an ambulance.

The girl thrust out her hand. "Yes. That's me. We haven't been formally introduced. How do you do?"

Evie reached out a hand and the girl clasped it warmly with both of hers.

"I recognized you immediately. Josh has sung your praises nonstop."

Trick looked from the girl to the angel and to Evie. "Ya'll going to explain this to the rest of us?" he drawled.

Freeing her hand Evie indicated the angel. "This is Josh, he's Stephanie's Guardian Angel. Stephanie lost her parents in a robbery. I helped to avenge their deaths."

Her mother and father had been brutally murdered at their little grocery near Century Boulevard not far from LAX one terrible evening. Evie had come upon the scene by chance. Or maybe by design. Heaven really did move in mysterious ways.

The robbers had taken Stephanie prisoner. Josh had hesitated. Only newly made, he hadn't known how far his guardianship extended. Should he interfere or let events take their course? She'd given him a quick lesson in the *guarding* part of being a guardian angel.

Evie had taken the appropriate measures, watching in satisfaction as the men's filthy souls were dragged into darkness.

"Who's taking care of you?" Evie asked.

"I'm living with my aunt in Arcadia. And of course, Josh here." She nudged him familiarly with her elbow. "I have you to thank for him making himself known to me I think."

Evie gave Josh a thumbs up. He'd made a lot of progress since that night if he was now flying his charge around the Los Angeles night skies.

"Any fallout from," Evie asked him, pointing up.

"Nothing," said Josh. "No contact at all."

"Good."

"Or bad," said Josh frowning. "Could be bad."

Evie patted him on the shoulder. "Don't be a glass-half-empty kind of an Angel, Josh."

"Let's cut to the chase," said Trick sounding impatient. "What the hell are you two doing here? We're a little busy."

Stephanie looked around at the assembled group, her eyes settling on the child. The little princess was now sitting on Evie's feet, her thumb in her mouth, the other arm wrapped tightly around Evie's legs.

Josh pointed at Stephanie. "It's her fault."

Stephanie rolled her eyes. "That's right, Josh. Throw me under the bus. Yes. I asked him to fly me here. I felt a disturbance in the force, to use a Star Wars reference. So much weird energy these past few weeks. I'm an empath in case you didn't know. Did you know?" she asked Evie.

"Not directly," she answered. "The night we met I sensed you were far more than what you appeared. You had power humming just beneath your skin. So much potential."

"Well, I didn't know either. Josh helped me figure myself out over the past few weeks."

“You seem remarkably okay with all of this,” Trick said raising his eyebrows.

The girl shrugged. “Go figure. Anyway. I’ve been having these weird dreams about angels and winged beings and danger, danger Will Robinson” She tossed her arms up in the air. “And then she appeared in my dream tonight asking for help.”

“Who?” Evie, Trick, and Leo asked.

Stephanie pointed at the princess. “Her.”

“How?” said Evie, thoroughly confused. “The kid showed up on our doorstep only a few minutes ago.”

Stephanie looked at Josh. “Should I tell them?”

He nodded. “Go on. It’s driving you crazy.”

Stephanie took a deep breath. “Okay. Don’t judge. I have some dreamwalking abilities.”

“Dreamwalking?” said the Baron, suddenly alert.

“Yeah. Not like Dr. Strange and the Multiverse level. But I definitely do astral projection into other people’s minds. I’m not sure whether I felt her,” she pointed at the toddler. “Or she felt me. I woke up and knew I had to come.”

“Woke up? Why were you asleep?” asked Evie.

The girl pointed at the sky. “It’s one a freaking clock in the morning.”

“One?” said Evie, surprised. “I thought it was like ten.”

“One,” said Leo. He was leaning his head against the wall with his eyes closed.

“She was like a spectral GPS,” said Josh. “Told me exactly where to go. And here we are.”

“But why?” asked Trick, frowning.

“Maybe,” said Josh, “to help Miss Grace with the child.” He made an awkward gesture at Evie and the little girl. “Not getting a real touchy-feely vibe here.”

“I want her to go away,” said Evie with feeling.

“Precisely,” said Josh.

“My guess is Stephanie is here to help translate between you and,” he indicated the toddler. “Angels have the gift of languages, but I don’t think a two-year-old has much language yet. Steph is good with kids, as you can imagine. Their emotions are strong, little shielding. She can read them clearly.”

Little Rosabeth turned to face the newcomers. Wings out, hands on hips, she fixed her stare on the teenager.

Stephanie took a step back. Swallowed reflexively, then returned the stare.

She and the toddler sized each other up for all the world like a couple of gunslingers at high noon.

“Speaking of reading emotions. That is one angry little girl,” said Stephanie at last.

Evie raised her brows in surprise. “She is?”

“Yep. Very angry. At everybody. Even me and she doesn’t even know me. Sheesh, she’s radiating emotion like heat on a desert highway. Can’t you feel it?”

“No.” Evie shook her head.

Stephanie looked at Josh, “Avenging Angel you said?”

Josh nodded.

“Figures. You have a lot of anger too. You probably just think it’s normal.”

“I am not angry,” Evie protested.

“Yes, you are,” said Trick and Stephanie at the same time.

Evie thought about it. Losing her wing. The curse of the Fae blood. The release of the Daemon.

Her breath hissed out between her teeth. “Okay. Yeah. I guess you’re right. But what about her?”

“I think she sees all of us as getting in the way of her having time with you.”

“Why would she want time with me.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Duh! She thinks of you as her mom. Did you grow up in an orphanage? Every baby wants exclusivity with mom. She hates us. Especially him.” She pointed at Trick.

The toddler followed Stephanie’s finger, her too-old-for-a child-eyes narrowing. Hissing, she snapped her piebald wings back and forth.

“Me?” said Trick. “Why me?”

Stephanie rolled her eyes again and even Josh joined in this time. “Because Miss Evie loves you. Baby Fae there wants mom to love her. Only her.”

Evie frowned. “I am an Avenging Angel. Emphasis on the word vengeance. I like fighting. Changing diapers is not in my job description.”

“You could change them with a vengeance,” Stephanie said, snorting a laugh. She moved her hands around mimicking dramatically changing diapers.

Rosabeth babbled a string of words.

Stephanie snorted again. “OMG, she wants you to know she is potty trained.”

Evie tried to move away. Quick as a cobra, Rosabeth had her arms locked around Evie’s calves.

Evie swayed, arms out, trying to keep her balance. “Awk! Wait. the baby can understand what we say?”

“How is that possible?” said Trick moving closer.

Rose hissed at him.

He hastily stepped back; hands held out. “Sorry, sorry. We’re speaking English.”

Sofia pointed at the little girl. “Her mother was Nephilim. So is she. The gift is the gift.”

Angels can understand all languages. Before tonight, Evie thought it was only human languages. Seems not.

“Okay, I can accept that,” said Trick. “Except how did Stephanie understand *her*? She’s talking baby talk.”

Stephanie blinked. “Uh...you’re right.” She stared at the child. “You know what? I think she has some telepathic abilities.”

Evie’s stomach sank into her shoes. “Do not tell me that.”

The Baron crossed his arms over his chest. “I have spent much time in the Fae lands. Empathy is common enough. Telepathy...” he paused.

“Perhaps it is a trait Fae babies have,” said Sofia, copying her husband’s pose. “An ability they grow out of when they can speak. The Fae are not easy breeders. Any trait to ensure a baby’s survival would be cultivated.”

If she was telepathic, the child would know exactly how much Evie did not want her around. Oh my God, did think those thoughts make Evie abusive? Evie’s stomach churned. No matter what had happened between the Red Queen and Evie, this little girl had no part in it.

She forced herself to smile at Rose.

Rose began a tippy-toe dance of delight, throwing her arms up and out. “Mah-mee.”

Evie patted her gently on the head.

Trick shifted position.

Apparently, this was one step too close.

“RoRo mahmee,” she declared to Trick. “RoRo mahmee!” and whipped out a stubby finger to point at him.

A crackle of light shot out smacking into Trick. He flew back to hit the wall.

Everyone froze.

“What the hell,” Trick shouted, one hand to a smoking hole in his shirt. “Ow!”

Evie leaned over to pick up the girl, holding her up to her level.

“Bad girl,” said Evie sharply. “Bad.”

The child understood her tone. She reached out her arms, “Mahmee, mahmee, mahmee,” and burst into tears.

“Oh man,” said Evie, still holding her at arm’s length.

Stephanie moved close, nudging Evie with her hip. “Hold her, silly. Close.”

Evie stared. “Wha...what?”

The girl put one hand on the toddler’s back and the other on Evie’s, attempting to push them closer. “Hug.”

Evie relaxed her arms and held the warm little body close. Rosabeth buried her tear-streaked face into Evie’s neck, sobbing, “Mahmee, mahmee.”

“She’s yours for now,” said Sofia. “Unless you know how to get back into the Red Kingdom. And even then.”

“We’re at...” The little girl put her hand over Evie’s mouth. Evie tugged it away. “War...” She plopped her hand back

Evie pushed it away again, saying sharply, “Stop it. Jeez. Trying to have a conversation.”

Rosabeth babbled her comment on that.

“Whatever. I have to patrol.” Evie made a sound of exasperation. “I have to fight. Sofia. You understand. Who’s going to look after her? What if no one does?”

“The prince, her father, will come,” the Baron said.

All the owls bobbed their heads in agreement.

“This is but the opening salvo,” he continued, “in wooing you to make an appearance in your new kingdom.”

“Not,” Evie started to say.

He held up his hand sharply, “Stop, Miss Grace. This is your new reality. Embrace it and learn how it can help us against the Daemon. You asked how we could convince the Fae to surrender the Imp’s Bottle?” He indicated the little girl. “You have your answer.”

“Mahmee,” sighed the little girl, nuzzling Evie’s neck.

Leo began to softly snore, leaning against the stair wall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Evie stared blearily into her second double espresso of the morning and yawned.

Rosabeth along with Evie's entire motley crew had insisted the girl sleep with Evie. Either that or the whole household would be kept awake as she howled in protest to being separated from 'mahmee'. The little girl had curled up next to Evie like a happy kitten and fallen asleep.

Evie in contrast lay awake the rest of the short night feeling absurdly uncomfortable.

Rosabeth was shoving scrambled eggs and diced potatoes into her mouth with both hands.

With much effort they'd managed to unhook the gorgeously embroidered gown, dressing her in one of Evie's tee shirts, knotted at both sides. She was wearing little pantaloons and, just as Stephanie had said, no diapers.

Rosabeth insisted on privacy in the bathroom and Leo improvised steps with a drawer pulled out of one of the nightstands. She allowed a sleepy Leo to wash her hands and face. Rosabeth had taken to Leo immediately. Hard to fault her instinct, Evie thought, Leo was a good man.

Stephanie and Josh headed for home after exchanging phone numbers. They promised to check in that afternoon.

She hadn't been kidding when she said she'd never held a child. Growing up she kept her eyes on the prize of qualifying for scholarships to pay for college and then becoming a police officer. Extracurriculars were community or academic-focused. She did not babysit.

Figuring out this next step in her angelic evolution seemed insurmountable. The Red Kingdom, the child, getting the Imp's Bottle, and vanquishing the Daemon? How could she accomplish such feats? How could any of them?

"I said, would you like some eggs, Miss Grace?"

Evie blinked, looking up to see Leo hovering over her with a plate.

"Sorry, sorry. Million miles away. How are you feeling?"

He was still pale as chalk, The dark circles under his eyes hadn't been helped by the events of last night.

He smiled though. A big smile. "I am better. Thanks to everyone here."

"I'm glad Leo. That was a close thing." She put a hand on his arm and squeezed.

"Eggs?" he said again.

She nodded and he set the plate down.

Rosabeth held up two sticky hands, bouncing up and down in the improvised highchair of pillows piled up on one of the dining chairs.

"And the little one likes my cooking, yes?"

He leaned over to kiss her tumbled red curls. Unlike her reaction to Trick, Rosabeth grinned at the big Russian.

She babbled a string of baby talk which probably translated to "More eggs, more eggs!"

Taking the little girl's plate Leo served up more eggs and potatoes from the stove. He brought the plate close to his cheek before setting it in front of the toddler.

"What are you doing?" Evie asked.

"Testing," he cocked his head as if surprised at the question. "You must always make sure the food is not too hot for tender babies."

He kissed the top of the little girl's head again and Rosabeth laughed.

Evie never would have thought of that. Which was exactly why she was so unsuited for this job.

Sofia came in, *sans* owls and husband.

Rosabeth paused to regard the newcomer.

Sofia approached her, "I am Sofia. Your new mother," she pointed at Evie.

Evie groaned, "Don't say that word!"

Sofia ignored her. "Is my friend. I will help to care for you while you are here if that is agreeable."

She waited while Evie stared.

"Do you think she understands you?"

"I do indeed."

The toddler regarded Sofia seriously before giving a regal nod and returned to her eggs and potatoes.

Evie's phone buzzed. It was on the table within easy reach. Picking up, she checked the screen.

'Unknown number.'

Almost no one had Evie's cell phone number. This could not be some casual scam call.

She touched the answer button and put it on speaker.

"Turn on the television," the voice said without preamble.

She knew this voice. "Father James?"

"Yes, Evangeline. Sorry, this is a burner phone. I can't talk long. Turn KTLA or one of the local news channels," and he clicked off.

Leo looked at her for confirmation and she nodded. "Put it on Channel five."

Leo switched on the TV mounted to one kitchen wall.

She, Leo, and Sofia turned their attention to the television.

The camera was focused on a woman at a podium speaking into a microphone flanked by well-dressed men and women. Across the bottom scrolled the words, 'Elizabeth Reyes announces candidacy for Mayor of Los Angeles.'

Leo and Evie exchanged puzzled glances.

The camera panned first right and then left. Evie gasped, swearing under her voice.

"The Daemon have made their first move," she hissed.

"What do you mean?" Leo asked, taking the frying pan off the burner.

Evie stared at the bodyguards. Then stared harder. To her eyes, they were haloed in a slight shimmer of pale light.

"The guards..." she started to say. Then looked at the Reyes woman. She'd left the podium to wade into the crowd.

"I see it," said Sofia, nodding. "I see what you're talking about."

"What?" asked Leo, his hands in the air. "What do you see?"

Evie pointed. "The bodyguards are under a *glamour*."

"Dameon, I'm guessing," said Sofia.

"Or worse," said Evie with a shake of her head.

"She's glimmering the crowd," Sofia said with a knowing look. "Enchanting them."

"Crap," groaned Evie. "Do you think it's Aiysha?"

Sofia stared at the screen. After a few moments, she shook her head. "I don't believe so. What I mean is I do not believe she is shapeshifting into this woman. She has bestowed power on her. She is a powerful witch. Watch. She's touching as many people as she can. Look at their before and after expressions."

Sofia was right.

"They will try to bring the church into this," Leo said with conviction. "It is the way of America these days."

He was not wrong. America being America, the separation of church and State had become more of a blurry guideline than the firm division the Founding Fathers intended. If this Reyes woman brought angels into the equation, the Christian churches would be all over it.

"I am guessing," said Sofia slowly, "once the campaign gains traction, there is going to be a heavenly visit."

"Crap," said Evie. "Crap, crap, crap."

"What's going on?" said Trick, rubbing his hands through his mussed hair. He had a sleep crease down the side of his face and yawned mightily. "A Daemon is running for mayor?"

"Not quite," said Evie. "But close. The Daemon appear to be backing Elizabeth Reyes. She just announced her candidacy. Look."

Trick leaned forward.

Rosabeth hissed at him.

He rapidly moved to the other side of the kitchen table.

After watching the news for a few moments, he said, "Can't say I'm surprised. Los Angeles is the City of Angeles. Where better place to kick off the Daemon's semi-divine message?"

"They've started the clock," Evie sighed.

"Tick, tock," said Trick running his hands through his hair again with a sigh. "Well, we're not going to save Los Angeles from the Daemon unless we get the Imp's Bottle back. Which means, taking care of this little treasure." He indicated the princess.

"Shopping," Sofia said in a decisive tone. "She needs clothing."

"And a sippy cup," added Leo. "Her little hands cannot yet hold a glass."

"A sippy cup?" Evie almost shouted. "The Daemon have a mayoral candidate and you care about a sippy cup?" She stared at them, "Are you all crazy?"

“No, Evie. We are building our own platform of attack.” Trick’s voice was calm. “Our merry band of warriors is no match for the Daemon in force. We can’t win in open war, plus they have threatened to kill those inside St. Jude’s. We need the Imp’s Bottle. To get the bottle we need,” he pointed at the princess, “her and her kingdom’s goodwill. A sippy cup is just another weapon in our arsenal. Look at it like that.”

Evie felt her cheeks burn. This was why she was an Avenging Angel and not something better. Fight and kill for justice. Strategy was not her forte.

“You’re right,” she admitted, taking her seat. “I...I can’t seem to think clearly these days. Vengeance echoes through my head.” And fear, she wanted to add. Fear that her dream of the Los Angeles burning would come true.

Trick moved to put his arms around her then drew back, dropping them to his sides.

Evie’s heart thudded. She longed for him to hold her, calm her impulses, kiss away her fears if only for a few moments.

But he couldn’t.

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, remaining silent. What words of comfort could he offer in all honesty?

Instead, he said in a flat voice, “I’ll make a list. We need some grocery items. Leo, can you help me?”

Leo already had the refrigerator door open. “I am on it.”

Leaning in, he began scanning the shelves.

“I’ll text the list to you.” Trick gave her a crooked half smile, saying so much without saying anything at all. “Are we all going to the Baron’s valley home?” He addressed the last question to Sofia.

She crossed both arms over her chest, her face solemn. “Our objectives are now aligned.”

By that Evie assumed she meant her group’s desire to remove the Daemon and the Baron’s mission to keep his wife safe.

“Today I will construct a protective amulet for Mr. Leo. The owls are watching the house. They will know if danger approaches.”

“You,” Trick pointed at Evie, “need to make a Target and toy run with the little princess here.”

Evie felt her stomach sink. “Me?” she squeaked. “Her? Alone?”

Trick laughed, “You look like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck.”

“I can accompany you, Miss Grace,” volunteered Leo.

“No,” countered Sofia. “It is not safe for you to until the amulet is finished.”

Evie tried to swallow but her mouth had gone dry.

“Mahmee, mahmee, mahmee,” sang Rosabeth waving a fistful of potatoes.

Sofia gave her a sideways smile, “I will help Mr. McKitrick with his list.”

Trick held up a hand. “Let me take the car first, you can’t go anywhere without a car seat.”

“Car seat?” said Evie faintly.

“For the car. Can’t drive without a car seat. Even you must know *that* much about kids.”

“You don’t have to say it like that,” she admonished.

Trick sketched a salute. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Take your time,” Evie said sincerely, hoping it would occupy him for a couple of days. Even a week.

He was back within an hour. Damn it.

“Car seat’s all set.” He held up a paper bag, “Picked up an outfit for the kid. She can’t go out looking like Queen Elizabeth the First. Or a little hobo.” He indicated the knotted tee shirt with a swing of the bag.

Turned out, Rosabeth wanted very much to look like a hobo. She refused to let them remove the shirt. Zapping everyone with tiny bolts of magic except Evie. When Evie ordered her to stop the little girl burst into noisy tears.

“Let her keep the shirt on,” suggested Sofia, joining the chaos. “It smells like her mother.”

They all stopped and stared saying a collective, “Oh.”

Fifteen nerve-wracking minutes later, Evie was in Leo’s slightly battered Nissan Versa, shopping list in hand headed for Target. They’d put Rosabeth’s new hoodie and little stretch pants on over the tee shirt. Trick, with great forethought, had bought them several sizes too large.

“Never buy the exact size as their age,” he’d informed Evie as he helped her strap Rosabeth in.

She gave him a blank look. “Why?”

“Because they’ll already be too small. Go big or go home.” He pumped his fist in the air.

“How do you know these things?” she asked.

Evie was so far out of her comfort zone she needed a passport.

Evie parked in a far space of the big lot. She needed to have a talk with Rosabeth.

Popping the locks on the car street seatbelts, Evie addressed the child with all the gravitas she could summon.

“Okay princess, listen up. No wings. You must not show your wings or magic here. Do you understand?”

The piebald wings popped put and Evie squeaked.

Rosabeth held up her hands, fingers splayed, palms out in the universal sign for ‘wait.’ With a great show, she put first one wing and then the other back into their magical pockets.

When she finished, she clapped her hands, looking expectantly at Evie.

“Uhhhh...” Should she say something? “Ummm. Well done?”

Rosabeth wriggled with happiness.

Evie set the little girl on the ground. Her arms popped up immediately.

“Can’t you walk?” Evie asked.

Rosabeth shook her head, setting her red curls wiggling. Her arms reached out more urgently.

“Dang it,” Evie moaned, picking her up and settling the child on one hip.

Stephanie called when they were almost inside.

“Lunchbreak at school. Do you need help?”

“Yes!” Evie practically screeched in relief.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Evie said into the phone as she put the girl into the shopping cart.

“That is fairly obvious,” Stephanie said. “Better tell her not to use magic in public.”

“Yikes. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Once through the *whoosh* of the automatic doors, Nessa looked for a shopping cart.

“Do I put her in the cart or the seat?” she asked Stephanie. “I have no idea what I am doing.”

Stephanie snorted a laugh, “That is totally obvious. Put her in the front.”

She managed to achieve that without dropping the little girl or injuring herself.

“Now what?” Evie asked.

Stephanie laughed harder. “Shop,” she managed to choke out.

Rosabeth seemed a little unsure of her position until the cart started rolling. As they moved into the store, she clapped her hands gurgling baby talk. Probably telling Evie to go faster.

The familiar smell of warm popcorn and stale air washed over Evie in a reassuring wave. Okay. She could do this.

Evie sent a screenshot of her shopping list to the teenager.

“Give her choices,” said Stephanie. “She’s smart. Really smart and like all kids, has definite likes and dislikes.”

Choices, okay.

They started with soups.

Evie held up cans, explaining what was inside.

Chicken noodle, yes.

Tomato, no.

Chicken and stars, yes.

Split pea, no.

“Try to get the organic ones,” Stephanie advised. “They’re healthier.”

Evie made a face.

“I saw that face, Miss Grace.”

She plastered a fake smile across her face. “Organic. Right. Got it.”

They moved on to macaroni and cheese.

Was there organic macaroni and cheese?

She held up boxes for Rosabeth’s inspection.

Rabbits, yes.

Elbow, no.

Then juice.

Apple, yes.

Orange, no.

Pineapple, heck no.

Leo had added other things to the list like bread and sliced natural cheese, ground beef, etc.

Rosabeth had zero interest in ground beef

Cheese however was another matter.

Cheddar and smoked gouda slices won over Swiss and Muenster.

Stephanie suggested Evie look at cute pajamas with animal patterns before signing off.

“Lunch is over, class is calling.”

Evie thanked her sincerely.

They were slowly walking through the clothing aisle after choosing some puppy-patterned pajamas that met the toddler’s approval when Rosabeth began to crow, waving her arms wildly.

Evie thought they were happy sounds, not ones of alarm. She looked around only to see a tall, handsome man approaching behind her. As he approached her black wing began to tingle wildly, threatening to pop right out of its magical pocket.

Fae. He had to be. Another courtier?

Evie desperately hoped he would not try and hand her a crown here in Target.

‘Where was your coronation, Evie?’

“Aisle 13, Target.”

CHAPTER NINE

She pulled Rosabeth out of her seat, settling the toddler on one hip as she faced the newcomer.

When he was a few feet away, the little girl squealed, “Papa, papa, papa.”

Oh my god, Evie thought, the Prince Consort?

Here?

In Target?

How does everyone know where I am,” she moaned out loud. “Is there a neon sign over my head or something?”

Well, at least the Red Kingdom hadn’t kept them waiting. Eyes on the prize, Evie reminded herself. The Red Kingdom held the key to their victory against the Daemon.

Prince Arundel held out his arms. Evie couldn’t hand over the child fast enough. Rosabeth nuzzled her face into his shoulder as he kissed her head and cheeks.

“Papa, papa, papa,” she sang.

“RoRo, RoRo,” the man sang back.

After a few choruses of this catchy tune, the prince raised his face to Evie. And what a face it was. He had more masculine features than the other Red Kingdom Fae she’d seen. They’d been an androgynous lot. Tall and willowy, fair-haired, blue eyes.

He was different. His hair was the color of chestnuts and eyes to match. He was sturdy, broad-shouldered, with strong brows, broad cheekbones, and a crooked nose that looked like it had been broken one too many times. A long scar cut through one cheek all the way to his chin.

He smiled and Evie was surprised to see his eyes crinkle at the corners. That was unexpected. Fae smiled with their mouths; the emotion seldom reaching their eyes. At least that was Evie’s limited experience.

“Miss Evangeline Grace, I presume,” he said in a deep, resonant voice. “Arundel, Consort of the late Queen.”

Evie stood staring stupidly totally at a loss of what to say. She certainly wasn’t sorry for his loss. His bitch wife had murdered her and two men to break a curse on the Queen’s family. Kidnapped her and cut out her heart with a ceremonial knife.

So much had come from the queen's heinous act. Evie transitioned to an Avenging Angel, met Trick, lost her Grace, played a part in the release of the rebel Daemon, and helped her enemy, the Baron, retrieve his wife from her heavenly prison. All because of his queen.

"I hated your wife," she hissed. "I didn't kill her, but I'd been fully prepared to. I *wanted* to. So much." Her tone was venomous.

Rosabeth stopped babbling to stare at Evie.

"I understand," he said levelly.

"Do you?" she asked, her tone unchanged.

Rosabeth reached out a little hand to Evie, "Mah-mee?"

"Could you get her to stop calling me that," Evie said in exasperation.

"No," he said simply. "As far as she is concerned you are her new mother." He held up a hand as she started to protest. "Not full-time. Never that."

She looked behind him. "Where's the rest of the party? Servants, flag bearers, drum corps?"

"No retinue today, well, except for Lehric. Lehric!" he called.

The fair-haired courtier peeked around a display of diapers. He bowed to Evie.

Evie hoped he wasn't in his ceremonial robes.

"Tell me he's not hiding a crown on a blue velvet pillow behind his back," she snapped.

Lehric had started to move into the aisle and hastily jumped back.

She rolled her eyes. "You have got to be kidding."

The prince shrugged. "Pays to be prepared. Lehric, I think you may wait for me in the car."

Lehric withdrew.

"There, no crown. Better?"

Evie gave a snort of derision.

Despite his princely bearing, Arundel was dressed casually in loose denim jeans, a gray crewneck sweater, a white tee shirt underneath peeking out at the hem.

"Are you wearing Nikes?" Evie asked looking him up and down.

"Yes. Extremely comfortable. But as to the matter at hand." He sketched her a courtly bow, one hand over his heart. "My apologies for pressuring you. Come, let us continue shopping for Rosabeth. We can talk when you've finished your list."

“How do you know I have a list?” she said narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

He gave her a guileless look in return. “Who shops without a list?”

To tell the truth, she was tempted to abandon the cart and walk away. Leave him there with the child. But what good would that do? They’d drop Princess Rosabeth off on her doorstep within the hour. Plus, like it or not she needed the Fae. The Imp’s Bottle must be their top priority.

She shook her head, pushing the cart deeper into the toddler section

The prince took over communing with Rosabeth over clothing preferences and Evie was happy to let him.

Consulting with the little girl they settled on velour sweatpants and matching hoodie in royal blue. Also, a red cotton hoodie and denim pull-on pants.

“Be sure and buy them too big,” Evie said, remembering Leo’s words.

“I know,” said the prince. “Two sizes up so she can grow into them.”

Rosabeth struggled to pull up her zipped jumper, showing Evie’s T-shirt bunched up underneath.

Prince Arundel cocked an eyebrow at Evie.

“She likes the way I smell,” Evie explained, her cheeks flushing.

“Ah, of course she does. It is your wing.”

“I sort of realized that.”

“Perhaps you could give her one or two to take back to the Red Kingdom? They will be a comfort to her.”

“Fine. Whatever.” The thought that she was responsible for the child feeling comforted was like a punch in the stomach. She didn’t have the emotional bandwidth for comforting anyone right now. Even herself.

Evie waved the list. “Underwear. Shoes, and socks,”

“Easily done.”

Rosabeth was delighted with a pair of pink Velcro strap sports shoes picked out by her father. Socks, a pair of undershirts, and underpants completed the clothing list.

Prince Arundel seemed completely at home walking the aisles of the superstore with his daughter on his hip.

“Let’s go to the toy section,” he said as Rosabeth leaned over from his tight hold to drop the socks and underwear in the cart.

“Talk?” Evie reminded him. “We need to talk.”

“After shopping. She likes stuffed animals. Come pick out something for her. It will mean so much.”

He said it with such earnestness Evie couldn’t help but follow them as they headed for the toys.

They found the stuffed animals and he set the little girl on her feet. She ran back and forth hugging everything within reach.

“Go on,” Prince Arundel encouraged, “Pick something.”

She made a face at him.

“Please?” he said. “She’s trying very hard to be good.”

She was, too, Evie agreed. No fussing. No screaming. No crying. And especially no wings.

Sighing noisily, so he’d know she was doing it against her will, Evie looked. Bears, elephants, a giraffe, cats, indeterminate creatures Evie could not identify, a couple of dinosaurs. None of them seemed particularly appealing until a big brown eye and floppy ear caught her eye. It was tucked under an angry-looking Yeti or Big Foot or something.

Tugging the toy out, she saw a fluffy brown and white dog with long spaniel ears.

She had a toy spaniel as a child. Coco. Even after growing up, he’d come with her to college and every apartment. He’d had a squeaker, but it went to squeaker heaven while she was still in elementary school. Mom had sewn his ears back on several times and one of his eyes didn’t match. Poor Coco. Gone now.

Evie gave herself a mental slap across the face. Strolls down memory lane were not allowed. Her family was dead. She was dead. End of story.

She was on the verge of putting the dog back when Rosabeth threw herself onto Evie’s shins as she had the first night in the house on the Strand.

“Mahmee, *row, row*. Mahmee, *row!*”

It was obviously a dog barking.

She held up her little arms reaching for the toy.

“*Row, row.*”

Evie handed the dog over. It was half as big as the princess.

Rosabeth immediately covered it with kisses.

“I believe we have a winner,” said the prince.

The prince put Rosabeth and her toy back in the shopping cart and they headed for the registers.

“We can talk at Starbucks, yes?” he asked as he expertly scanned each item in the self-checkout lane.

Evie nodded.

To her surprise, he paid with a credit card.

Prince Arundel was quite the renaissance Fae. Nike shoes, shopping carts, bar code scanners, and even a credit card. She briefly wondered what zip code he entered in the reader.

At Starbucks he picked out an apple juice pack and package of popcorn for Rosabeth, ordering a double espresso for himself and, upon her request, a cappuccino for Evie.

“Here we are,” he said as they sat at one of the tables in the little dining area.

“And where precisely is that?” asked Evie.

“I need you and you need me.”

He wasn’t wrong.

She got directly to the point. “We want the Imp’s bottle.”

He nodded, opening the popcorn for Rosabeth and emptying most of the little bag onto a napkin for her.

“Understood. The bottle is under guard. There has been one attempt to take it.” He shrugged, “One we know of. I am not familiar with Daemon magic. You are welcome to the cursed object. We certainly have no need of it.”

“Except as a bargaining chip,” she pointed out.

He gave her a sly smile. “Yes, there is that.”

“What is it the Red Kingdom wants in exchange?”

“You, Miss Grace.”

“Oh fu...,” she started to say then checked herself. “Fudge. What does that mean? I am not going to live in Faerie.”

“No, certainly not. I am the Prince Consort and will rule until Rosabeth comes of age. The Dowager Queen, due to your sacrifice, is still alive.”

Evie cringed, her hands tightened on the table so hard they left dents.

“All we need is an occasional appearance by you to reassure the people that all is well. You are a superior being, even by Fae standards. The people of the Red Kingdom are proud and happy to embrace you as an absent ruler.”

“I have to go to Fae?”

Stupid question. They weren't going to just hand over the Imp's Bottle.

“Yes. We will hold an official function to introduce you to your subjects. Only one or two nights. Following that, we would like you to agree to spend one night in Fae every thirty days give or take how your battle with the Daemon go.”

“And in return?”

“We will give you the Imp's bottle to take back to this world with you when you return from the initial visit.”

Evie looked at Rosabeth. She was pretending to feed popcorn to her stuffed spaniel then popping the kernels in her mouth, all the while chattering earnestly to her new friend.

“When?”

“Tomorrow night? I know you are uncomfortable having Rosabeth with you.”

Evie snorted a laugh, “That's an understatement.”

Was it her imagination or did the prince look a little hurt. Jeez, Evie had insulted his daughter. Damn her tongue.

“Not that she isn't a good little girl,” Evie added. “Obviously you love her very much.”

He ran a hand gently over the girl's tousled red curls. “With all my heart.” He shifted his eyes to Evie's, “I hope you can at least come to care for her. Not as a mother, of course. No one expects that.”

“She does,” Evie said wryly.

“I suppose so. However, she is a princess and accustomed to compromise.”

Ouch. Poor little kid.

“Do we have a bargain?” he asked, holding out his hand.

Evie kept her hands where they were. “Fae bargains are tricky things. I have been warned.”

“Very true. What assurances would you like from me?”

Evie moaned inwardly. She had no idea.

“Let me call my partner.”

She dialed Trick. He picked up immediately.

“Evie? You okay?”

She reassured him things were under control, then told him about the deal for the Imp’s bottle.

Trick put in a couple of clauses regarding Fae time and real-world time. They did not always match. Her length of stay would be measured in a mortal world time.

Trick said to insist the Imp’s Bottle be free of any additional spells or curses imposed by the Fae that would make it impossible to open.

Agreed.

No hostages from Evie’s group.

Also agreed.

No conjugal visits required.

The Prince laughed at this clause but agreed.

Neither of them could think of anything else to add.

“Do we have an accord?” the prince asked, once again extending his hand.

Feeling she was in over her head but with no choice, she shook it.

A frisson of energy buzzed between them like a jolt of electricity.

They jumped, equally surprised, but he didn’t let go of her hand.

“You need to say it out loud,” the prince said.

“Oh, right. We have an accord.”

He relaxed his grip and Evie shook her hand vigorously. It was buzzing almost painfully.

Cocking his head to one side, he looked at her searchingly. “Was that strange? I think it was strange.”

“You don’t normally buzz when you shake hands in fairyland?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Frankly everything about this situation is odd. When I accepted the Queen’s proposal to be her consort, I never imagined in my strangest nightmares a situation such as this.”

“You and me both buddy,” moaned Evie.

“Row, row!’ barked Rosabeth.

CHAPTER TEN

They stepped out of the Portal into a shower of scarlet rose petals falling from the sky, covering the red brick road beneath their feet.

The heat hit her like a slap in the face.

A dozen flower girls in bright red embroidered dresses carried baskets of more petals. As soon as Evie's group stepped all the way through, they began to slowly walk ahead, scattering the petals.

"You have got to be kidding me," Evie moaned.

The street was lined with people waving red and gold ribbons, shouting in Fae. It took Evie's angelic translation mode a moment to kick in. Then she heard,

"Hail the Queen!" and "Long live our Glorious Queen," was being shouted from every quarter.

"I am so screwed," she moaned as her stomach cartwheeled into her boots.

Father James nudged her with an elbow. "Head up, Evie. Smile and wave. Smile and wave."

Only yesterday they'd all gathered around the dining room table at the Baron's beach house to strategize. Trick had brought Father James over from the house in the hills and Adam Lee had joined them too.

"We need a show of force," Father James said. "Dressed to Impress. Weapons. The whole works."

Evie hadn't seen him since the terrible night he'd given his soul to the Baron. He had been her mentor after her transition. A confused angel newbie on the doorstep of St. Jude's. More than a mentor, he was her friend. No longer in his priestly cassock but worn jeans and a brown V-neck sweater.

"I will be Merlin to your Arthur," he declared once she'd stopped hugging him.

Very appropriate. He'd once told Evie before becoming part of the BCB, he'd been a sorcerer and not always a nice one. With his power and knowledge of supernatural races he would be their foundation.

Father James had insisted they bring Adam despite Evie's protests.

These were the same Fae who had murdered the young Feng Shui wizard. The Red Queen had siphoned his Elemental magic before cruelly ordering him killed so no one could make use of him again. Why would he want to see them much less make nice?

It was his mastery of the four elements that had opened the Imp's Bottle.

After his mortal death, his spirit was recruited by Princess Shao Lin, the most exquisite and terrible princess of the immortal Chinese Pantheon of Gods, daughter of the Ghost King, Zhong Kui.

To their good fortune, the Princess owed Father James a favor from his days as a sorcerer. According to the Princess, Father James had helped prevent some great supernatural calamity when the hungry ghosts united against her father. Though that wasn't the only reason she lent them Adam. In summoning all four Elemental energies to open the Imp's Bottle, he had let loose some rogue magic. Because of that, Heaven and Earth were no longer in balance. At least that was the Princess' story. He would stay in the mortal realm to help unify those elements.

Evie and Trick were just happy to have him back.

He was usually at his grandfather's in Los Angeles Chinatown. Grandfather Lee specialized in business luck magic.

Trick would have to stay behind. Reaper and Fae did not play well together.

"You probably can't eat or drink their food," Father James said when Trick protested. "You could become a liability. Better you stay here with Leo. We don't know how closely the Daemon are tracking us. If they realize Evie is absent, they might try to take advantage of the situation."

"In what way?" Leo asked.

Father James held up his hand in a helpless gesture.

"We don't know. That's precisely the problem. Elysia and her lieutenants are still feeling their way. After all, they were locked up for most of current human history. There are far more players on the board than before. Politics, vigilante justice, claims of being heavenly messengers are obvious choices for them. I fear it will be a combination of all three."

Evie had a recurring vision of Los Angeles on fire as humans battled with Daemon against angels. It now seemed an all-too-real possibility.

Perhaps the rebel Daemon felt the world had become so overcrowded they needed to whittle down populations.

Heaven's non-interference policy in human affairs could very well allow that to happen. Gaius would come of course.

"Don't be shy about flashing your wings or waving your angelic sword," Father James advised. "Fae are all about power plays."

Gaius placed one fist against his chest in a Roman salute.

Now they were all here: Father James, Sofia, Evie, Adam, and Gaius. Evie swallowed a rising sense of panic as she scanned the cheering crowd.

The crowd went wild. Cheering and shouting.

Adam started waving too, his long pheasant feathers bobbing. He'd ordered Adam to bring his formal Chinese armor. It was splendidly complex combination of silver armor and white silk; his helmet was decorated with a Chinese dragon. The enormous white pheasant feathers strapped to his back bobbed and waved with every step.

"Not you!" growled Father James. "You're a bodyguard."

Adam's face fell, "Ah, no fun."

"Look intimidating," the priest ordered.

Adam attempted to glower. Since he was naturally the most amiable person you could hope to meet, it looked more like he'd stubbed his toe.

"Put your faceplate down."

Adam did. Since the faceplate was a snarling demon the effect was excellent.

Gaius was having no trouble with the intimidation thing. His wings were fully extended, the sun bouncing off his golden breastplate. He held his sword out and ready glaring at everyone.

Knowing Gaius, Evie thought he was probably hoping for an attack. He hadn't killed anything in twenty-four hours – that she knew of – and was probably just waiting for an opportunity.

Sofia walked behind Evie, the little princess in her arms. Rose was back in her royal robes. She laughed trying to grab rose petals as they floated by.

Sofia was cloaked in every sense of the word. She wore a simple brown velvet dress ending at mid-calf and a matching hooded cape. Beneath her dress, her skin was covered in painted sigils to hide her witchy powers.

The Baron had not wanted her to accompany them. But who better to determine the authenticity of the Imps Bottle? In the end Sofia had said something to the effect of ‘You’re not the boss of me,’ and declared she was coming.

Evie wouldn’t be surprised if the Baron secretly found his own way into the kingdom. He must have been here many times when he was courting Rose’s grandmother, the Dowager Queen.

At the end of the rose-strewn road, a shaded dais draped was draped in golden cloth that sparkled in the bright sun. The dais was high enough so the people crowding the road could see everyone.

Evie had refused to wear a dress. She hated dresses. Besides she was an Avenging Angel. A warrior. She wanted something more forceful. Sofia helped her put together a suitable outfit.

She wore a long velvet duster – scarlet in honor of the Red Kingdom – with black embroidery in a wave pattern around the open collar, sleeves, edge, and hem. It fastened loosely to hang at her waist in an A-line to her ankles. The cut kept the material away from her legs in case running became necessary. Evie was pretty sure running and fighting would be necessary at some point.

Beneath the coat she had on a simple pair of black yoga pants, black leather walking boots, and a simple black tee shirt. The coat provided all the drama she needed. Her long brown hair hung loosely in its natural waves. She had a red velvet scrunchie around one wrist in case she needed to fasten it back.

Her wings were fully extended like Gaius though unlike him, she kept her golden sword sheathed. She didn’t want to appear like some invading conqueror. Both wings pulsed slowly back and forth, picking up on her nerves. They were far more than appendages with feathers. They also didn’t always agree.

She knew she looked imposing. She was also after about ten steps sweating buckets. Oh my gawd it was hot.

Prince Arundel came down the steps to meet Evie at street level. He wore half armor over a heavily embroidered tunic in shades of brown and chestnut, fawn-colored breeches, and suede knee-high boots. Metal shin covers were strapped around each boot and matching ones on his thighs.

His crown was surprisingly simple: a silver circlet set with rubies the size of her thumb all the way around.

At the bottom step a wave of cheering crested over them. He extended his hand.

“Take it,” hissed Father James. “And smile, damn it.”

Smile, right. She did her best though she doubted it reached her eyes. She didn’t know what she was doing.

Taking his hand, she felt the same frisson of magic pass between them. Just as when they’d shaken hands in Target.

His eyes widened as he felt it too.

Her black wing fanned out to its widest point.

Rose shouted, “Papa, papa!”

He reached out his arms. Sofia moved so he could take the wriggling child.

Holding her tightly, he kissed her cheeks and head, murmuring in her ear.

Rose nuzzled him, her pudgy arms locked around his neck.

The crowd went wild.

They stood there for several moments until Rosabeth turned to point at Evie.

“Mahmee, mahmee!” she cooed reaching one hand for Evie.

“Take her hand,” Father James whispered.

Evie reached up and took it.

The crowd’s cheers doubled in volume.

With the little girl in his arms and Evie’s hand in hers, they ascended the dais.

A crowd of courtiers resplendent in gowns and armor despite the blistering heat bowed low as they reached the top step.

They turned to face the crowd. Evie didn’t know what to do so she waved at them.

Rosabeth dropped her hand and waved as well, chattering away in baby talk to her father.

Still holding his daughter, the prince eventually raised a hand motioning for quiet.

The crowd silenced immediately.

“Thank you for your welcome,” the prince said, his voice carrying easily across the huge open plaza.

Evie wondered if he was using a spell to make himself heard.

“Today is an important day for the kingdom,” he continued.

Evie noticed he said ‘the kingdom’ not ‘our kingdom’

He spoke in Fae though Evie’s angel skills translated it with only a slight echo. Gaius leaned closer to Adam, Sofia, and Father James, translating she hoped.

“Your Queen has returned, acknowledged by her child. The dynasty continues. All hail Queen Evangeline, sovereign of the Red Kingdom.”

Queen Evangeline? Her insides felt like they dropped into her boots.

Queen Evangeline?

What had she gotten herself into?

Thankfully she wasn’t expected to address the crowd.

He set the princess on the dais. When Sofia moved to pick her up, the prince motioned for her to stay where she was. Unlike Evie, Rosabeth was not new to public appearances. She stood tall and straight between the two adults, though she grasped Evie’s coat with one little hand.

This did not go unnoticed by the crowd or the courtiers. Everyone pointed at the toddler’s acceptance of Evie.

The prince spoke a little longer about change and new opportunities and his own kingdom’s ongoing friendship and alliance with the Red Kingdom. Honestly, Evie was not paying attention. The crowds and heat and her nerves were overwhelming. If she wasn’t angelic she would be having a panic attack right now.

She thought it might end in some sort of crowning ceremony. The courtiers hadn’t given them a schedule of events.

Taking her hand, the prince gave a little tug, indicating they should bow to the crowd. Evie bowed, matching the angle to that of the prince. She saw Rosabeth do the same.

“Now wave,” whispered the prince as he guided her back to the steps.

Rosabeth reached up her hand and dropped the prince’s, Evie took it automatically.

Arundel held the little girl’s other hand and as though they’d rehearsed it, they lifted her down the short flight of steps as the toddler laughed.

The cheers reached new levels.

At the foot of the steps, the crowd parted to reveal an ornate red and gold open coach drawn by six chestnut horses.

Entering the coach, they rode through the town to the castle. Waving and smiling until Evie's arm and cheeks ached in equal measure.

Gaius, Adam, Father James, and Sofia followed in another coach. Or at least that was the idea. Gaius refused to leave Evie unguarded. Spreading his wings he flew in circles around the coach, the sun glinting from his sword.

Instead of causing a problem, the crowd seemed to love it. Cheering and pointing at the splendid figure of the Angel.

Rose sat between them. Sofia had given her the little stuffed spaniel wrapped in Evie's tee shirt and she was allowed to cuddle it as the horses trotted along.

"Mahmee?" Rosabeth said plopping the stuffed spaniel down on Evie's lap. The little girl petted the toy's fluffy head then pointed at Evie.

Evie glanced down.

Rosabeth made petting motions to the dog. Looked up at Evie, and repeated the petting.

"She feels your unease," Arundel said. "She thinks petting her dog will help you feel better."

Evie dutifully patted the toy dog's head.

Rosabeth smiled and nodded as if to say, "See? Better, right?"

"Thanks, kiddo," Evie said.

They turned a corner opening onto a wide boulevard. and Evie finally noticed the castle built into the towering red cliffs behind the town. Had she been able to see it all along? Evie had been too preoccupied with the procession and meeting the prince to even glance beyond the crowds.

The structure was carved right into the cliffs: spires, turrets, windows, terraces, and balconies. Like some sort of glorious Pueblo in the Southwest. The cliff rose at least a thousand feet and the castle with it. Waterfalls falling in spumes of white foam a thousand feet framed the castle. Buildings painted in bright patterns of flowers, birds and animals spilled out at the foot of the mountain.

A fanfare of trumpets rang out from the castle ramparts at their approach. A giant banner unfurled revealing an enormous portrait of Evie, the Prince, and little Rosabeth.

Cheers echoed across the plain.

Evie put her head in her hands moaning, "I need a drink."

“We will be in the castle shortly. There will be refreshments.”

She gave him a frank stare. “Buddy, there isn’t enough alcohol in the kingdom to help me figure this mess out.”