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Tiffany
Aaron

The Veil:
Heaven & Hell



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The Veil: Angels and Demons

If you like snappy dialogue, well paced action, suspense, engaging characters and hot sex to spice up good romance then you will enjoy this excellent story!

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With *The Veil: Angels and Demons*, Ms. Aaron has penned an amazing book full of adventure and passion... Beltaine has struggled to achieve everything in her life. Her courage and her willingness to stand up for what she believed in endeared her to me.

-- Noemi, *A Romance Review*

Ms. Aaron creates such a vivid picture that the reader will not want to put *The Veil* down.

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

I loved the strong dash of humour threaded throughout this book. The ending came too soon and left me wanting more. Bring more of Beltaine and Kalan soon, my heart cannot stand the suspense!

-- Wendy, *Coffee Time Romance*

Readers will find themselves rooting for Beltaine and Kalan to give into their need for each other and get the bad guys. The supporting cast is a surprising mix of good and evil working together without overtaking the story. All of these make this story worthy of a Perfect 10. *Angels and Demons* is not only a great addition to any TBR pile, but one you'll read over again

-- Belinda S. Mays, *Romance Reviews Today*

The Veil: Angels and Demons is now available from Loose Id.

THE VEIL: HEAVEN AND HELL

Tiffany Aaron

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some violence.

The Veil: Heaven and Hell

Tiffany Aaron

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Volume 3:
Sympathy for the Devil

Chapter One

Beltaine stared down at the small book in her hand. Who would have guessed that such a small thing could bring about the destruction of the world?

“So is it done? Have we completed our mission?”

She looked over to where Kalan sat on her couch in the Ericksberg apartment. His gold skin was pale, and there was a tired glaze to his eyes.

“I don’t think so. The Veil’s visible, and the holes were there. We never learned who did it.”

“You’re right,” he sighed.

She moved to sit beside him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and pulled her to his chest. Sighs came from their lips. She had never been held by anyone else who could make her feel as if she’d come home. Resting her head on his shoulder, she relaxed into his warmth.

“I guess we should figure out how to contact my mother.” She hated the way her voice held a hesitation.

“You don’t know how to?” He sounded surprised.

“No. I’ve never wanted to talk to or see her. She always finds me, usually to annoy me.” For the first time, there was a pang in her heart when she thought about her mother, and it wasn’t heartburn.

“Maybe if we contact the commander, he would know how to find her.” Kalan ran his fingers through her hair.

“Bad idea. The commander dislikes my mother even more than I do. We’ll find some other way.” She shuddered at the thought of her mother and the commander being anywhere near each other.

“I’ll save us all the trouble and take the book now.” An elegant, aristocratic voice entered the room along with the strange and compelling smell of burning wood and cinnamon.

Beltaine almost fell off the couch as Kalan jumped to his feet. Her angel stood in front of her, brandishing his sword at the being standing by her window.

“Beltaine, could you tell your bodyguard to put his sword away?” The Devil’s thin hand fluttered in Kalan’s direction.

Kalan growled and stalked forward.

“Kalan, put your sword away. He isn’t going to do anything to us.”

Kalan charged the Devil. A blinding light flashed and she heard Kalan cry out. She waited until she could see again. Kalan was kneeling in front of the slender creature, clutching his burnt hands to his chest. Turning, he stared at her with accusing eyes.

She went to the kitchen. She slid oven mitts on and pulled a bottle of holy water from the far reaches of a cabinet.

“What are you doing, if I may ask?” The Devil appeared at her shoulder, gazing curiously at her.

“I’m soaking some towels in holy water so Kalan can wrap his hands in them.”

“Okay.” He backed off. “Why are you being so nice to him?”

“He’s not so bad once you get to know him.” Shrugging, she smiled slightly.

A finger reached out and stroked her cheek. “And you know him well.” His voice was soft, and unlike so many others she had met during this time, there wasn’t any scorn or disgust in his voice. There was only a quiet, desperate understanding.

She nodded and walked to where Kalan was kneeling. Lowering herself to the floor beside him, she wrapped the soaked towels around his hands. Pain shone in his eyes. She pulled off the mitts and captured his face in her hands. She leaned forward to kiss him. Beltaine feasted on his lips, nibbling on the bottom one until he gasped. Taking advantage, she slid her tongue in and stroked the roof of his mouth.

“Beltaine,” he moaned.

Pulling away, she stared into his eyes. “Jackass.” Her voice was low and amused. “I told you to put your sword away. The Devil isn’t here to cause us harm. What did you think you could do to him anyway? A lone angel -- even if he is a member of the Host -- can’t defeat the Devil.”

“He’s evil,” he ground out.

Disappointment flooded her for a moment. “After everything we’ve been through so far, you still don’t get it.”

She gripped his elbow and helped him stand. Leading him to the couch, she settled him on the furniture and waved the Devil to a chair.

“Don’t get what?” Kalan eyed the creature with suspicion.

“He isn’t good or evil. The Devil just is.” She caressed his cheek and sighed.

“He’ll never understand, dear. Angels see the world in black and white. They don’t comprehend gray.” The Devil shook his head at her.

“We’ve spent so much time together the past couple of days, I was hoping he had figured something out.” She shrugged.

“I’m not sure the time you’ve spent together is conducive to changing his mind about the good or evil of demons, dear.” The Devil perched on a chair and crossed his legs with prim perfection.

“*He’s* in the room with you,” Kalan pointed out, an annoyed tone in his voice.

They ignored him. Beltaine narrowed her eyes at the ruler of Hell. “Why’d you kill the guy who stole the book?”

The Devil shrugged. “It was mine. No one is allowed to take what’s mine.” His eyes skated to the book resting on the couch.

Kalan glared at him and put his hand on the book. A smile raced over the Devil’s face.

“Do you really think that’ll stop me from taking it? It’s mine and no one has the right to take it. I don’t give anything away.”

“Especially if it can lead to your destruction.” Kalan seemed determined to push the Devil’s buttons.

Beltaine sat back, allowing them to chat. If he wanted to annoy the fallen angel, then she wasn’t going to save him from his own stupidity. Most of the time she’d be tempted to save him, but she didn’t have the energy. Kalan was a big boy. He should know better.

“Ah, well, it’s better for everyone if I’m not destroyed.”

She could tell the smug certainty in the Devil’s voice bothered Kalan.

“Better for everyone? How can you justify that statement?”

A frown crossed the Devil’s face. The creature’s gaze shot to her, then back to Kalan. “Why would I want to justify it to you or anyone else for that matter?”

She hid her smile. The Devil truly didn’t understand why anyone would doubt or question him.

“I would think you’d want to convince me that there is some purpose to you still being here.” Kalan glared at him.

“Is he serious?” the Devil asked her.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he is.” She laughed.

The Devil huffed and stood, grabbing the book from Kalan’s grip. “I don’t have to explain myself to anyone, least of all some angel who’s under the delusion he can question me.”

The Devil’s hands were waving around as he turned to her. “You make it clear to him that it doesn’t pay to question me.”

Before she could say anything, he disappeared.

Kalan stared at her as she chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I think I’m rubbing off on you.” She wiped the tears of laughter from her cheeks.

“What are you talking about? You’ve been rubbing on me since we met.” Kalan’s blue eyes snapped at her.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I thought I was the only one who managed to piss off people who could kill me, but you seem to have developed a knack for it.” Shrugging, she stood and strolled to the window. “Of course, I think my enemies are a little more dangerous than yours.”

“The Devil isn’t dangerous?”

She looked back at him. “He isn’t nearly as dangerous as your commander is.”

Kalan’s face held a confused look. “The Devil isn’t deadly or vicious? You really fear the commander more than him?”

She leaned against the windowpane, staring out into the darkness. While she thought about how to explain, she had the strangest feeling that someone was standing out in the night, watching her. Hostility rolled in waves over her. Her skin crawled and a shiver raced down her spine.

“Beltaine?” Kalan touched her shoulder and she jumped.

She’d been so focused on the watcher, she hadn’t heard him approach. Sliding into his arms, she put her head on his chest and tried to think about the question he’d asked.

“Lucifer is deadly and dangerous. I’m not denying that, but he tends to stay away from mortals. He has no real use for them.”

“But is he trouble for me?”

“Not if you take him seriously. Don’t treat him like a child or an idiot and you’ll be fine.” She rubbed her forehead on his skin.

By his hum, she could tell he liked what she was doing. “I’d never say he was an idiot, but he does come across as a spoiled child.”

She agreed. “He’s a very spoiled child with a lot of power. He’s inclined to dismiss everyone, unless they enter what he considers his kingdom.”

“Or take what’s his.” He traced a pattern over her back.

“Oh yes. He’s very possessive. That’s why we need to find the person who ripped the Veil.”

“Why?”

“If the Devil gets him first, he’ll kill him and we’ll never know why he did it.”

Chapter Two

She pressed her lips to his. The kiss started out gentle, as if neither of them was interested in anything other than the soft give and take of the kiss. His firm lips rubbed against hers while his hands reached down to cup her ass.

Forgetting about the watcher outside, she wound her arms around Kalan's neck and pulled him closer. She was addicted to his taste. She had figured out she couldn't last long without it.

"I'm mad at you," she said, leaning back from him.

A puzzled frown skated over his face. "How was I supposed to know the Devil wasn't going to hurt you?"

"I'm not mad at you for that. I'm angry because you scared me to death back in the catacombs."

"Sorry, Beltaine. I didn't know it would hit me like that."

"Maybe it's a matter of what side of the Veil you come from. When I'm near it, I'm energized, and I want to draw its power into me." Her body tingled, remembering the rush she'd experienced when she tapped into the Veil to destroy the rest of their attackers.

"All I feel is oppression and pain." He bent down and nibbled on her ear.

Purring, she tilted her head to allow him a better angle. “Was that really from the Veil or could it have been from all the rituals and sacrifices committed in the altar room?”

“Not sure. It could have been from both.” His voice was distracted as he trailed his lips down to the base of her neck. He was taking his time tasting her.

She was in the mood to let him. There wasn’t any protest when he gathered the neck of her tank top in his hands and ripped it in two. Beltaine was happy the holy water had healed his hands so quickly. She braced herself against the window and thrust her breasts up towards him.

He licked over one shoulder down to the mauve tip of her right breast. Kalan nibbled there before he moved to her other shoulder and did the same down to her left nipple. Shivers traveled down her spine as he fastened his teeth around that hard tip and tugged. Moaning, she allowed the pane of glass and the windowsill to support her weight. She threaded her fingers through his hair and urged him to take her breast deeper into his mouth.

A gasp tore from her throat as he bit her hard, then soothed the sting with long swipes of his tongue. She watched as he sank to his knees and feasted on her. He teased Beltaine with teeth and tongue. He nipped, sucked, and licked her flesh until it was red, aching, and tender. Letting go of the left nipple, he moved over and fastened onto the right one.

“Shit, you’re going to make me come,” she cried.

She had never felt this way before. Not one of her former lovers had ever tried to ensure her own pleasure first. Well, she admitted to herself, she was never involved in their enjoyment, either. As long as she came, she didn’t care if the man she was screwing got off.

His hand came up and began to play with her aching left tip while he sucked the right harder. Each tug shot to her pussy, making her juices flow. Pleasure began to build. With a bite from his teeth and a pinch from his fingers, she came.

Her orgasm exploded over her, causing her to arch her back and clench his head tightly. While she was still coming down, he reached down and unbuttoned his pants. He stripped her quickly, not wasting a movement. Before she could say a word, he was naked and sliding into her. His head dropped to rest against her shoulder as he took a deep breath.

Beltaine wrapped her arms and legs around him. She ran her hands over his shoulders. "What are you waiting for?" She couldn't hold out any longer. She tilted her hips to take him deeper.

"I'm savoring the moment," he said in a hoarse voice. "I love the way you feel around me."

"Good thing, since I love the way you feel inside me. Now move," she ordered.

Chuckling, he stroked into her and slowly pulled out. It was a slow loving. Deep emotion ran between them, and she felt the wall she had built around her heart and soul beginning to crumble.

There had only been one person who was welcomed beyond that wall. Roger bullied his way into her life, and nothing she did pushed him out. Now, almost from the beginning, her body had recognized Kalan as a mate, but her heart wasn't willing to give him a chance. Yet the more time they spent together, the more she realized that he was trying to move beyond the lessons he'd been taught about her and her kind.

Laughing, she lifted her hips to encourage him to ride her harder. It wasn't the time for deep thoughts. Her heart might want to claim him, but she wasn't going to allow it any control at the moment.

Soon all thought rushed from her mind as the blunt head of his cock hit the spot that made her orgasm crash through her again. Her pussy held him inside and the contractions of her muscles drove him over the edge. He grunted as he spilled into her.

Pressing her cheek to the cool glass, she felt the anger and insanity of the watcher roll over her. She stood up slowly, clothing herself with a casual wave. Since her back was towards the window, she didn't worry about the watcher seeing her lips.

"There's someone out on the street watching us." She grabbed Kalan's chin to keep his gaze on her. "I'm going to see if I can flush him out."

"I'll go with you."

Shaking her head, she moved them away from the window. "I want you to stay here. I don't want him to figure out that I've left the apartment."

He frowned, but Beltaine didn't care. She was better suited to stalking prey in the dark.

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

"No. Don't worry. I've been kicking demon ass for years. A crazy mortal isn't anything to sweat about." She kissed him, then strapped on her knife.

"I hate being left behind," Kalan complained as he followed her to the door.

"Imagine how women throughout the ages have felt when the macho men went out to save the world and left them behind to tend the children and make dinner." She snickered as he smacked her ass when she went out the door.

Beltaine slipped down the stairs. She was lucky that the entrance to her building was on the other side of the block. The watcher wouldn't know she'd left.

Slinking out of the doorway, she focused her power to pinpoint where the stranger stood. An odd emptiness came from the spot where she was sure he hid. It was as if something was absorbing her power instead of bouncing it back at her. The emptiness caused an uneasy shiver to run down her spine. All creatures -- mortal or not -- caused a ping in her power. She wondered what creature was out there.

Drawing her knife, she made her way from shadow to shadow, trying to sneak up behind the watcher. She masked her own approach with some of her power. It was reacting sluggishly. She'd have to visit a cemetery soon.

Glancing up, she found her window and every once in a while Kalan would cross in front of it, talking. A smirk crossed her face because she was sure he wasn't saying nice things. She hoped the person on the street couldn't read lips. Across the street from her building was an alley. That's where the emptiness and anger was coming from. With every sense on high alert, she moved into the alley. Beltaine wasn't sure what she expected to find, but she was surprised when she didn't find anyone. Searching the entire, alley, she didn't see a single person. There was no way the watcher could've gotten past her, and the alley was a dead-end.

Pushing her power out beyond the alley, she couldn't find a trace of the person who had been watching them, and that scared her. Her power had never failed her before, yet if the stranger had anything to do with the Veil, he must be protected by someone more powerful than she was. She headed back to her apartment.

* * * * *

A shadow parted from the darkness of the alley's dead-end. Gleaming eyes held hatred for the demon spawn. Beltaine and her pet angel had foiled his plans, and they would pay for that. He still had Starrer. The mortal would serve his purpose, then true power would be his.

Thunder cracked and the sky opened with a torrent of rain. The shadow looked up and if he hadn't known better, he would think God was weeping.

Chapter Three

When Beltaine returned to her apartment, Kalan wasn't alone. Father John and Roger were chatting with the angel.

"Gentlemen." She nodded at them as she took off the knife sheath and flung it on the end table.

"Did you find anything?" Kalan asked as she sank down to sit on the floor beside his feet.

"By the time I got there, he must have left. The strange thing is, my power didn't see him."

The men looked confused.

She explained. "When I send out my power, the essence of another creature makes a ping, in a way, and comes back to me."

"Like radar?" Roger asked.

"Right. Any being will do this, even demons or angels, but this stranger didn't. It was as if he absorbed my power."

"Do you think it was the man you're searching for?" Father John looked tired.

“Did you get any rest?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “If it was, he’s protected by something more powerful than I, and that concept scares me.”

Roger and Father John nodded. Kalan frowned.

“I didn’t think anything scared you.”

She flipped him off and everyone laughed. “There are a few things that scare me, but the beings more powerful than me are creatures you should fear as well.”

“Who are they? Besides God and the Devil.” Kalan stroked a hand over her hair.

“The commander and the master. Trust me when I tell you to have respect for God and the Devil, but don’t fear them. Their motives are rather clear.” She rubbed her eyes and sighed.

“The Devil’s motive is to collect souls and ruin people’s lives.” Kalan sounded confident.

Roger, Father John, and Beltaine shook their heads.

Roger said, “The Devil’s motive is to rule Hell and to make sure he’s never bothered with trivial things. God’s motive is truly known only to Him, but we know it isn’t to harm us.”

“With the commander and the master, you never know if they’re out to help you or hurt you. So you can’t trust them. If you can’t trust them, you should fear them, especially since they have the power to kill you,” Beltaine pointed out.

“But the commander is an angel, one of the most powerful angels in Heaven. I’d think you’d be able to trust him to do God’s will,” Kalan protested.

“Maybe he does do God’s will, Kalan, but I’ve felt there was a purpose behind it.” Father John pinned the angel with a glance. “Are you telling me angels never have any other motive besides God’s will?”

Kalan blushed and stammered. Beltaine decided to let him off the hook. "We could discuss this all night and never convince him about anything." She patted him on the knee. "How's Betsy?"

"She's resting comfortably at the hospital. Father Paul was with her when we left. I see Lucifer's come and collected his book." The priest leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"Been here and left all ready. He wasn't inclined to stick around when Kalan started questioning him." Beltaine looked at Father John with concerned eyes.

The priest was the only example of a father figure she had. Or at least what a real father might have been like. She'd watched him age over the years, but had steadfastly ignored the thought of his death. Now, staring at him under the harsh lights of her apartment, she could see the priest's death hanging over him. Tears she'd vowed never to cry welled up in her eyes.

Father John smiled with gentle understanding. "It seems I'll be joining our Father sooner than we had hoped."

She scrambled to her knees in front of him and took his gloved hands in hers. As much as she wanted to deny his words, she knew lying wouldn't stop the hurt. She just nodded.

"What are you talking about, Father John? You've got a lot more life to live." Roger's voice held panic and pain.

"Son, there's no point in lying to ourselves. Each new episode with the stigmata takes away a piece of my soul. I'm losing the energy to live." The priest took Roger's hand and held it with Beltaine's.

"Why would He do that? Why would God give you the stigmata and allow it to kill you?" Beltaine's question was low and fierce.

Father John chuckled. "You're always questioning Him, child. You've never been content to accept the answer 'Because He's God.'"

“Damn right. Everyone in this room is accountable for what he does. Why shouldn’t God be? ‘Because he’s God’ is such a cop-out. It’s bullshit to be scared of asking God questions. If He didn’t want us to know, He never would have given us free will.” She jumped to her feet and smiled down at them. “You’re not going to die tonight. I’m heading out to replenish my power. I’ll be back.”

With a simple wave of her hand, she disappeared.

* * * * *

Kalan stood, ready to follow her. Father John stopped him.

“Let her go. Confronting death is never pleasant, especially for Beltaine.”

“Why? She kills demons all the time.” He sat back down.

“Demon killing isn’t the same as someone dying.”

“How is it different?” He stared at the priest.

“When she kills a demon, she’s destroying his corporeal form and its tie to the earth. The demon reforms in its true shape in Hell. For her, when a mortal dies, he dies. There’s no reforming anywhere for him.”

Kalan was puzzled. “What about Heaven? Most mortal souls reform in Heaven.”

“Heaven is a vague concept to her. All she’s known her entire life is the hypocrisy of Earth and the dangers of Hell. She can’t stretch her imagination far enough to believe in a place of peace.” The priest shook his head, sadness taking shape in his eyes.

“What kind of place would have beings so intolerant they would rather she be dead than alive?” Roger inquired, his gaze fighting with Kalan’s.

Winning, Kalan couldn’t argue with them. He had been one of these angels who thought everyone would be better off if she were dead. Yet somehow, in spending time with her, he had come to realize there was more to Beltaine than the hard-nosed kick-ass demon

slayer. She had depths she didn't show others. He had entered some of the closed rooms in her soul, and he hoped she would allow him more access.

Kalan snorted. He wasn't sure how much more access she could give him. He loved her body and enjoyed it every chance he got, but it was her soul he wanted.

"I've changed," he said quietly, standing and moving to the window. "I see her as more than a demon."

"So angels aren't as rigid as we're led to believe." Roger smiled to take the sting out of the words.

"Only in some ways." He winked at the young priest and watched the man's cheeks flush. "I'm going to look for Beltaine. You're welcome to stay here for the night." He bowed slightly to both of them and disappeared.

* * * * *

Beltaine sat in the potter's field. She gathered power from the souls confined in the cemetery. It was one of the few places she'd come to in Ericksberg.

"Is the woman all right?" Azubah asked from next to her.

She kept her eyes closed and held the thread of power. She wasn't interested in talking to the demon.

"I would've thought you'd be happy to hear me ask about the whore." She could almost feel the demon staring at her. Opening her eyes, she gazed over the plain wooden crosses marking the graves of the poor. Would she even get an unmarked grave when she died? Would there be any mourners at her service? A laugh broke from her. There wouldn't be any sort of service because except for Roger, no one would really care.

A sharp pain drew her gaze back to the demon standing beside her. Something wet trailed down her arm. She snarled when she saw a long thin scratch running along her skin.

Azubah's red eyes widened as he stepped back. Beltaine clamped her hand around the demon's neck and jerked it close enough for it to see the fire in her own gaze.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She shook the creature, then pushed it away from her.

The demon cowered and whined. "You weren't paying any attention to me."

"Did you ever think I just might not want to talk to you?" She watched with narrowed eyes as the scratch healed.

"Why wouldn't you?" Azubah stuttered as she glared at it. "Anyway, you were wallowing in self-pity."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Wallowing in self-pity?" Climbing to her feet, she considered punching the creature, but decided it wasn't worth it.

"Sure. You were thinking that no one would mourn you if you die."

"How'd you know that?" A suspicion skated through her mind.

"I didn't read your thoughts. I'm a lesser demon. I can't do any of that, even with the power I have. You had a sad look in your eyes, so what else would you be thinking in a cemetery?" The demon shrugged.

She didn't want to talk about it. "Betsy's fine. Father Paul is staying with her at the hospital for tonight."

"Great." The demon dismissed the whore with a flap of its hand. "What are you going to do now?"

"Do? Why would I do anything more?" She started to move down the stone path leading out of the graveyard.

"Wait. You're joking, right?" The small demon skipped after her.

"Am I? I got the book back for the Devil. The idiot who ripped the Veil can't do any more damage." Standing at the gate, she looked in both directions before she stepped off hallowed ground.

Azubah reached out to stop her, then must have thought twice about touching her. “What if the mortal tries to sneak into Hell? What if the Veil falls?”

“Do you always worry about ‘what ifs?’” The same strange feeling of being watched made the scar her father had left on her neck itch.

“Only if they involve my very existence. Aren’t you scared? If the Veil falls, beings like us are screwed.”

She stopped suddenly, causing Azubah to run into her back. Whirling around, she grabbed the demon and shook it.

“We’re all screwed, you stupid demon. Every creature on earth is doomed from the moment it takes breath. It’s just a matter of time before God gets His head out of the sand and realizes how fucked up this world’s gotten.”

The demon was a little wild-eyed. “If you believe that, why try so hard?”

Pushing Azubah away, Beltaine started to walk away. The demon didn’t follow, but another voice let her know someone else had arrived.

“Why try so hard?” Kalan’s question made her stop and turn to look at him.

The angel leaned against the low stone wall surrounding the cemetery, his muscled arms crossed over his chest. His white leather pants lovingly outlined every bulge and her mouth watered. She tried to ignore the part of her body that wanted to jump the angel and ride him until they were both crying out with pleasure.

“Beltaine?” Kalan waved a hand in front of her face.

She hated when people did that. “What?” She’d forgotten he had asked her a question.

“Why did you fight so hard to find the book and save Betsy if you believe we’re all doomed anyway?”

It was a good question, but she didn’t have a good answer. “I never said angels were doomed. Just mortals and demons. I can’t tell you why for sure. Maybe it has to do with the human part of me that I try to forget exists. Mortals fight so hard to survive and to live. Do

you think it could be coded in their genes or something, and I got some of it from my father?" She grimaced, not wanting to think about getting anything from her father.

"If you have this will to live, why do you have such a negative outlook?" Kalan took her hand and pulled her close to him.

"There's more than enough demon blood to counterbalance any optimism I might have. As a mortal, I want to live, even if this world's screwed up. The demon in me says what's the point in even trying anymore, because we're all doomed anyway."

"That's a depressing way to live." Kalan frowned as he cupped her cheek.

She was feeling a little more bitchy than normal. Instead of soothing, his touch irritated her. She jerked away and moved towards the village center.

"Maybe it is, but it's the outlook I'm happiest with at the moment. I've lived with it all of my life and I don't see why it's any of your business whether I believe we're doomed or not."

He blinked, and she could tell he was unsure why she was attacking him. Beltaine longed to scratch her scar. Her neck was burning. Shooting a glance back up the street, she saw Azubah standing in front of the entrance to the cemetery. A large black shadow formed behind the demon.

"Azubah, get the hell out of here," she cried as she raced up the sidewalk.

The demon's eyes widened, and the creature didn't take the time to look behind it. It disappeared as Beltaine skidded to a stop before she ran into the figure emerging from the shadow.

Chapter Four

The creature was tall, reed thin, and pale. Its fangs dripped some noxious fluid. She didn't want to know what it was. Snarling, the vampire lunged for her.

"Shit," she swore as she managed to dodge her attacker.

"What the hell is that thing?" Kalan's voice came from behind her.

"It's a vampire." She kept her eyes on the Hell-born creature. She needed to grab it without getting any of the poison on her. She had seen a man's skin melt off his body when he got a drop of the vampire's slime on him.

"A vampire? Amazing. I never thought I'd get to see one. It's interesting how its head can spin around on its neck like that."

"Now's not the time to discuss this, Kalan. Stay away from his saliva. It'll melt your skin off." She danced to the left side of the vampire and drove her foot into the creature's ribs.

It shrieked and shambled towards her. She fought her gag reflex. God, the creature reeked. The thing was literally a walking dead man. She shouldn't expect it to smell like roses. The vampire hissed and she swept her foot out to connect with his ankles. The creature went flailing past and into the downswing of Kalan's sword.

Now the vampire was beheaded and not moving. She didn't have to worry about dodging the flinging drool. Gathering her power, she held out her hand and said, "Burn."

Fire engulfed the body and severed head. She tried not to watch as the flames turned the pale flesh into ash. When everything -- bone and flesh -- was gone, she turned to glare at the angel.

"What the hell were you doing?" She shoved him.

He blinked his pretty blue eyes at her with an innocent smile, but she saw a hint of wickedness hidden in them. "Doing?"

"You were gawking at that thing like a damn tourist."

"I've never seen a vampire before. I knew you had him under control. I'm surprised you're not yelling at me for helping you." He went to lean against the stone wall with an insolent wink.

Snarling, she pinned him to the wall with her body. "Your way of killing him was more effective, but don't push me, angel."

"Or what? You'll beat me up?" he teased.

Beltaine's adrenaline raced. She grabbed his head and brought it down to crush their lips together. He squeaked as her tongue demanded entrance to his mouth and took it.

Kalan tensed.

She knew he was fighting the urge to take over. Well, she wasn't going to let him. Reaching down, she unzipped his pants and burrowed her hand into them, cupping his balls. He moaned when she squeezed them. Nipping his bottom lip, she tugged on them a little harder.

"Hey, be careful," he yelped.

She grinned up at him as she sank to her knees in front of him.

He looked down at her. "That's becoming one of my favorite positions for you." A mischievous grin appeared, then disappeared quickly when she took a tight grip on his balls and flashed her fangs at him.

She stared up at his pained expression and tried to decide if she should continue what she planned on doing or if she should walk away.

"Please," he whispered.

Beltaine wasn't sure if he was begging for her to release him or if he wanted her to pleasure him. In the end, it didn't matter, because her body demanded its own release, and Kalan was the only way it wanted to get it.

No mercy. She sucked his cock into her mouth and went to work. Rolling his balls in her hand, Beltaine licked Kalan's shaft. She nibbled the throbbing vein on the underside of his rod. She teased the slit in the blunt head and tasted the salty pre-cum leaking from him.

The tip of her tongue found the sensitive spot right below the crown, and Kalan cried out.

"Beltaine." His voice rang through the night air.

She stroked a fingertip over the soft skin behind his balls. Wrapping her other hand around the base of his cock, she slid her mouth up and down the shaft along with her hand. His hands threaded through her hair and kept her from pulling away. Humming, she continued to work him until his hips were snapping and he was fucking her mouth.

"I'm going to come, love," he ground out between clenched teeth.

She pulled off him with a pop. He wasn't going to come until he was inside her. She squeezed her fingers tight around the base of his cock. "Not yet."

With a burst of power, she willed her clothes away and climbed his body. He leaned against the wall to support her weight while she entwined her legs around his waist. Sighs filled the air as her wet hot pussy sheathed his throbbing cock. It wouldn't take long for either of them to reach their climax. He thrust up while she pushed down and he went deep.

Her inner muscles clung to him as he pulled out. One more hard, deep thrust and their orgasms overwhelmed them.

She rested her limp body on his chest while he managed to keep them upright. She felt a chuckle well up in him before he spoke.

“I think we need to get into fights more often. It doesn’t take much to get you off when your blood is racing.”

Angling her chest away from his, she stared. “Do you really want to rile me up, angel? I can do things to you that would tie you in knots.”

A gleam came into his eyes. “Are we talking about bondage?”

She slid to the ground and clothed herself with a casual wave. “Yes, and not in a fun way either.”

A wild-eyed look crossed his face.

“Don’t worry. I don’t have any interest in tying you up.” Glancing at the scorched earth where the vampire’s body had been, she shivered. “It’s not looking good.”

“What do you mean?” Kalan tucked his cock away and did up his pants.

“First, it was zombies. Now, it’s vampires. The Horde is mustering its troops. The demons are already making forays into this world.” She moved towards the center of Ericksberg.

“The Devil and the master will keep the others in check, won’t they?” Kalan inquired as he followed.

“The Devil might, because he’d be out of a nice cushy job if the Host destroyed Hell. I’m not sure what the master would do. He’s the one unknown in this whole affair.” Beltaine stopped at an intersection. “Every move we make, we’re being watched. Who’s watching? I don’t know.”

“What do we do now?” Kalan stood beside her and she enjoyed the solid warmth of his presence.

“I’m going to St. Benedict’s to look over the Veil. You can go back to the apartment and rest.” She cut off his grumble. “You can’t be in the presence of the barrier for very long. It puts too much pressure on you. Nothing’s going to happen tonight. Whoever’s watching us is hiding while he rethinks what he’s going to do. I need to assess what’s going on with the Veil.”

She knew he couldn’t argue with that. Kissing him, she headed off to the church.

Chapter Five

Beltaine stood before the large oak doors carved with angels and a stylized picture of St. Benedict. She studied the patron saint of war. Had the bad guy picked this church on purpose? Had he known what he would cause when he started the process? Or had the whole thing gotten out of hand?

She stroked a finger over the fierce expression of the saint. She found herself wondering what type of person would suffer persecution and pain for a belief or a religion. She didn't know if she would be strong enough or crazy enough to become a saint. Laughing quietly, she went into the sanctuary. She'd have to change quite a few things in her life to come close to being a saint, and she wasn't willing to do that.

Not really paying attention, she made her way down the aisle towards the altar. A body slammed into her. She grabbed the man's arm to keep him from falling down. Once he settled, the man shook her hand off his body.

"Are you okay?"

"You should watch what you're doing." The man snarled at her.

Surprised, she shot the man a quick glance. His suit was wrinkled. The shirt underneath was dirty. His hair stood straight up as if he had been running his hands through it. A deep sorrow shone in his eyes, but a twitch in the lid told her he was on the edge.

“Mr. Starrer, what are you doing here so late?” Father Paul came from his office.

The priest nodded at her, so she decided she was going to let Starrer’s comment pass.

“I needed to pray, Father. I was just leaving when this woman ran into me.” Starrer gestured to her.

As much as she wanted to tear into the man, she had the feeling he wouldn’t be listening to her.

“St. Benedict’s is always open to the hurting.” Father Paul touched the man’s arm.

Starrer tilted his head, but Beltaine didn’t think he was hearing the priest. He seemed to be hearing something else in his head. “I have to go.” Starrer left in a rush.

Both Beltaine and Father Paul watched the man leave. Turning to look at her, the priest smiled and shrugged. “Mr. Starrer’s son committed suicide earlier this year. He’s still trying to come to terms with it.”

Nodding, she didn’t pretend to understand what the man was going through. She’d never lost anyone she cared for.

“I want to thank you.” Father Paul’s voice showed his nervousness.

“For what?” Surprise raced through her. No one had ever thanked her for doing her job.

“For stopping those men from killing that woman.”

“You’re welcome.” What was she supposed to say? Father Paul had no idea what Betsy really was. She wondered if Roger or Father John had explained what was really going on down in the catacombs.

“I need to go back down there, Father. There might be some clues. Unfortunately, I’m not sure this is over.” She stalked to the wall where the entrance to the tunnels was.

“Certainly. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Just pray, Father.”

Slipping through the opening, she made her way into the cellar and found the hidden door to the catacombs. A rush of power flowed over her. She fought the urge to open up and allow the Veil to fill her. She didn’t want to find out what all that power would do to her.

Dismay swamped her as she walked into the altar room. The Veil was a solid barrier across the room, but there were large holes in it. Some of the holes were big enough for the Higher Lords of Hell to come through. She reached out to touch the shimmering barrier. A screech tore from her throat as a hand came through the Veil and wrapped around her wrist. Before she could free herself, she was jerked through the barrier into Hell. Shock rippled through her body.

Blinking, Beltaine met the sardonic gaze of the master. As always, he was impeccably dressed in a double-breasted grey suit. He gestured for her to follow him. She wobbled when she took a step. Looking down, she stopped in horrified shock.

“What the fuck is this?” She waved a hand at the calf-length skirt, sensible black flats, and button-down shirt.

The master sat down at a café table in front of a coffee shop. He laughed. “I believe this is your version of Hell, Beltaine.” He waved her to a chair.

“It’d have to be, because I’d never be caught alive in this outfit. What am I doing in Hell?” She flopped on to the chair and glanced around.

People walked the sidewalks of the picture-perfect city. If she didn’t know better, she’d think the people were mortal. In a glimpse of their eyes, she saw sparks. These were demons, and none of them looked happy to have her there.

“Why am I here?” She sat up, keeping a wary eye on the demons.

“By virtue of who your mother is, you’re capable of crossing into Hell without any side effects. You can return whenever you want. Your pet angel would suffer greatly if he came over.” The master’s eyes gleamed deep red.

“Good thing he’s not planning on vacationing here.” Beltaine knew poking the demon wasn’t smart, but she couldn’t change who she was, and showing fear wasn’t her way.

He bared his fangs at her. “Are you sure you want to mouth off to me?”

“No one’s ever accused me of being smart. Why did you bring me here?” She shifted while holding the demon’s gaze.

“I believed self-preservation was the most important thing to you, but you seem to have found a conscience somewhere.” The master leaned back and crossed his legs.

“It’s not a conscience that I got. My self-preservation kicked in. If the Veil falls, the Horde rides into the mortal world and the Host is unleashed. Who gets stuck in the middle of that fight? Me. I’d rather risk my neck to stop it than stand by and watch it happen.”

He nodded. “I believe I understand what you’re saying, but trust me when I say there are more who want you to fail than there are who hope you succeed.”

“I can probably guess who they are.” She thought about the High Lords of Hell. For centuries, they had chafed at the limitations God and the Devil put on them. They, along with the master, would love to show mortals how inferior humans were.

“Maybe you can. You might be surprised, though. Don’t trust anyone.” He stood and bowed slightly. Turning, he walked away.

“I never have,” she murmured. The burning sensation started in her scar. She needed to get out of Hell.

There were creatures she didn’t want to face. Not in Hell, on their home turf. Beltaine rose and made her way to the barrier. She tried not to rush. Never show fear, or the demons would attack like wild animals. Before she could reach the Veil, a voice she didn’t want to hear called out to her.

“Beltaine.” Her mother appeared next to her.

“Great. Now I know I’m in Hell.” She moved to step around the demon.

“That’s no way to talk to your mother.”

“We’ve been over this before. You might have carried me in your body, but you’ve never been my mother.”

The demon shrugged. “I’m selfish and a terrible creature. All you can do is hate me. I’ve come to terms with that.” Her mother wiped an imaginary tear from her cheek.

Beltaine grimaced. “Quit the bullshit, Mother. What do you want?”

“I see you got the book back and gave it to the Devil already. I wish you had contacted me before you returned it.”

“So you could get the credit for retrieving it?” Beltaine shifted as tension seeped into her body.

“Of course, dear. Why else? You don’t need the Devil’s good will. He won’t bother you. On the other hand, I need all the help I can get with him.” Her mother was very nonchalant about cheating her daughter out of any credit.

“My friends and I almost got ourselves killed because of that stupid book. I would like to add that you were the one to lose it in the first place. I don’t think you deserve to get any brownie points from it. That would be truly fucked up.” Beltaine turned to make her way to the spot where she had crossed over.

“Darling, you’re the one who has always claimed I had no maternal instincts. Why are you surprised by anything I do? I didn’t know you had any friends.” Her mother stopped to think. “Except for that odd priest you hang around with. That’s a strange relationship.”

“Why would it be strange?”

Her mother shot her a puzzled glance. “Considering who and what your father was, I would have thought you’d run as far away from a priest as you could.”

“I don’t run from anyone. Roger might be a priest, but he’s never hurt me, so I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Very open-minded of you.” Her mother smirked.

“Unlike either of my parents.” Trying to be casual, Beltaine asked, “Since Father’s dead, do you see him often?”

“See your father? Why would I? He wasn’t that great a fuck.” Her mother shook her head. “I don’t even know if he’s anywhere in Hell. Just because he was an asshole doesn’t automatically mean he came here when he died.”

Beltaine wasn’t sure how she felt about that information. Would she prefer knowing he suffered in the afterlife? Or was not knowing better for her?

“I have to go. It’s been great chatting with you. I hope we don’t repeat it any time soon.”

The time had come to leave. Hell wasn’t a place she wanted to stay in and she needed to get away from her mother. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through the Veil. The tingling chased up and down her nerve endings. She could swear the energy recognized her and let her absorb it. A wave of exhaustion rose over her. Time to head back to the apartment and talk to Kalan.

Chapter Six

Kalan headed back to Beltaine's apartment. He wasn't thrilled with the fact that she was right. Until he could figure out how to control the effect the Veil had on him, he wasn't going to be very useful to her. It bugged him to know she was going somewhere dangerous and he couldn't be there to save her.

Yet she had to save your ass in the catacombs, his conscience reminded him.

He didn't deny that, but Beltaine was female and the urge to protect her was strong. He wondered if his growing feelings for her were short-circuiting his good sense, because she'd proven she was more than capable of taking care of herself. She'd done it when she was twelve and time had only given her more experience. In truth, she had more experience than he did when it came to dealing with demons.

"Excuse me," a hesitant voice interrupted the conversation he was having with himself.

Turning, he saw a young woman standing a few feet away from him, her eyes scanning the night.

"Yes?" He didn't move closer to her. She was twitchy enough that he realized any sudden moves would cause her to bolt.

"Are you the one who is working with the demon slayer?" The woman stepped closer.

“Demon slayer? You mean Beltaine?” He nodded. “I work with her.”

“Tell her the person she’s looking for is seeking revenge.” She took a small step away.

“Revenge for what?” He reached out to keep her from getting away.

“Something was taken from him that he thought was so important, he needs to blame someone for the loss. He needs to punish someone for it. It’s just unfortunate he chose the Devil.” She shook her head.

“Unfortunate? Why would you say that?”

She looked at him as if he were a fool. “Who else would God defend without question, if not the Devil? Because without the Devil, there would be no need for God.”

Before he could reply, she disappeared into the night shadows. Damn, he had forgotten to ask who the man was, though Kalan didn’t think she’d tell him.

He thought about what the woman had said. Was there truth in her statement? Would God defend the Devil because His own existence depended on it? He wanted to talk it over with Father John. The priest had a rather unique outlook on religion and God. He’d never met a priest who didn’t hate the Devil. Father John talked about the creature as if he were a silly, spoiled child.

Kalan made his way to Beltaine’s apartment, hoping to find the priest still there. He opened the door and disappointment rushed through him when he realized the priests had left. A note on the table let him know that Father Angelo had called to ask Father John and Roger to return to the city. There went his chance to talk to the priest.

He was settling down to nap until Beltaine returned when someone knocked on the door. Frowning, he stood up and went to the door. Misha St. Largent stood in the hallway. A shock of surprise raced through him. What was the head of the Board doing here? Board members should be too busy running all the commerce and criminal trade in the City to take a chance on bothering Beltaine.

“What are you doing here?” He didn’t move out of the doorway.

"I came to see what Beltaine's found out so far." Misha's voice was husky, and she stared at him as if he were a piece of meat.

"She told you she'd report in when she knows anything," he reminded her. "How did you find this place?"

"I have my ways. I'm not stupid enough to believe that bitch would tell me anything."

Misha stepped closer to him and ran her finger down his chest. He shivered in disgust, but he could see she thought the shiver was from desire. Another step and her breasts pressed against him. Fighting the urge to gag, he stepped back, only to realize too late that was what Misha wanted.

Gliding into the apartment, she glanced around and curled her lip. "Very sparse."

"What do you want to know, Ms. St. Largent?" He made sure he wasn't close enough for her to touch him.

"Have you found anything yet?" She wandered around the room.

He stayed silent and watched her circle like a shark. Two large men stood to the right and left of the door.

"Who are they?" Kalan nodded towards them.

Dismissing them with a wave, she said, "My bodyguards. So has the demon-spawned bitch discovered anything?"

He shrugged. "I don't work for you, so I don't have to tell you anything, Ms. St. Largent."

"Please, call me Misha. You might want to rethink your statement. Telling me will be healthier for you in the long run." Her smile was all teeth.

Incredible, he thought. "Are you threatening me?"

"I wouldn't call it a threat. Just a strong suggestion."

He laughed and took a step towards her. "I'm a member of the Host. There's nothing you or your bodyguards can do to force me. If Beltaine chooses not to talk to you, then I've got to honor her wishes."

She flashed him a triumphant smile and flung herself into his arms. Before the shock wore off, she crushed their lips together. When he pushed her away, he saw her glance shoot over his shoulder. With a sinking stomach, he turned around to see Beltaine standing in the doorway.

"Beltaine --" he started to explain.

A glance from her closed his mouth, and he took a huge step away from Misha. Beltaine's eyes glowed red. When she opened her mouth to speak, her fangs gleamed. Squeaking, Misha gestured to her bodyguards. Kalan shot a look at them, and they didn't look inclined to come to her aid. He moved to cover Beltaine's back.

"They won't help you, Misha. You never told them they'd have to go up against me." Beltaine stalked towards the other woman.

Fear showed in Misha's eyes, but the woman didn't back down. Kalan couldn't decide if that was brave or foolish. He knew Beltaine had been looking for a reason to quit working with the Board, and Misha was providing the perfect excuse.

Beltaine reached out a finger tipped with a claw. A thin scratch appeared on Misha's cheek.

"How dare you," Misha gasped.

Beltaine snarled. "I dare because you've never understood what I am. You and the Board have been so smug as you send me here and there, doing your dirty work."

Misha's eyes were wide. "You're a demon. You're nothing but a mad dog."

"You've been jerking my chain long enough." Beltaine pointed at him and said, "He's mine."

Kalan didn't protest because Beltaine was right. He was hers as long as she wanted him.

“So you control him like we control you?” A glance shifted between him and Beltaine.

“No. Kalan does what he wants to do.”

“Then how do you know he doesn’t want me?” Smugness wasn’t attractive on Misha.

“Kalan has better taste than to fall for a cold-hearted bitch like you.”

Misha snorted. “I’m not as cold-hearted as you. At least I didn’t kill my father.”

Shit. Kalan moved to grab Beltaine, but wasn’t fast enough. Beltaine had Misha by the throat and slammed the woman against the wall. Misha’s feet were dangling off the floor.

“You never personally killed anyone, but you’ve hired your murders done for you. At least I have the guts to do my own killing. I guess your way lessens the nightmares you have.” Beltaine shook her like a rag doll. “Remember what happens when you jerk on a dog’s chain long enough. It’ll turn around and bite you. Believe me, my bite is much worse than my bark.”

Leaning, she bared her teeth and ran the tip of her tongue over her fangs. “Since I had no problem killing my father, I’ll have even less of a problem killing you, and I won’t feel guilty about it either.”

The two men started to move forward. Kalan blocked them as he said, “Let them handle it between themselves.”

Misha must have seen something in Beltaine’s eyes to convince her Beltaine was serious. Misha dropped her gaze in submission. Beltaine shook her hard and tossed her across the room towards her bodyguards.

“Get the hell out of here. Never threaten me or any of my friends again. You know how easy it is for me to kill you, and it would be *you* I came for.” Beltaine stalked by him to stand in front of the trio. “If and when I decide to come and tell you what happened, you had better be prepared to pay me for my time.”

Misha reached to touch the scratch on her cheek. Her face went white when she pulled her finger away and saw blood on her skin.

“You’ll have a scar to remind you what I’m capable of. Don’t push me.”

They left and Beltaine turned to him. The fire in her eyes dimmed.

“I’m sorry. She must have heard you coming up the stairs or something. One minute she was threatening me, then she just threw herself into my arms and kissed me.”

* * * * *

Beltaine allowed her anger to drain away while she listened to Kalan apologize. Her claws and fangs disappeared. When she had control over her power, she reached out and cupped Kalan’s cheek.

“Shut up. Don’t apologize for that bitch.” She pressed her other hand to his chest. “As strange as it may seem, I trust you on this. You don’t strike me as the type of person who’d jerk me around.”

He looked surprised. “You trust me?”

Shrugging, she stroked her hand from his cheek into his hair. “Maybe not in every way, but I trust you when it comes to women.”

“Confident of yourself, love?”

“Not really. You’re an honest angel. It has nothing to do with me.” She pulled his head to hers. Nibbling on his lips, she soothed him.

His arms wrapped around her waist and drew her tight against him. Laying her head on his chest, she listened to his heart beat. His hands stroked up and down her back. They rested against each other and absorbed each other’s warmth.

His finger levered her chin up and their lips met again. Her tongue stroked over the crease of his mouth, begging for entrance. Kalan’s mouth opened and her tongue slid in to tease him. A moan filled her mouth as she ran her tongue over the soft inner part of his bottom lip. His hands cupped her ass and lifted her. She entwined her legs around him.

She didn't stop kissing him as he carried her to the bed. Laying her down, he pulled away.

"Hey, I didn't say you could leave," she protested.

He chuckled. "Don't worry. I think you'll be happy with what I'm going to do."

Before she said anything else, he stripped her. He kissed her, then made his way down her neck to where the tendons met her shoulder. She gasped and arched her neck when he bit her there. The wet kisses he trailed over the curves of her breasts cooled in the night air, making her skin tingle.

His teeth scraped over her nipples as he split his attention between them.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and held his mouth to her.

He lowered his body onto hers and feasted on her nipples. His teeth closed around one tip, and he flicked it with his tongue. One of his hands cupped her other breast. His thumb and finger plucked at the nipple.

Writhing on the bed, she begged for more. "Harder, Kalan. I want to feel it deeper." Her voice urged him on.

He sucked her in and with each tug, her hips surged. Each nip raced down her body to center in her pussy.

"No," she moaned when he pulled off her.

"Shh," he whispered against her stomach.

Spreading her thighs, she gave him more room to settle between them.

He spread her nether lips and blew a puff of air over her throbbing clit.

Clutching the sheets with her hands, she lifted her hips up.

He slid his tongue on each side of her pussy, but didn't touch her clit. Pointing the tip of his tongue, he dipped it into her.

"Please." She fought the urge to pull his face tighter to her.

He pinched her hard button between his thumb and finger. Thrusting his tongue deep into her dripping pussy, he twisted her clit gently

Her hips picked up the pace until her pleasure built to a climax. Her orgasm burst through and her back arched as she cried out.

Kalan crawled up her body and thrust his cock into her. Reaching down to cup his ass, she tugged him deeper into her.

"I can't get enough of you," he whispered in her ear as he rode her fast and hard.

"Good. I think I'm addicted to you." She smiled up at him.

Squeezing his shaft with her inner muscles, she angled her hips and encouraged him. His smooth rhythm became jerky while his climax moved closer. A grimace graced Kalan's face as his cock rocked in and out of her. She watched his desire bloom in his eyes as he spilled his seed into her.

Collapsing, he managed to roll so he was lying beside her. She kissed him and snuggled close. Discussing their next move could wait until morning.

* * * * *

It's time.

Starrer shook his head. There was no way he could go back to St. Benedict's. Father Paul was starting to become suspicious. He had never spent so much time in the church when his son was alive.

The Veil is weak, and the Devil's vulnerable. No one's expecting you to move so soon.

The voice was insistent. He wasn't sure. How could the Devil be killed so easily? A mere mortal wouldn't be able to do it. He wandered into his son's room.

He had left everything the way it was when his son died. Such a bright, talented boy, yet Starrer had never known how tortured the young man was. Picking up a photo, he stared down at the smiling face of his son. Why would he kill himself?

The Devil made him do it. The evil creature was jealous of your son.

The Devil had no need to be jealous of any mortal. Starrer turned to look at the wooden cross hanging on the wall.

The Devil coveted what your son had. You must make him pay for what has happened. God believes in your quest. He would never have sent me to you if He didn't. He understands losing a son. He has chosen you to take revenge.

The voice made sense. A bond was formed between him and God because of their mutual loss. He hadn't been misled yet. The setback of the loss of his army was his fault. He had chosen wrongly.

"I'll do it. You're right. The time has come for me to destroy that monster and make him suffer."

Closing the door to his son's room, he went to his own bedroom to cleanse his soul. Tomorrow night would be the night the Devil died.

Chapter Seven

A hard rod poked Beltaine in the ass as she woke up. Sighing, she rubbed against it. Kalan's hand reached around her and cupped her breast.

"Hmm, I think I like waking up this way," she purred as she arched her back to press her nipple into his palm.

"It's better than getting kicked out of your bed." Kalan massaged her chest while stroking his cock between her ass cheeks.

"If you hadn't been such a jerk, we could've spent that first morning like this."

She groaned when his hand slid down over her stomach and into the curls covering her mound. Angling her hips, she encouraged him to dip his fingers into the juices that were making her curls glisten. His fingertips pinched her clit and twisted slightly.

She jerked, causing the head of his shaft to leave a wet trail along her ass. Kalan moved to ease his cock between her thighs. His lips attached to the tender spot behind her ear. They both gasped as the blunt head hit her clit.

"On your hands and knees," he ordered.

Rolling over to her stomach, she rose and supported herself with her hands and knees. He knelt behind her and traced her backbone with his finger. He trailed his cock from the

top of her ass to her clit, where he applied pressure by circling it with the weeping head of his shaft. She pushed back, wanting to rub harder against him.

He teased her by inching just the tip of his cock into her pussy and leaning over to bite the nape of her neck. Whimpering, she tried to get him to thrust farther into her, but he wasn't letting her control how much of his cock she got or how deep he went.

"What do you want?" A wicked chuckle breathed hot air over her ear as he nibbled on her earlobe.

"You. Deeper. Harder." Coherent sentences were slowly getting beyond her capabilities.

"I don't think I can get any harder than I already am. Maybe I can get deeper, though." A roll of his hips and he slid in an inch farther.

Hissing, she demanded his entire length. "All of you in me, now."

"You're rather demanding for being on the bottom, love." Another roll and two inches filled her.

Heaving, she twisted. Suddenly he was on his back and she was straddling him. Bracing her hands on his chest, she lined her pussy up with his cock and impaled herself on him. They cried out as she sheathed him farther than he had ever been before.

"God," Kalan breathed as his hips twitched.

She pressed down to keep him from moving. "Never tease a demon about sex, angel boy. We tend to take it very seriously. Now don't move. I'll do the work."

Lifting herself off his cock until only the tip fitted in her, she contracted her inner muscles to massage the blunt head. He tensed, and she figured he was getting ready to put her on her back. Smirking at him, she slammed back down on him.

His cock throbbed inside her. Her fingers plucked at his flat nipples as she rode him with quick, deep moves. The room filled with their groans and the sound of their flesh slapping together.

Her orgasm burst through her and she cried out. Kalan grasped her hips to keep her moving. The inner muscles of her pussy urged his climax from him. Wet warmth spilled into her as he thrust deep and came. Rocking, she soothed him until his climax died away.

* * * * *

“Can we stay in bed all day?” Kalan asked after he caught his breath.

Chuckling, Beltaine rolled to sprawl next to him. “I wouldn’t mind that, but your commander might have something to say about it.”

He grimaced at the thought of explaining to the commander why he hadn’t found the mortal who’d torn the Veil. He didn’t think the commander would be amenable to him fucking Beltaine all day.

“So did you find anything interesting in the catacombs?” He climbed out of bed and padded into the kitchen for a glass of water.

She was dressed when he returned. Staring out the window, she said, “I talked to the master.”

“Really?” Pulling on his clothes, he sat on the bed to watch her.

“He repeated the same thing he told me before. There are people who want us to fail.” She shot a grin over her shoulder. “Like we didn’t know that.”

“Did he name anyone specific?”

She shook her head. “Of course not, but we know who they are.”

He nodded. Yes, they did know. He wouldn’t be surprised to find out the Higher Lords of Hell were lined up just on the other side of the barrier, waiting for it to fail.

“I talked to a young lady last night before I got back here. She approached me on the street. After she asked me who I was, she said that this whole thing is about revenge.”

“Revenge for what? What was her name?” She moved towards him.

“I didn’t have time to think about her name.” He had an irrational urge to duck his head.

“You’re an angel. Why didn’t you read her mind?”

“I didn’t think about it.” He stopped her next statement with an upraised hand. “I was thinking about something else she said to me.”

“What did she say to make you forget about her name?”

“Who else would God defend but the Devil? Without the Devil, there would be no need for God.” He glanced at her. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it, but it makes sense. How can you understand evil without having good to compare it to?” She reached out to stroke his shoulder. “Are you having a problem with the idea that the Devil might have a purpose for being in the world?”

He nodded. “Of course, I can’t believe God would willingly allow evil to exist.”

“Mortals are different from angels. We tend to take things for granted. If nothing bad ever happened to us, we’d end up forgetting how good we’ve got it.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Without the Devil, we have nothing to thank God for.”

Silently he nodded. Her statement made sense. “So what do we do now?”

“We go out and ask questions. There are other people who know who is to blame for this. Shaking a few trees might drop something at our feet.” She pulled him to his feet and started leading him from her apartment.

He stayed quiet as they walked down the street. She shot him a glance, and he smiled at her.

“I met a man at St. Benedict’s. He gave me an odd feeling.”

“Sweetheart, I thought most men gave you a strange feeling.” Laughing, he protested when she slugged him. “Hey, why’d you hit me? Wasn’t I telling the truth?”

“Jackass,” she muttered. “You’re right. I like men for one thing and one thing only, but I wouldn’t even do that with this one.”

“What was wrong with him?” He was intrigued because there didn’t seem to be anything that made Beltaine nervous.

“I can’t put my finger on it really, but when I brushed against him, there was a feeling of something else being in there with him.” She shivered.

“Like a possession?”

“No. I can tell when there’s a demon involved. I’m not sure what it was. There were moments when I felt like he was listening to something inside his mind. Father Paul introduced us.”

“So who was he?”

“His name was Starrer, I believe. His son died earlier this year by suicide. He was at the church praying for the hurt to go away.”

He heard the disgust in her voice. “Why do you sound like that? God can remove the pain if you ask.”

“Bullshit. The pain’s always going to be there. It might get duller over the years, but it’s never going to go away. I’ve never lost anyone I cared about, but even I know that much.” She headed towards the bad end of Ericksberg.

“Have you ever asked God to take the pain and guilt away?” He hesitated before he asked, but curiosity got the best of him.

She stopped and turned to glare at him. “Guilt?”

He waited for her to either hit him or flay him with her tongue. She shut her mouth and seemed to think about it for a moment. Shrugging, she started walking again.

“I guess I do feel some guilt for killing my father, but I’d do it again.”

“Would you? Even knowing what you’ve been through since then?” He wasn’t sure he believed her.

“Yes, I would. I didn’t have anyone to protect me.”

He pulled her to a stop with his hand on her shoulder. “Why didn’t you ask your mother for help or go to the Church?”

She stared down the street. “I was fourteen, Kalan. My mother dumped me with that crazy abusive man. Also, she was a demon. The very thing my father had tried to beat out of me.” She turned to look up at him, her eyes bleak. “My father was a priest. Why should I trust the Church?”

“I thought he was excommunicated after you were born.”

“He was, but he still believed in the teachings of the church. Father needed a scapegoat and I was the perfect one. No one from the church came to help me until it was too late. He was dead and buried before Father John came to help me. I believed the Church was as much to blame for my pain as my father.”

“How did your parents meet?” They had grown closer than he had ever thought they would, but he wasn’t sure she’d tell him.

Gesturing to a small café, she said, “Let’s sit. I want to get something to eat if I’m going to tell you my life story.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Beltaine. You’re not obligated to say anything,” he assured her as they moved to a table.

“Do you really think I’d tell you this if I didn’t want to?” She laughed. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he hugged her close. “I don’t know that, but I wanted you to understand I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable with trusting me.”

She kissed his cheek and smiled. “If you’re thinking of sticking around, you need to know the story.”

Chapter Eight

After they ordered breakfast, Beltaine watched the people walking by in front of the café. She wondered how many of those happy families were hiding dark secrets behind their smiles.

“My first memories are of my father kneeling in front of an altar and praying. I was in a crib or maybe a cage. I don’t know. The reason I say that is because my view was blocked by bars.”

Kalan frowned. “Do you really think he kept you in a cage?”

“I’m not sure. It wouldn’t surprise me. He never thought of me as a real child. I was a wild animal.”

“You were an innocent child. It shouldn’t have mattered who your mother was.”

Reaching over, she grasped his hand and squeezed. “It shouldn’t have, but it did. My father was looking for a reason to hate me. Being half demon was all he needed.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “When I was old enough, I hid. I’d go anywhere I could where he couldn’t find me. That’s how I met Roger.”

A warm feeling welled up in her at the thought of her friend. “The pain and anger festered in me and I looked for someone else to hurt.” She sent him a questioning look. “You understand the concept of ‘paying it forward’?”

“Sure. Someone does something nice for you. Then you go out and do something nice for someone else.” It was a basic concept most angels lived by.

“Right. Well, that’s a wonderful idea, but have you ever wondered what might happen if you applied that same concept to abuse or evil?” She watched as confusion showed on his face.

“The evil you do doubles, and the effects are worse for the next person. My father caused me pain and even as a young child, I searched for a way to release my anger by hurting others.”

Disillusionment showed on his face. “You hurt Roger.”

Chuckling bitterly, she shook her head. “No, he was the one person I couldn’t hurt. When we first met, a group of men was getting ready to kick his ass. I was a pissed-off child and even as a half-demon, untrained and young, I was more than capable of taking them on.”

“What did you do?” Fascinated horror rang in his voice.

She waited until their waiter finished delivering their meal. After he left, she continued, “I mowed through them. Destroying mortals is easy when you’ve never been taught the sanctity of life. I killed them without remorse or thought. When I was finished, Roger and I stood among the pieces of human bodies. He looked down at me with those beautiful blue eyes and I swore to myself nothing would hurt him. There was an innocence in him that I’d never had in my young life, so I’ve spent the rest of the time since then protecting him.”

“But how did your parents meet in the first place?”

“It was Beltaine night. A particular celebration my mother can’t resist. Father heard stories of the rituals and celebrations that go on during this night. Even though the church

frowned upon it, he decided to go. It's never been clear to me whether he went to find a woman to have sex with or if he went because he just wanted to see what the church was condemning." She smirked. "I never felt the need to go into detail about why he was there. Maybe he felt the call of the old Gods."

"Why was your mother there?"

"A pagan ritual celebrating sexuality and fertility? She wouldn't miss it for the world. The more interesting question would be what made her pick my father as a partner that night?"

"All right. Why did she pick him?"

"Don't know. She never told me. She's treated the whole thing like a joke from the beginning. I mean if she was serious about me, she would have never dumped me." There was no compassion or willingness in her to understand why her mother fucked her father that night.

"Maybe she didn't think a baby should grow up in Hell."

She knew he was trying to think the best of her mother, but there wasn't any forgiveness in her about that. "She didn't want to be tied down with a baby. Maybe what she thought was true. Maybe she did think my father would take better care of me, but she never came to see me. I was inconvenient for her. She forgot about me once she dumped me."

Beltaine leaned back in her chair. Anger built in her. She had always been mad at her parents for that.

"How was she to know she'd get pregnant? Has there ever been another half-demon child born?" At the shake of her head, Kalan said, "See, she had no way of knowing it would happen, and like any unsuspecting mother, she panicked."

Beltaine was willing to let him talk. Even though she didn't believe a word he said.

"Besides, isn't there a legend that says a child conceived on Beltaine night is a gift from God?" He grinned at her.

“I think my father considered me a curse, not a gift. Anyway, my mother seduced my father and got pregnant. Four months later, I was born.” She wanted to finish the story.

“Four months?”

“It seems demons have accelerated pregnancies. As soon as she could, she dropped me off at my father’s. I was a helpless babe, and that’s what I never understood.”

Kalan waved to the waiter to get the check. “You didn’t understand that you were a helpless babe?”

She stared at a couple walking by. They were laughing and holding each other. “Why didn’t he kill me when I couldn’t fight back?”

“He was a priest. His conscience wouldn’t let him kill an innocent child.” Standing, Kalan paid the bill, and they moved away from the café.

“Bullshit. He couldn’t kill a baby, but he abused me until I finally fought back? I’m not buying that.”

“He was a bastard, but you’re more than he thought you’d be.”

“I had Roger. I used him as my moral compass.” She winked at him. “Of course, I’ll admit I do a lot of things he wouldn’t, but he’s done more to keep me honest than anyone else.”

“You love him.” It was a statement, not a question.

“For a very long time, he was the only one I loved.” Beltaine cupped his cheek and pulled his mouth down to hers.

Inches away from her lips, he whispered, “Is there someone else you might be willing to love?”

“Maybe.”

Their lips whispered kisses between them. Promises were made as their arms wrapped around each other. Tasting and teasing, they leaned on each other, trusting in the other’s strength. They moved apart and walked towards the rough end of town.

“Enough about my depressing childhood. Let’s find the creep who’s trying to kill the Devil.”

* * * * *

Starrer strolled into St. Benedict’s. He wasn’t going to do anything but draw energy from the Veil.

Why not go now? No one’s watching.

He shook his head. It wasn’t time yet. He needed to scope the catacombs and make sure the Veil was still weak. He needed those holes to make his way into Hell. Without checking to see who might be watching, he opened the door to the cellar. It didn’t matter if anyone saw him now. God had ordained he would be the one to end the Devil’s reign. The voice told him the truth. He headed down towards the catacombs.

* * * * *

Wide-eyed, Father Paul watched as Roger Starrer opened the door leading into the cellars and the tunnels. Disbelief coursed through him. Starrer was an elder at St. Benedict’s. That’s how he knew about the door. He couldn’t have had anything to do with the trouble that happened two nights ago.

Father Paul tried to convince his mind of that, but it wasn’t listening to him. Why did an elder know about a secret door leading to the tombs of former priests when the current fathers of the church didn’t know they were there? An upstanding, honest person like Starrer wouldn’t try to kill a woman.

Father Paul wondered if this was one of those strange occurrences Beltaine spoke of. He decided to follow the man and see what he was doing.

* * * * *

Power rolled over Starrer, driving him to his knees. He stared at the shimmering barrier in front of him and felt a swell of pride. He had done it. Only a few more hours to wait, and the Devil's hold on terror would be over.

He fought his way upright and moved towards the Veil. The voice in his head urged him on.

Go on and cross over. You can kill the Devil and be in control of Hell before anyone knows.

Starrer's hand trembled as he reached out to touch the gleaming Veil. The holes were bigger and he could see horrific images flash by as the tears fluctuated. He gasped as his hand slid through. A burning sensation raced up his arm and exploded in his brain. He needed to get his hand back. Jerking it free, he cried out at the sight of his charred flesh.

"It burns," he wailed.

A cross. You're marked with a cross. It's a sign from God that you're meant to achieve greatness.

"Yes," Starrer whispered as he stared at the brand seared into the palm of his hand. "God has chosen me to avenge the deaths of our sons."

Raising his hand, he shouted, "I will prevail. The Devil will die tonight." Starrer shook his fist defiantly at the barrier and spittle sprang from his mouth.

Turning, he stumbled from the catacombs, his mind filled with the voice and their plans to assassinate the Devil.

* * * * *

Father Paul released the breath he'd been holding. Tension drained from him as the mumbling Starrer left without noticing him.

"Shit." Father Paul had never cursed in his life, but the swear word was the only thing he could think of.

Starrer wanted to kill the Devil. He wanted revenge for the death of his son. God, what a screwed up mind. Starrer had to believe the Devil was responsible for his son's death.

"Tonight. The man said he'd get his revenge tonight," Father Paul said to the empty room. "I have to find Beltaine and Kalan."

He raced out of the tunnels in search of the only person he believed capable of stopping this disaster.

Chapter Nine

Kalan and Beltaine stopped to regroup. They had spent most of the day terrorizing the lesser demons for information. None of those creatures would give anyone up, not even with Beltaine threatening them. Somehow, they knew she wouldn't send them back to Hell.

"What do we do now?" Kalan looked at her.

She shrugged. "I'm not sure if they know something and don't want to tell me or if they really don't know. All we have are hints, but nothing concrete. I'm starting to get pissed."

"It's frustrating. This guy shouldn't be so hard to find. I don't know why people and demons aren't standing in line to lead us to the culprit." He kicked the crumbling bricks of the wall beside him.

She smoothed her hand over his shoulder. "Most of them don't understand what's going to happen if we don't solve this problem. They're too caught up in their own lives. The bigger picture eludes them." A twinge of unease rushed over Beltaine, making her step closer to Kalan. She leaned in and murmured, "Someone is watching us."

"Have you got a bead on where he's standing?" He turned to hug her, pressing his lips to her ear.

“I think he’s in the alley across the street and a few feet to our right.”

“You want me to take him?” He tensed.

“I’ve been feeling this same person all day. Not sure when he started following us.”

Twisting, she crushed their lips together.

“Is it the same person from last night?” Kalan eased them into the shadows cast by a doorway.

“No. Not nearly the same level of anger and madness. This one feels more unsure. Maybe he wants to approach, but isn’t sure how.” Her hands grasped his ass and tugged his hips tight to hers.

“Do you think he wants to talk to only one of us?” He rubbed his erection against her mound.

“It’d have to be you. I’ve been alone a few times when he could’ve talked to me.” One of her hands slipped around and fondled his hard-on.

“So if you disappear for a while, he might talk to me.” He nibbled her ear.

“Take a walk to St. Benedict’s. Maybe he’ll feel more secure talking to you in the church.” She gave him a quick kiss and then pushed him away.

“Where will you be going?” He stepped back.

A twinge of disappointment and frustrated lust crept through her. Desire sat strong in her and she wanted to finish what they had started.

“Later,” he said as if he knew what she was feeling.

“I’m doing a little more shaking down, then head back to the apartment. Meet me there afterwards.” She winked at him as she strolled away.

* * * * *

Kalan watched Beltaine walk away. He wondered if his warrior angel status would be revoked if his commander knew he was far more interested in kissing that woman than finding the man bent on revenge.

“Doesn’t matter,” he muttered. “Keep your mind on the job and once this is over, maybe you’ll have some time to spend with her.”

He headed towards the church. Without Beltaine’s presence distracting him, he could feel their watcher following him. He didn’t like the idea of not confronting the person trailing him, but he didn’t want to scare anyone who might have information away.

Father Paul was rushing from the church as Kalan rounded the corner. The angel started to call out to him, then decided to let the priest go. Father Paul looked like he was in a hurry.

Stepping into the vestibule of the church, Kalan felt all the tension and worry he’d been carrying slip away. With the peaceful calmness of the sanctuary, one would never have guessed the horrors that had gone on below in the catacombs.

He knelt in front of the altar and bowed his head. He needed to clear his mind. Focusing on the mission before him, he knew he had to find a way to control his overwhelming lust for Beltaine. She was distracting him with her body and attitude. A rueful smile skated across his lips. It wasn’t like he fought too hard against the attraction. Some emotion had been there from the moment they had met, even when he hated her for what she was.

Someone knelt beside him. He didn’t acknowledge the person at first. Silence made people nervous, so he figured the watcher would spill his guts without much encouragement from Kalan.

Shifting closer to the other person, he asked, “Why have you been following us?”

“I wanted to watch the great Kalan work with a demon. I wanted to see if your intolerance for anyone different than you could stand up to Beltaine’s sensuality and her smart-ass mouth.” The voice spoke with sardonic amusement.

Startled, Kalan’s gaze shot over to the person next to him. A pair of green eyes stared at him with barely disguised disgust. He jumped to his feet and faced off with the other angel.

“Jasper, what the hell do you mean?” Kalan demanded.

Jasper rose to his feet and strolled over to the front pew. Sitting, the angel grinned at Kalan. “What do I mean? Come on, you’ve got to know what your reputation is in the Host.”

Kalan frowned. He had never paid attention to what the other angels said about him. It was all about serving God, not winning a popularity contest. He shrugged. “I don’t pay attention to gossip.”

“Of course not. You’re the commander’s favorite and on the fast track for success. That’s why you were chosen. We all know it.” Jasper smirked as he leaned back.

“I doubt the commander has a favorite,” Kalan stated.

Jasper shook his head. “So oblivious to anything that doesn’t directly affect you. So intolerant of those less perfect than you.”

“What have I done to you, Jasper?” Kalan was puzzled by the angel’s anger towards him.

“Aside from making the rest of us look bad, nothing really.” Jasper lifted a lazy shoulder. “Maybe it’s jealousy, but I’ve always thought you felt like you were better than us.”

Shocked, Kalan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He’d never thought anything like that. He never concerned himself with the others. “Do you have anything worthwhile to tell me?” He didn’t want to listen to Jasper anymore. He admitted silently that Jasper’s tendency to whine irritated him.

“Ah, don’t want to listen to your faults dissected and listed. Close your ears and turn away from anyone who might be reaching out to you for help.” Jasper’s green eyes flashed.

“When have you ever reached out to me?” Kalan’s own anger was growing.

Jasper’s gaze slid to the crucifix behind Kalan, then back to him. “I couldn’t reach out because you’re perfect. Do you realize how hard it is to reach out and ask for help or understanding from a person who never does anything wrong?”

“Nothing wrong? You need to talk to Beltaine. I’m sure she could give you a list of things I’ve screwed up.” Kalan paced and waved his hands around. “I’m fucking a demon, for God’s sake.”

“I don’t think God has a thing to do with it.” Jasper chuckled at Kalan’s snarl. “When I first heard the rumor going around the Host about you and Beltaine, I didn’t believe it. I thought it was a lie someone started to discredit you. Imagine my shock when you two started sucking face on the street.” The angel shook his head with a disappointed grimace. “I really thought she had better taste.”

“I’m not sure either one of us had a choice,” Kalan muttered. At Jasper’s puzzled glance, he continued, “There was an instant attraction and neither of us seemed to be able to fight it.”

“You couldn’t fight it?” Jasper shook his head. “You can’t convince me you lost control.”

“Believe it. Within five minutes of meeting her, she was wrapped around me like a boa constrictor, and we were trying to devour each other. Beltaine’s not the type to deny herself, so this wasn’t new to her.”

“Except instead of a regular guy, she was kissing an angel,” Jasper pointed out. “She doesn’t have a death wish. There’s no way she’d risk touching you because you could’ve killed her.”

“See what I mean about not having control? Self-preservation is important to her. Beltaine isn’t going to do anything that could result in getting herself killed, so having sex with me shouldn’t be high on her list.”

“It shouldn’t be on her list at all.” Jasper sounded confused.

“Exactly. I hadn’t been particularly nice to her before that, so I’m sure her first inclination was to kill me, not fuck me.” Kalan stopped when he heard a gasp. Looking at the back of the sanctuary, he saw a parishioner standing there with her mouth open in surprise.

“You’re ruining your image. Swearing in a church isn’t something the commander’s favorite angel would do.” Jasper winked at the woman who ducked her head and hurried out.

“I know, and God knows I’m sorry.” Kalan sent a silent prayer for forgiveness to the Father.

“I never thought we’d live to see the day you would willingly breathe the same air as a demon, even one as enticing as Beltaine.” Curiosity brightened Jasper’s green eyes.

Kalan flung his body down on to the pew next to his fellow angel. “I know. Before I met her, I believed the only good demon was a dead one.”

“You were spoon-fed that drivel by our illustrious commander who bears a deep hatred for the Devil and his demons,” Jasper commented.

“Even half-demons.” Kalan thought of the last encounter between the commander and Beltaine.

“I thought it was her abrasive personality he couldn’t stand.” Jasper joked.

“No. The last time they met, I really thought he was going to kill her, but he can’t touch her. God won’t allow it.” Kalan frowned. “It’s strange, though.”

“What is?”

“That God would protect a half-breed demon.” Kalan jumped to his feet and started pacing again.

“Not when you consider He allowed her to live in the first place.” Jasper moved from the pew to stand in front of the altar. “Maybe He has a plan for her, like He does for all of us.”

“What sort of plan would allow for her killing her father?”

Jasper was quiet for a minute. "I guess I have to fall back on the tried but true saying, 'God works in mysterious ways.' There was something seriously wrong with her father to begin with."

"What sort of plan does He have for you?" Kalan inquired.

"Who knows? It's not like He tells any of us the future." Jasper glanced up at the crucifix.

"Do you know anything about what's happening here?" Kalan was tired. He wanted to talk to Beltaine and hold her in his arms. He wanted to hear her tell him that all this was just bullshit.

"The man you're looking for is Roger Starrer." Jasper shrugged as Kalan stared at him. "It doesn't matter if I tell you or not. Being a rebel, I believe in helping whenever I can, even if it's against orders."

"No shit?" Kalan was so surprised, he forgot about not swearing. "Beltaine ran into him yesterday. She had a feeling something was wrong with him."

"Something *is* seriously wrong with him. Losing his son put him straight over the edge, and now getting revenge on the Devil seems to be all he can think of."

"I've got to get to Beltaine." Kalan turned away, then whirled back to Jasper. "How do you know so much about Beltaine?" The question had been bothering him since they'd started talking.

"We've met at some of the clubs in the City." At the skeptical quirk of Kalan's brow, Jasper laughed bitterly. "They're clubs no self-respecting angel would go to, but since I have no self-respect, I fit right in."

Kalan wasn't sure how to react about that. He made a mental note to talk to Beltaine later about Jasper. "Thank you. I know you weren't supposed to help me. That you did, especially with you hating me as you do, means a lot to me."

Jasper smiled with a sad glint to his eyes. “I don’t hate you. Helping you and Beltaine ultimately helps me. Find the bastard and stop him before he screws everything up.”

“We will.” Kalan focused his attention on Beltaine and disappeared.

Jasper glanced up at Jesus hanging on the cross and winked. “He might turn out okay after all.”

Chapter Ten

Starrer stared down at the girl sprawled in his living room. Her blood pooled into a dark burgundy puddle beneath her head. Dispassionately, he thought how beautiful it looked against the bright pine of his hardwood floor. Her brown eyes stared up into the fluorescent bulbs piercing the darkness. He pushed one of her legs with the toe of his polished shoe. When she didn't move, he shrugged.

The slack jaw and drooping skin gave her face a half-witted look. He knew she had been intelligent when she was alive. His son had never suffered fools or stupidity, and the boy had loved this silly girl. Starrer remembered how she had sobbed on his shoulder during his son's funeral. How she had talked incessantly about why he killed himself and how much she loved him. Roger had fought the urge to backhand her and tell her that she could never have loved his son as much as he did.

You are a loving father. You sent your son his girlfriend to keep him company in the afterlife. The voice grew stronger every minute. There were times when Starrer thought the voice was directing his actions and compelling him to do the things he was doing.

She was innocent, and as such, her place in Heaven is secure. You have done nothing but ensure your own spot in Hell. Another voice broke through the static in his mind to berate him.

“She was no innocent. She got my son involved in drugs. I know it was her, so she is just as much to blame for his death as the Devil is.” Starrer remembered the shock he’d felt when the doctor had told him that traces of cocaine and heroin had been found in his son’s bloodstream.

That’s right, Richard. She knew about the drugs and did nothing to stop him or even to tell you about them. Her negligence makes her just as guilty and you’ve made her pay. Now it’s time for the Devil to be destroyed.

“You’re right,” he muttered as he headed to his room. “This is the last day the Devil has lived to see. The Devil will taste death tonight at my hand.”

Opening his closet door, he pulled out his red silk robe. It should have stayed down in the catacombs, but running away from that bitch and her partner hadn’t given him a chance to leave it behind. He hoped the mortal world hadn’t contaminated it too much. Maybe soaking it in the blood of that silly girl would ensure that the power was sealed in. He stripped and wandered back to the living room. Kneeling, he dipped the robe in the drying blood. When it was saturated, he folded it and stuck it in a bag. There was enough sanity left in him to realize he couldn’t wear the blood-drenched robe out in public. Leaving the bag next to the door, he strolled back to the bedroom to retrieve a black cotton robe. Slipping it on, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror. A maniacal laugh ripped from his throat. He looked like a priest.

That’s what you are in the truest sense. Those priests in the church give lip service to God’s words. His Word says not to listen to the Devil, yet they have allowed the creature footing in their world. The Devil turned from the Father and Heaven, so his punishment should have been death, not banishment. God chose mercy. We will choose justice. Justice for all the souls he has claimed. Justice for all those lives he has ruined in his arrogance.

When we are through with him, there will be only one powerful being in the world, and that will be us.

The room shook as if the earth was reacting to the voice's words. Starrer braced his body against the dresser. His eyes widened as a large crack shattered the mirror he was staring into. Minute shards broke off and landed to pierce his hands. Running the palms of his hands over the dresser, he didn't flinch at the flaying of his flesh or the lines of blood streaking the wood.

Your blood is offered as sacrifice and a good faith gesture that you will accomplish the goal God has set out for you. One being's blood was spilled for another's arrogance. One being's blood will be spilled for atonement. Go and take Hell for God.

Starrer nodded and stalked from the apartment, ignoring his son's girlfriend, whose body grew cold on the living room floor.

* * * * *

Beltaine was strapping on her knife when Kalan returned to her apartment. Father Paul jumped and whirled to stare at him.

"I know who ripped the Veil," Kalan announced when he appeared.

"So do we." She smiled at the priest. "Father Paul came and told me. That's why I'm getting ready."

She laughed as Kalan shot the priest a glare. She decided to leave the gun behind. She didn't think she was going to have to kill Starrer.

"How did you know?" Kalan asked Father Paul.

"I followed Mr. Starrer down into the catacombs." The priest nodded towards Beltaine. "She told me to come and see her if there was anything strange happening at the church. While Starrer was in the altar room, he slid his hand through the Veil."

“Father Paul said when Starrer pulled his hand back, there was a burn on it. Starrer was saying he was ordained by God to avenge the deaths of their sons.”

“That’s what my informant said as well. It all comes down to the fact that his son committed suicide, and instead of taking any of the blame for it, he picked the person least likely to care about the entire episode.” Kalan followed her and Father Paul out of the apartment.

She glanced back at him. “I forgot about our follower. Who was he?”

“Jasper. He’s a fellow angel of the Host. He followed us to see if I had learned to tolerate people. He doesn’t have a real high opinion of me, but he seemed to like and know you.” He shrugged.

“Jasper? We’ve met at a few clubs in the City. I didn’t know your fellow angels could or would help us.” She turned to look at Father Paul. “Where does Starrer live?”

“He lives uptown. I’m not sure if he would be there when we arrived. We might be better off heading back to the church.” Father Paul directed them.

“It isn’t that hard. We could pop over there and check. We need to catch him before he causes more damage,” Kalan commented to her.

She thought about it. Would the use of power be worth catching Starrer before he headed to the church? She didn’t know how much of a fight the man was going to put up. “Maybe one of us should head over there, just to check.”

Kalan agreed. “I’ll go with Father Paul. You know where to go in Ericksberg. Plus, I trust you to do what’s needed to stop him.” A rueful grin crossed his face when she glanced at him. “If he has to die, I’m not sure I could do it.”

“You didn’t have a problem with the vampire.” She wasn’t sure she believed him. The warriors of the Host were fierce, and at times more violent than the Horde of Hell.

“It was evil. Nothing could redeem it or change its nature. Starrer is a mortal, helpless and worthy of my protection.”

She speared him with an incredulous look. "Helpless? I'm not sure that's the word I'd use for him. Crazy. Totally fucking nuts. Lost touch with reality. Look what he's done. We don't know how many women he and his silly army might have killed. The idiot believes he's ordained by God to kill the Devil. I know Starrer isn't worth any sort of protection." She snarled.

"Exactly. That's why you need to go. Father Paul and I will meet you in the catacombs."

She watched the two men walk away. So she was relegated to assassin; she shouldn't be surprised. In the grand scheme of things, killing was what she was good at. Plucking Starrer's address from Father Paul's mind, she gathered her power and disappeared.

* * * * *

"Damn."

Beltaine couldn't believe it. Starrer had the Devil's own luck. Considering what the man was trying to do didn't bode well for the Devil. She hoped the crazy man didn't get close to the ruler of Hell.

Kneeling, she felt for a pulse at the girl's wrist. "No pulse," she muttered. "Of course not, you idiot. The big pool of blood should have given it away."

She stood and shook her head. Another life ruined in Starrer's psychotic crusade. She thought about making a list, but it would be an overwhelming number if they didn't stop him. Glancing around, she frowned. Starrer must have put something in the blood puddle because there wasn't the quantity she'd expect to see if the girl had bled out, and there were drops leading to the door.

Curiosity got the best of Beltaine. She knew Kalan and Father Paul could hold down the fort back at the church for a few minutes more. Looking at the living room, she saw all the accoutrements of wealth. Beautiful works of art decorated the dark tan walls. Leaded

crystal lamps and bits of sculpture graced the high-end furniture. She wondered if he'd bought any of the things legitimately or if he had gotten them from the black market.

Wandering down the hall, she stepped through a door and felt shock race down her spine. The large ornate mirror hanging over the white pine dresser had shattered. Shards of glass littered the top. Moving closer, she whispered a finger through the red streaks on the wood. She brought the tip to her tongue and grimaced at the metallic taste.

"Blood." She spoke out loud.

Her gaze was caught by her fractured image in the mirror. *This is who you really are*, a small voice echoed in her mind. *Shattered beyond recognition*.

Had she always been cracked? Or had her personality developed small fissures that were widened by the stress she had lived under with her father? A tremor caused more pieces of the mirror to drop to the dresser and she blinked. Who the hell cared why she was fucked up? She couldn't go back and fix the past. She didn't even know if she wanted to. Another tremor shook the entire room and a piece of glass impaled itself in her hand.

Hissing, she picked the shard out and flung it onto the floor. Something was happening. She needed to get back to the catacombs. Beltaine started to make her way back to the living room, but a strange force was pulling her to the closed door across the hall from Starrer's room. Pushing open the door, she felt her mouth fall open. She stepped inside and contemplated the space around her.

It was a shrine to a dead son. She could see that. It didn't look like anything had been moved for months. The layer of dust on everything was thick. A picture tucked into the corner of the plain dresser mirror captured her gaze. Reaching out, she tugged it free and pulled it closer. A young man around twenty years old posed with his arms around the very girl who lay dead out in the other room. Their faces held smiles, but where the smile showed in the girl's eyes, only darkness reigned in the boy's dark stare. Starrer had to have been blind to miss the despair in his son. She ran a thumb over the paper, stroking the kid's face.

What sent the boy on the path he chose? What was so broken in him that killing himself was easier than living? She couldn't help but compare herself with him. Why had she chosen to kill her father instead of herself? Was it her demon blood that turned the anger outward?

Studying the girl in the photo, Beltaine smiled. The girl must have been a cheerful person and a joy to be around. A rare twinge of sadness hit her at the most recent image she had of the girl. Those laughing brown eyes were empty now. The grin was gone from the slack face. It was rare for Beltaine to be disheartened about not having met someone. She had a feeling she would have enjoyed getting to know this girl.

Beltaine, where the hell are you? Kalan's shout broke into her thoughts.

Shocked, she dropped the picture. No one had ever been able to break down her barriers enough to communicate with her mentally. Except for the commander and the master, but those two creatures disregarded any wall blocking them.

What's wrong? she shot back as she drew her power in.

Somehow Starrer got past us. He's passed through the Veil and is in Hell.

Damn.

The time had come to deal with the bastard. She would make him pay for killing the girl and for taking the world to the brink of destruction.

Chapter Eleven

Kalan released the breath he'd taken when Beltaine arrived in the catacombs. He was barely hanging on to consciousness. There was no way he would have been able to survive going through the Veil if she hadn't shown up.

"Thank God, you're here." He hugged her.

An eyebrow shot up as she frowned at him. "I don't think anyone's ever thanked God for me. What's got you all worried? As long as he stays in Hell, we'll be able to take care of him."

"What if he finds the Devil and kills him?" Father Paul's voice shook as he questioned her.

Kalan shivered at the coldness in her laugh. "Dear Father, there's no way he will get close enough to do any harm to the Devil. Do you think all those demons and the Horde of Hell are just for show? They serve as his bodyguards and will rip to shreds any mortal who dares to invade their domain."

"You are going in after him, aren't you?" Kalan pushed her closer to the Veil. He had qualms about sending her into Hell, but since she'd been there once already and hadn't suffered any ill effects, he figured she'd be fine.

“Why would I? The master and the Horde will take care of the problem without our getting our hands dirty.” She leaned against the altar and smiled wickedly.

Kalan’s stomach roiled. He had seen what demons could do to a body, and that image was seared into his brain. “We can’t let that happen to him. He’s mortal and one of God’s creatures.”

“Ah, but see, so is the Devil. Have we any right to keep the Devil from defending himself against attackers?” She pursed her lips in thought. “Maybe I should go and make sure that they really do take care of him. We don’t want him returning and causing even more trouble.”

Disappointment rushed through Kalan. “I thought you were finally beginning to understand that everyone has the right to be judged by God. We can’t play judge and executioner to Starrer. Only God has that right.”

She reached out and drew a claw down his cheek, scratching a thin line into his skin. “I’m willing to suffer the consequences of his dying in Hell. You didn’t see what I found in his apartment. You don’t understand the level of depravity he has sunk to in his ridiculous quest.”

He angled his head away from her claw. There was a wildness in her that he hadn’t seen in days. Anger turned her eyes red with fire. “What did you find?”

“A body of a young woman. She might have even been the one who talked to you. She was dead, her blood pooled beneath her throat. He cut her neck so deeply, he almost beheaded her. She was his son’s girlfriend. The one person who might have been able to understand his grief and help him through it. Instead, he killed her and left her as if she were a mere side of beef at the butcher’s shop. You look at the Devil and call him evil. You see a creature who serves only himself and has no concern for anyone else, and you say he’s the one who should be destroyed.” Stepping away from him, she gestured to the bloodstained altar in front of them and spit. “I look at Starrer and see a creature so evil that he doesn’t

deserve mercy. A mortal so far gone, he doesn't deserve justice. Richard Starrer is the true Devil, and I have no sympathy for him."

"This is what you were born to do, Beltaine."

They whirled to see Father John standing in the entrance to the chamber. Hissing, she turned and moved away from him. Kalan was relieved. If anyone could talk sense into her, it would be Father John. The priest was the only person she seemed to respect.

"You won't con me with that bullshit, Father John. I don't believe God created me to save some psychotic mortal."

"No, He didn't," Father John agreed with her.

Kalan figured he looked like a fish with his mouth gaping open. He thought the priest would be able to talk her into saving Starrer.

"I knew someone would see the light." Smugness tinted her voice.

"He created you to save demons and mortals alike from the consequences of Starrer's actions." Leaning on Roger, the priest moved into the room.

Kalan could see the toll this effort was taking on the old priest. He started to move forward to help them, but Roger shook his head.

She chuckled. "No way. If that's true, then God knew before all this started what was going to happen." She denied the words. "He would have never allowed it to start."

"As powerful as God is, He's bound by His own actions. He gave us free will and so has condemned us to the state we live in. He can only put in place things or people that could help ensure a better outcome." Father John placed a hand on her shoulder.

"So now I'm a simple game piece. A piece He ensured would be here at this moment. Someone He knows won't allow thousands to die for the idiocy of one." Shaking off the priest's touch, she moved closer to the Veil. "He's taking a huge chance that I won't just decide to allow all of us to die. What if that's my choice, suicide by Heavenly Host?"

Father John didn't flinch from the burning glare she fired at him. "You chose not to kill yourself because of your father's abuse."

"Isn't it twisted that you see the fact that I killed my father instead as a good thing?" She moved away from them again. "I'm glad you find something good in the hell that my early life was."

"Beltaine, stop it. You have a chance to help the world out. You've always wanted to know the reason God had for making you," Roger admonished her.

"I hate it when you throw my words back at me." She didn't look at any of them, and Kalan wondered what she was thinking.

The small glimpse into her demon side shook him. He wasn't sure why he was surprised and upset by it. She never tried to be anything other than what she was. Beltaine wore her truth like a badge. She might hate her demon heritage, but she wasn't going to hide who she was from anyone. He respected that, yet complacency had grown in him when her hard edges had softened in the days he'd known her. The reappearance of her "screw them all" attitude disheartened him.

"Please, Beltaine. I don't want to die yet." Roger's voice was soft.

A hint of jealousy rushed through Kalan as she cupped the young priest's cheek and smiled at him. *Jealousy gains you nothing and just makes you look like an idiot*, his inner voice told him. If there really was anyone she would listen to, it would be the young man she had grown up with and protected. Kalan doubted she would react the same way had he said anything like that to her. *That's because you can deal with things on your own. You don't need protection. You're an angel as well, so there's no danger to you.* He kept quiet as he watched Roger manipulate Beltaine.

"I know what you're doing, Roger. I've seen you guilt your parishioners with those innocent blue eyes." She kissed Roger's cheek and sighed. "All right, I'll do it and protest the entire way. It won't be my fault if he's already dead."

They watched as she strolled up through the Veil. Kalan turned to look at Roger and Father John.

“Can we trust her to bring Starrer back to us?” he asked them.

Father Paul stepped up to stand beside him. “I was wondering that as well. She doesn’t really care if he lives or dies. What’s to stop her from allowing the demons to kill him and then tell us he was already dead when she got there?”

Roger smiled. “She’ll bring him back. Beltaine had made the decision to go get him before I said a word. There isn’t a thing I could have done to convince her if she didn’t want to go.”

* * * * *

“What the hell am I doing here?” Beltaine asked herself as she strolled down a deceptively quiet city street. She chuckled. The men believed Roger had talked her into going after Starrer, and if anyone ever asked, that would be her answer. Truth be told, she had decided she wanted to make the man pay for what he had done to Betsy and the young woman he left on his living room floor. If Beltaine could kill him, she would, and there wouldn’t be any guilt about it.

“Now to find the crazy bastard and drag his ass home.” She made her way towards what seemed to be the seamier part of the city. It was odd how Hell appeared to her like a city on Earth. There was nothing to distinguish it from Ericksberg or the city she lived in. As she walked, the buildings fell apart around her, marking that she was entering the rough part of Hell. *Who knew there was a bad section of Hell?* her inner voice joked.

Angry voices came from ahead of her. Breaking into a jog, she wound her way through a growing crowd of demons and mortal souls. She stopped outside a seedy jazz bar, where the Devil stood complaining to the master.

“You’re telling me some mortal has come into Hell to kill me.” A nasty cackle came from the Devil’s throat. “Not only does he dare to do this in my realm, he does it on the night my favorite band is playing. Mortals have no manners at all.”

The Devil saw her standing there and gestured for her to come forward. Without a tremble, she greeted him. She didn’t want to show any fear, but she had to show respect for the creature in his own world. “Sir,” she said as she nodded to the Devil and the master.

“Do you know the arrogant whelp who has entered my world without permission?” the Devil demanded.

“Yes. His name is Roger Starrer and he believes you caused his son’s suicide.”

“If I caused every bad thing attributed to me, I wouldn’t have time for myself, and that would never do.” He paced in front of her, tugging on the cuffs of his suit.

“He’s mortal, sir. He doesn’t grasp how unimportant his son’s death is to you. I’ll be glad to take him back to his side of the Veil.” She heard the master hiss.

“Do you really believe you can waltz in here and take him from us?” The master grabbed her shoulder and whirled her around to face him. “Did you really think it would be that easy?”

“I was hoping it would be, but I should have known you’d be an ass about the whole thing.” She cringed inside. Antagonizing him probably wasn’t a good thing. Biting her tongue had never done anything except make it sore, so she would do what she did best. She had worked hard at being a smartass, and she was going to use that talent to her advantage to tick off the master and get the Devil on her side. Those two creatures hated each other almost as much as the commander and the master did.

The Devil’s thin eyebrows shot up and he laughed. “She knows you well, friend.”

“An ass? A mere mortal dares to enter Hell without permission and she calls me an ass.” The master’s voice dropped into a low growl.

The hair on Beltaine's neck stood up. The warning tone in his growl shivered up her spine. *Now would be a good time to back down and walk away*, her inner voice told her. She knew it was good advice, but she had never listened to anyone's advice, not even her own.

"Listen, the man has some serious issues and personally, I'd let you rip him apart, but there's a disagreement on whether that's the merciful thing to do." She turned to the Devil. "Do I have your permission to find the bastard and take him out of here?"

A pleased smiled blossomed on the Devil's face and she knew she had him. Stroking his ego would get her farther than being a bitch to him. He beamed at her.

"Of course you can. I'm going to listen to the band. I don't want to be bothered by this mortal again." With a wave of his hand, the Devil dismissed both her and the master.

"You think you're smart, scraping and acting like he's the important one here. Remember, I control the Horde. They do my bidding, not his. Don't think I'll let Starrer out of Hell alive," the master warned.

"I guess it's a race then. If I find him first, I get to take him back to the other side. If you get him, you can kill him."

"Are you serious?" The master stared at her with narrowed eyes.

"I don't tend to joke with beings who can kill me without thought." She eased away from him.

"Remember that when you're looking for your mortal." The master gestured for the Horde to follow him.

Chapter Twelve

“You do have a knack for upsetting demons and angels alike, dear.”

Beltaine groaned as her mother appeared beside her. “You are the last person I want to see right now.”

“Not true. The commander would be the last person you wanted to see now. He’d pitch a fit and try to kill you.” The demon giggled.

“Can’t argue with you on that, but he can’t touch me, so he’d just be blowing hot air.” She stared at her mother. “Is there a reason why you’re talking to me now? I don’t have time to deal with you.”

“No reason. I just wanted to say thank you for bringing the book back.”

Beltaine was surprised. “Who are you and what the hell did you do with my mother?”

“No, I mean it. The Devil thanked me for sending you after the book. You made me look good. I appreciate it.”

“Ah, I see now. You want to thank me because my almost getting killed made you look good. It doesn’t matter what the Devil thinks, he’s still going to screw you.” Disappointment rolled over her.

“We both know he can’t get enough of me.” The creature preened. “He thinks I was awfully clever to get pregnant with you.”

“It was all your doing. Father and God didn’t have a damn thing to do with it,” Beltaine sneered.

“They didn’t carry you for four months. I looked like a whale. I should get some sort of recognition for that.”

Before Beltaine could release her frustration by hitting her mother, Azubah appeared.

“What do you want?” Beltaine demanded of the small demon.

The demons spit at each other like alley cats, then her mother disappeared. Azubah sniffed as it turned to look at her.

“I really don’t have time for this. I have to find that lunatic before the master gets him, or we’ll have pieces of mortal strewn all over Hell.” Crossing her arms, she stared down at the winged creature.

It nodded. “I know, and for some odd reason, you don’t want that to happen. Why not allow the Horde to punish the man for his impertinence?”

“I’m a sucker for blue eyes and a body made for loving.” She laughed at the demon’s puzzled frown. “Roger wants me to bring Starrer back.”

“A body made for loving? Roger’s a priest.” A look of horrified fascination crossed through Azubah’s red eyes.

She shook her head. “It’s Kalan’s body I was talking about, sick creature.”

It shrugged. “I’m a demon. Being sick is a rule or something for my kind. So you’re obeying an angel now.” Cunning slid onto its face.

“I listen to him when he tells me what he would like me to do, but I don’t obey anyone, so get that look off your face.” She started to walk away.

“Do you know where to find this man?” Azubah asked with an innocent grin.

“Hell no, but since I’m tired of talking to you, I thought I’d leave and see if I can trip over him.” Her patience was wearing thin with everyone in Hell. She was reaching the point where she went to hide and said screw everyone.

“Well, I might know where he’s hiding.” The casual tone in the demon’s voice belied the tension in its body.

Her hand shot out and grabbed the creature by the throat. Dragging its trembling figure towards her, she lifted it so they were staring eye-to-eye. She bared her fangs and growled. “I should kill you here. You’ve been jerking me around while you go on a power trip. Don’t fuck with me, and you’ll be a happier demon.” She shook Azubah so hard, she thought its fangs were going to rattle out of its head.

“Okay. Okay. No need to get all manic on me, Beltaine. I was just kidding.” Waving its arms, the demon babbled.

“Sorry if I have no sense of humor at the moment. Just tell me where he is and I won’t tear your head off.”

“Where else would a mortal who knows nothing about the Devil go?”

Beltaine dropped the demon and took off. “The throne room.”

“Yep,” Azubah said as it scurried along beside her.

“How did he find his way there without some demon seeing him?” she wondered out loud.

“I don’t know. He’s been hiding in a corner and mumbling to himself since he got there.”

Stopping quickly, she turned to question the demon. “How do you know where he is?”

Azubah bared its fangs in a sick parody of a smile. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the Veil since you rescued that whore. When Starrer crossed over, I followed him. I was on my way to find you when I saw you talking to that thing you call ‘mother.’”

“Thing? She’s a demon like you.” Beltaine continued towards the throne room.

A snort of disdain came from the small creature. "I would never stoop to her level. She might be the Devil's favorite, but she's just a bitch in heat. Gives the rest of us a bad name."

She snickered. "My mother gives demons a bad name? You, dear Azubah, have some serious delusions if you think it's only my mother's actions making you look bad."

She skidded to a stop outside the huge doors to the Devil's throne room. The doors leading into the room were over ten feet tall and made of solid obsidian. Carved into the panels were tormented faces, dismembered bodies, and creatures Beltaine had never seen before. The door handles were glistening-white leg bones.

"The Devil has a sick sense of humor." Grumbling, she pulled one of the doors open.

The atmosphere in the throne room was so oppressive she wondered how any creature -- demon or mortal -- could stand to be in the room for very long. Azubah ran into her as she stopped just inside the door.

"Watch where you're going," Beltaine snapped.

"Sorry. I thought I saw a shadow in an alley before we came in," the demon apologized as it glanced back towards the street they came from.

"Do you think one of the Horde followed us?" She wouldn't put it past the master to have one of his creatures spy on her.

Shaking its head, Azubah disagreed. "No, I think it was something else. I swore I saw a glimmer -- like light reflecting off glass or something."

She barked out a laugh. "Right. Light off glass. There's no light here unless I imagine some. It's amazing how Hell looks a lot like Dark Town."

"Hell's what you want it to be. Your worst fears and memories create this place. The only place that doesn't ever change is the throne room. It's the base of the Devil's power."

"And the one place he never goes." She moved with careful steps across the wide room to where the Devil's throne rested.

Again, obsidian had been used to create the chair. Elaborately carved skulls formed the chair's feet and armrests. The back rose seven feet in the air and had a gold sun etched into the face of it.

"Lucifer, the Daystar," she whispered. It saddened her to see the symbol of what the Devil had once been. She wondered if that was why he chose to spend his time elsewhere in Hell.

Azubah shivered as the demon settled beside her and stared up at the throne. "I've never liked this room. It's so gloomy and depressing here."

Beltaine shot a confused glance at the creature. "Are you sure you're a demon?"

"Yes. Why?" The question held a defensive edge.

"You don't sound like any demon I know." A quick peek at the sun again, and then she spun around to look over the room.

Thirteen enormous pillars spaced in two rows guarded the aisle leading from the doors to the platform. Paneled with darkest ebony, the walls soared up into darkness. Blackness covered the ceiling, hiding the roof of the room. Fear crawled down her back at the thought of what might be shrouded in the shadows. She knew there were beings in Hell she had never seen and never imagined existed. It was those creatures she didn't want released on unsuspecting mortals. The room was creeping her out.

"Let's find the asshole and get out of here before something worse than the master finds us." She pointed to the right side of the room. "You search that side. If you find him, give a shout."

* * * * *

Beltaine had been right about things hiding in the shadows. Creatures watched with evil burning deep in their red eyes. They chose to leave her alone because even housed in a fragile mortal body, they saw her demon soul and knew she was one of them. Also, gleaming

with the shimmering light of purity was a mark upon her neck. A mark telling them she was off-limits and protected by the one being they didn't want to mess with. So they crouched deeper into their hidey-holes to watch what was happening.

Even the strongest of those creatures didn't see the stranger perched in the farthest corner of the ceiling. His power blocking their sight, he glared down at the demon whelp and the pathetic thing helping her. His anger grew until he was almost overwhelmed by it. He wanted to fall upon Beltaine and rip her to shreds. *How dare she try to stop this cleansing I've started? She can't stand between my goal and me, even if she takes my mortal. Soon the Veil will fall, and my power will be absolute. It won't matter that she bears His mark; I'll kill her.*

White teeth gleamed in the darkness as the watcher snarled in fury at Beltaine's triumphant shout.

* * * * *

"Azubah, I've found the idiot." Beltaine's shout echoed through the room.

Starrer huddled in a corner behind the throne platform. His brown hair stood up in spikes, and tufts littered the floor around him as if he had been pulling hunks out. He muttered words she couldn't hear and wasn't likely to since she didn't want to get any closer to him. The robe he wore was stiff and had a metallic smell to it. She was sure it had been soaked in the girlfriend's blood before the man entered Hell. Reaching out, she stopped before she touched his shoulder.

Her skin twitched and her hand trembled. She wanted to believe it was because she was so angry at the senseless destruction the man had done, but she couldn't lie to herself. Fear caused her hand to shake. When she had run into Starrer the first time, a feeling of madness had swept over her. His attempt to find and kill the Devil proved her right, but at this moment, she knew by touching him, the madness would drag her into his mind, and she didn't want to go there. Insanity had dogged her steps for fourteen years of her life, and she

had chosen to kill instead of allow it to take her. She didn't know if she could willingly step into that abyss by touching this mortal.

Chapter Thirteen

“Why do you hesitate?”

The hoarse voice caused her to jump. Turning her head, she saw a transparent wraith standing beside her. She recognized the vague outline. She had held an image of the spirit in her hands earlier in the night. Starrer’s son scrutinized the body in front of him. Then those eyes met hers, and she saw the same emptiness in them that showed in the photo.

“You don’t want to touch him. Is it possible you can see the madness that hides in him?”

She drew her hand back with a careful movement. Spirits didn’t often linger in the throne room of the Devil. They were sent to their own specific Hell within minutes of arriving. There was something that felt off about this young man. Taking a step away, she settled into a defensive position.

“I don’t wish to harm you.” A faint grin graced the phantom’s face. “I’m not sure I could even if I wanted to. The mark upon your neck compels me to leave you alone.”

Fighting the urge to touch the scar on her throat, she clenched her hands and kept quiet. The shade glided closer to his father. A wave of its hand in front of the fixed eyes elicited no response.

“Just like in life, he doesn’t see me. Why is he here?” The question was directed to her without the son’s gaze leaving the father.

“He believes the Devil caused you to commit suicide. He wants to avenge your death by killing the Devil.” The words forced their way from her throat.

“Amazing. He had no time for me while I lived. Now he attempts great foolishness to atone for his own neglect.” The son’s voice held no concern or worry for his father. He knelt on the floor to look into Starrer’s eyes without touching him. “You’ve come to take him back to face judgment from God, haven’t you?”

“He’ll face judgment from the mortal world first for all the women he has killed or attacked in his crusade. More than likely, he’ll receive the death penalty. After they kill him, he will stand before the throne of God and be judged for what he was.”

An ironic chuckle came from the son. “So he will end up down here with me anyway. I never believed suicides went to Hell, no matter what the church said. Yet here I am, trapped in some strange room I can’t leave.”

“You can’t leave the throne room?” Beltaine hated oddities because it usually meant someone else had a hand in what was happening. “You should have gone on to your personal Hell when you arrived without even seeing the Devil. He doesn’t care who joins him as long as they’re dead.”

The young man shook his head. “I’m sure that’s the way it usually works, but for some reason, I have been stuck here. I can’t walk out the doors even if they are open. I don’t believe I was meant to be here.”

“Everyone says that. All the people who commit suicide don’t think they should be condemned for taking their own lives.” She was thrilled to see that the spirit wasn’t any different from others she’d run into.

“Maybe so. I knew what I was doing could kill me, and I was fine with that. I was willing to die, since I didn’t see anything to live for.”

“Not even your girlfriend?” She couldn’t forget the girl.

“She’s a sweet girl. I’ve never been sure why she would hook up with someone like me, but I guess it’s the attraction of a bad boy, huh?”

“She’s dead. Dear old dad there slit her throat before he came to Hell.” She pointed to the robe Starrer was wearing. “His robe is saturated with her blood.”

There was no noticeable change in the wraith’s visage. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or really didn’t care that his father had murdered his girlfriend.

“Unfortunate.”

Azubah grabbed her wrist to stop her from jerking the spirit to his feet and throwing him across the room. She took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

“Unfortunate? I guess you could say that. The most unfortunate thing that ever happened to her was becoming involved with your fucked-up family. Don’t you feel any sorrow for the fact that your insane father killed the girl who loved you?”

“It would make you feel better if I said yes, but why should I lie to make you feel better? She’s dead and in Heaven, a place she is suited for.” Glancing around them, the shade smiled and nodded. “I’m suited for Hell. Its darkness and torment touch a place inside me I never knew except through the touch of heroin. I won’t complain about coming here.”

Shock rocketed through her. She’d never known any creature that wanted to stay in Hell. None of them ever felt it was home. Even demons that were made in Hell fought to get out. She couldn’t kill a spirit, so she needed to get out of there before she killed the young man’s father. Without thinking, she encircled Starrer’s wrist and yanked him to his feet. The man blinked and his eyes focused on his son.

“Azrael,” the man whispered.

Beltaine looked at Azubah. “Please tell me I didn’t hear that name.”

Azubah grimaced. “Sorry, he really did name his son after the Angel of Death.”

“That could explain why the kid feels at home here in Hell.”

Pulling away from her, Starrer tried to embrace his son. The phantom slid over to stand behind her, making his father have to go through her to touch him. The man stood, staring over her shoulder with puzzled eyes.

“Azrael, why won’t you let me hug you?”

“This urge to hug me is weird when you consider the fact you never wanted to even talk to me while I was alive.”

From the words, Beltaine thought there should be some sort of resentment coming from the son, but it was almost like the young man was reading lines to a play. They were words he had memorized for the moment he might meet his father again.

“I’m here now. I’m going to kill the Devil for you. The voice said I’ve been ordained by God to do it. If you’ve ever doubted I loved you, look at everything I did to ensure you were even given birth,” Starrer protested.

Beltaine had a strange feeling she didn’t want to hear what was going to be said next. She tried to move out of the way, but a force greater than herself held her in place.

“Oh yes, I thought the blood sacrifice you made to make sure your wife got pregnant was a wonderful touch. I thank you for that, but the boy you knew as your son is gone. He’s been gone for a while now. His soul was needed only to create a body for me. When that was finished, he was sent back to where he came from.” Azrael thanked Starrer with flat words.

“I knew I didn’t want to hear this,” she mumbled under her breath, and Azubah nodded.

A sound came from the doorway. They turned to see the master standing just inside the door. His red eyes fastened on Starrer, and he lunged for him. Beltaine tried to intercept him, but she still couldn’t move. Starrer was still in shock over his son’s dismissal of his sacrifices and didn’t seem to sense the danger. Right before the master struck, the demon was flung across the room and pinned to one of the ebony walls. Beltaine didn’t know where the power came from, but she was happy someone had stopped the master.

“Beltaine found the mortal first. She takes him back beyond the Veil for judgment in his world.” Azrael stepped from behind her and approached the snarling demon. The fragile-looking phantom challenged the master with a direct gaze. “You know who I am, Master of the Horde.”

Fear flashed in those angry red eyes. It was an emotion Beltaine thought the master didn’t feel, no matter who he faced. She sent an inquiring glance at the young man. So who was Azrael? What kind of being was he that he could cow the meanest demon in Hell?

The master growled. “Azrael, so nice of you to join us finally.”

“I have been biding my time, waiting to see what you would make of this world you were given. I’m not impressed.”

“Why haven’t you been seen in the rest of Hell?” The master was still arrogant enough to demand answers.

Azrael didn’t seem bothered by the demon’s insolence. “I’ve been trying to figure it out myself. But that isn’t important at the moment. The demon killer will be taking Starrer out of Hell. We will get him soon enough, and once we do, his torment will last for eternity. We can afford to be generous.” The spirit turned and gestured for her to take hold of Starrer again.

She twisted the man’s arm up behind his back and forced him to walk towards the door. Things had gone over the edge into the downright scary, so she wanted to get the heck out of Hell before she got caught up in it. She stopped before she stepped out of the door. Turning, she looked at Azrael.

“I don’t know what you are and I don’t ever want to find out. Thanks for this and for not killing me when I’m sure you could have at any point.” As much as her mind was screaming for her to get out while she could, she knew she had to show respect to this being.

With a regal nod, Azrael accepted her thanks. “We’ll meet again, Beltaine.” The shade held out a hand towards her.

She felt heat blossom on her throat. Pain burned in a spot directly in line with her other scar. *Great, now everyone is marking me. I hope we don't meet until after I'm dead,* she thought as she hustled the stunned man from the throne room. Azubah followed right behind her.

The rest of Horde stood aside and watched her rush away. She wondered why none of them had gone in to help the master when he'd confronted Azrael. No one impeded their progress as they made their way to the Veil. When she got there, she gave Starrer a hard shove and tossed him through the barrier before her.

* * * * *

Kalan and Father Paul jumped to their feet when a ragged man came stumbling through the Veil. He caught the man to keep him from falling. Beltaine popped out with a pissed-off look on her face. She glared at all of them.

"No matter how much you beg and plead, I'm never going back there. They are sick, twisted people over there. Not to mention some truly frightening things have shown up." She reached out and snatched the man from Kalan's grasp.

"Wait. What happened?" There was a wild-eyed look to Beltaine, and he didn't think it was anger.

A look of disgust crossed her face and she let go of Starrer so fast, the man fell. "The bastard dragged that robe he's wearing through a girl's blood before he headed to Hell. It happened to be his son's girlfriend." She scrubbed her hands on her pants while she stared down at the man kneeling before her. She grimaced as he leaned and blubbered all over her boots. She kicked him in the chest and Starrer fell over.

Appalled, Kalan went to kneel beside the man. The robe was stiff with dried blood. He grabbed the man's chin and turned his gaze to him. "Why would you do that?"

"The voice said killing the Devil would be easy. I knew I needed blood to make my prayers heard. Blood seals oaths."

“The voice?” Kalan kept Starrer’s chin in a firm grip. The man kept trying to look at Beltaine.

Starrer seemed to know where the danger would come from because she looked like she was ready to slap the man silly. Kalan couldn’t help but wonder what idiot believed killing the Devil would be easy, and what kind of maniac listened to voices?

“It came to me at my son’s funeral. Told me the Devil made my son kill himself. Said I should make him pay. It told me about the book and helped me. Now it’s gone and I’ll never get revenge,” he sobbed.

“Shut the hell up. I doubt very much the Devil had anything to do with your son’s death. That’s just an excuse for ignoring your son until the boy thought there was no one left to support him.” Beltaine glared at Starrer.

Kalan admonished her. “He’s still grieving for his son. Cut him some slack.”

“Some slack?” She shot the angel an incredulous look. “We come close to total annihilation of every mortal and demon in Hell and on Earth. All because this fuck-up can’t take blame for his own actions and listens to voices. I can’t cut him enough slack to keep him from hanging himself.”

“How do we know he isn’t telling the truth?” Kalan was serious.

“I have enough souls joining me in Hell every day, I don’t need to go out and recruit more.” The Devil appeared, his dark eyes studying Starrer as if the man were a fascinating bug. “Besides, God and I made a deal before I got sent to Hell. I wouldn’t mess with any mortal’s mind, and He wouldn’t kill me. Very generous of Him, I thought.”

“So who would try to convince this loser that killing you would be easy?” She shrugged when Kalan frowned at her. “What? Now you’re mad at me for telling the truth. I’m sorry his son killed himself, but it’s something that happens every day, and he shouldn’t be looking for someone else to blame. Besides, I just met his son. The boy’s as fucked up as his dad.”

The Devil looked at her. “You met this mortal’s son in Hell?”

“Yes, he’s in your throne room. Tell you what, that is one scary soul. He pinned the master against the wall, and there was fear in the demon’s eyes when he realized who had done it.” Beltaine rubbed her arms like she was cold.

“Really? What was this shade’s name?” The Devil stopped his inspection of Starrer to stare at Beltaine.

“Azrael.” She breathed the name as if she didn’t want to bring notice to it.

The Devil’s pale skin went chalky white, and a fine tremor shook his frame. “Azrael is in the throne room,” he whispered with a hint of panic. “I had better go and see what is going on.”

The fallen angel disappeared. Kalan caught Beltaine’s face in his hands and kissed her. Her arms wrapped around his neck with desperate strength. He tasted the acidic flavor of fear from her mouth. In the back of his mind, he wondered who Azrael was and why Beltaine was afraid of him.

Chapter Fourteen

“Disgusting. Don’t you see this is why I have to go back and finish the job? You can’t stop me now.”

They broke apart to find Starrer holding Father Paul hostage. With one arm wrapped around the priest’s neck, he held a knife pressed against the man’s jugular vein. Kalan could have cursed. While he was reassuring himself and Beltaine, he had forgotten about the mortal who had started this whole thing. Beltaine stayed where she was, and he took a step to the man’s right. There was no way he could keep an eye on both of them, and Kalan didn’t think Starrer’s brain would be able to cope with the two of them. He tried to reassure the priest that they would save him. Father Paul wasn’t looking at him. The priest’s eyes were firmly fixed on Beltaine and Kalan had the feeling that the Father expected her to help him.

“What job? Even your son sent you back here with me. He didn’t want you to take revenge for something he chose to do. He seems quite happy there.” She moved in the opposite direction, forcing Starrer to make a decision about who to follow.

Starrer stuck with Beltaine, turning as she moved. Kalan smiled to himself. It had to mean Beltaine was the scary of the two of them. Maybe it was the fact that she had allowed some of her power loose so her fangs and claws were growing longer. Her eyes glowed an

unearthly red. Kalan moved another step and Starrer started to look at him. She growled low in her throat, and the man's gaze skated back to her. Kalan hoped they didn't push the man too far and make him cut the priest.

"No, Azrael is still under the influence of the demons. He doesn't want to stay there. He wants to come home with me and be a family again." Drool dripped from Starrer's lips.

"I don't think so. He seems very satisfied with Hell. Your son is seriously screwed up, Starrer. What the hell did you do?" Beltaine taunted him.

Go easy, love, Kalan thought. *Don't taunt him.*

"I didn't do anything. His mother and I tried to have children for years. Then one night, I got the idea of coming down here into the catacombs. I knew the altar had been used for rituals before. Blood oaths are needed to seal deals, so I picked up a whore to sacrifice. I performed the ritual, asking any being for help in having a son. The next week my wife told me she was pregnant. I knew it was because of the ritual. I knew I had been blessed." Starrer gestured wildly with his knife.

Kalan tensed. He wanted to wait until Starrer was facing away from him before he rushed the man. He didn't want to risk Father Paul being injured or even killed by this bastard. Sliding another inch behind the man, he tried to catch Beltaine's eyes, but her stare focused on Starrer and didn't see anyone else.

"Ordained by God? Do you really believe God wants you or anyone else to kill in His name? What kind of God would do that? Someone lied to you and used you for their purpose. You've done nothing except earn your own place in Hell, and I can guarantee you, the Devil has a special spot all picked out for you." She paced a step closer to Starrer.

Kalan assumed she had moved closer so Starrer's entire view closed down onto her. She presented the scariest prospect. He was close enough to touch the man, but he didn't want to move yet. The knife was still too tight to the priest's neck. He ran the risk of Father Paul's throat being cut if he jerked Starrer away from the other man.

“The Father wouldn’t allow that. I am avenging our sons, and you’ll thank me for it when the Devil’s dead.” Starrer pointed the blade at Beltaine.

Now, Kalan shouted at himself. In one quick movement, he snatched Father Paul from Starrer’s grasp and pushed the priest across the room. With his other hand, he punched the lunatic in the jaw, dropping the man where he stood. Turning, he saw Beltaine crouched next to Father Paul and talking to him.

“Beltaine, do we have any rope around here? I don’t want to risk Starrer taking off through the Veil again.”

Before she could answer, Jasper appeared. “Don’t worry, Kalan. I’ll take him. The Father wants to see him before the judgment seat.”

Kalan felt a hint of suspicion rush through him. “You? Where is the commander? He should be the one to take the mortal for judging.”

The green-eyed angel nodded. “Yes, he should be, but no one can find him.”

“No one?” Beltaine helped Father Paul climb to his feet. “Not even God?”

The angel strolled over to Beltaine and brushed a kiss over her cheek. “Good to see you again, Beltaine. Though I do prefer to meet you in the clubs.”

Jealousy rose like a hateful creature in Kalan’s chest, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t want Jasper to realize that he was irritated. Also, he knew Beltaine wouldn’t be thrilled with his jealousy issues.

“I’m sure God does know where the commander is, but He’s chosen not to tell the rest of us, and that’s fine with me. The commander is the last angel I want to run into.” Jasper glanced down at the mortal lying on the altar room floor. “I’ll take him.”

Kalan started to protest, and those brilliant green eyes caught him.

“Do you have something to say about that, Kalan? Are you the only angel who can perform his duties to the standards we’re expected to achieve?” Bitterness coated the angel’s words.

"It's not that, but how do I know I can trust you to deliver him?"

Jasper's narrowed eyes glared at him as the angel opened his mouth to reply. Beltaine broke in.

"Shut the hell up. Why are you acting like children? Jasper, take the asshole, and when you see God, tell Him Azrael is in Hell."

Jasper's eyes widened with a hint of fear in them. "I'll tell Him, but I'm sure he already knows."

"Probably, but tell Him anyway." Beltaine handed Father Paul to Kalan and whipped Starrer to his feet.

Jasper clasped the man's arm in his hand and disappeared. Kalan wondered who Azrael was that just the mention of him brought fear to everyone's eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked the priest as they walked out of the altar into the cellar.

"Yes, thanks to you and Beltaine. Is everything done now? Will things go back to normal?" Father Paul's eyes skated between him and Beltaine.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think anything will be normal again. The Veil still needs to be repaired, though I'm not sure how that'll happen. With the appearance of Azrael, I think things will get even more interesting for the rest of us."

Unease settled into the pit of Kalan's stomach. Something was telling him she was right.

* * * * *

Beltaine stepped into her apartment with a sigh. She never thought she would feel this way, but it was good to be home. Hell was a terrible place to be, and she didn't want to go back before she had to. She laughed as Kalan whirled her around and kissed her hard.

His teeth bit her bottom lip until it bled, and he soothed the wound with his tongue. She didn't fight as his hand tore her clothes off. It wasn't going to be slow and gentle this

time. Fear and anger coursed through their bodies, and they needed to reassure themselves that they lived. There was love in each touch as well. She was willing to admit to herself she loved the troublesome angel. She poured all her feelings into the kiss.

They fell back onto the couch with his hips wedged between her thighs. Her hips arched up to allow his cock to slide into her. She wasn't wet enough, so his penetration burned. Hissing, she reached down, grasped his hips and jerked him even deeper into her. A low growl came from his throat and Beltaine laughed.

She enjoyed their moments of slow lovemaking when he took the time to tease and torture her into a climax. She wanted more of those times, but the rough and fast fucks were the ones she got the most pleasure from. He slammed into her as his hands bruised her skin.

"I can't slow down," he panted in her ear.

"Then don't. I won't break." She allowed her nails to grow into claws, and she raked them down his back, leaving trails of welts on him.

He cried out and arched, driving even further into her. Staring up at him, she saw his climax building in his blue eyes, and her own orgasm started to take over. Her thighs tightened around Kalan's waist. Her inner muscles stroked his cock as he rode her. Her orgasm burst through her, causing a blackness to darken her sight. Her fangs erupted and she bit Kalan's shoulder, drawing blood. Crying out, Kalan's hips jerked as he threw his head back. Wet warmth spurted into her as his climax washed over him.

Her pussy continued to contract and encourage every last drop from him. He collapsed on her, pressing her into the couch.

"Wow." It was all he seemed to have the energy to say.

Chuckling, Beltaine agreed. "Yeah, wow. Before you fall asleep, let's head to the bed."

They forced their bodies to move and made their way to her bed. Snuggling, she traced her fingers over the welts on his back.

"Are we done now?"

Kalan's question tore a tiny hole in her heart. "What do you mean?"

"We found the book and the man who ripped the Veil. Have we done what they wanted us to do?" His lips pressed against her hair.

"There's one more thing I think everyone is expecting from us. The Veil still needs to be repaired. We'll have to figure out how to do that. So we're not done."

"Good. I don't want to leave you."

His whispered words sealed the hole temporarily. "We'll worry about it tomorrow, angel boy. Tonight, we get to rest."

Kalan's warm breath bathed her neck and eased her into sleep.

Volume 4:
A Sense of Balance

Chapter One

Standing in the altar room, the commander stared at the shimmering Veil. The holes were big enough for the Higher Lords of Hell to pass through. He wondered where those demons were. With a shot to overrun the mortal world, he thought they would be fighting to get out. His lip curled in a sneer when a werewolf slinked through a hole.

Ah, yes, the scouts are arriving. He thought about contacting Kalan, then decided against it. He no longer trusted the angel to have the Host's best interest in mind. He made the decision to keep watching. If things got worse, he'd make a move.

* * * * *

"I'm going to come," Kalan grunted in her ear.

This is how it started, Beltaine thought as she straddled him. Filling her pussy with his shaft, she grinned down at the angel. *Thank God, it's a different cock I'm riding.*

Kalan's hands cupped her breasts and massaged them. His rough fingers plucked at her hard nipples. Reaching behind her, she grasped his balls in one of her hands and squeezed firmly. She teased him as she slid up and down his cock. His thighs splayed farther apart.

Clenching her muscles, she urged Kalan's climax to build. One of his hands trailed down her stomach to burrow through her curls. She gasped as he found her clit.

"Like that, do you?" A smug smile crossed his face.

"Yes, I do." Why lie when her body told him what he wanted to know?

Letting go of his balls, she leaned forward to brace her hands on his chest. She picked up the rhythm and Kalan grabbed her hips. With a surge of his body, he rolled them over to put her on the bottom. Placing his hands under her ass, he tipped her hips for a deeper angle.

"Kalan," she moaned as the blunt head of his cock scraped over her sweet spot. Pleasure skipped down her spine, flooding her pussy with moisture.

"Wrap your legs around me and hold on," he ordered her.

She did as he told her and grasped the headboard. He slammed into her. Soon, the room filled with their grunts and the sound of skin slapping together. Her orgasm raced over her, causing her muscles to clamp down around his cock and milk his come from him. Heat filled her as he rode his climax by nailing her to the bed.

After their breathing eased, they lay side by side. Her fingers traced random patterns on his sweaty skin. She gathered her thoughts to try and figure out what their next move should be. They had slept most of the day, recovering from the emotions of the night before. The Devil's spell book had been recovered, and the mortal who ripped the Veil captured before he could kill the Devil. They needed to figure out how to repair the Veil before the Horde and the Higher Lords crossed over. She wasn't sure how to do that.

A scream came from the night outside her window. The unearthly screech caused shivers of fear to chase down her spine.

Kalan's skin went cold and he tensed. "What the hell was that?"

Beltaine climbed out of bed and went to the window. Staring into the darkness, she contemplated what creature might have made that sound. Another wail came, and a chill filled the room.

“Shit. It’s a banshee.”

“How do you know?” Kalan joined her in front of the window.

“I heard one the night I killed my father. They’re the heralds of the Horde.” She rubbed her arms to warm herself.

The memory of that night pulled her back into the past. All day, her father had yelled and beaten her. There wasn’t anything she could do to please him. The fact she was in the apartment bothered him and though her physical wounds healed as soon as they happened, the anger built until she had to make a choice.

She could allow her father to destroy her, inch by inch, or she could take her destiny into her own hands. It was the moment she lifted the gun and pointed it at her father that the banshee’s wail echoed through Dark Town. Ice formed in her heart and she pulled the trigger.

“If the banshee is the herald of the Horde, why would it announce your father’s death?” His question drew her back to the present.

“The master showed up for the first time as my father bled out.”

“Who’s going to die tonight?” He wrapped his arms around her.

Shrugging, she leaned back into his warmth. “I’m not sure it’s announcing any death in particular, but it doesn’t bode well. It means the Horde is getting ready to come through the Veil.”

“The Devil won’t stop them?” Kalan rested his chin on her shoulder.

“Why would he? He doesn’t really control any of the demons in Hell. They do as they please.”

“I thought the Devil was the ruler of Hell.” He sounded puzzled.

“It’s a title mostly. The other demons will listen to him usually, but if they want something, they’ll take it, and most of them want to rule in the mortal world.” She pulled away and headed towards the bathroom.

“So what do we do?” Kalan followed her.

“We gather everyone together and decide how we fix the Veil. Where did Father John and Roger go? I didn’t see them when Starrer and I came back from Hell.” She turned on the shower.

“Father John wasn’t feeling well. He wanted to check on Betsy and then head back to the City. Roger told me you’d bring the bastard back. He didn’t doubt you.” He leaned in the doorway and watched her.

She raised an eyebrow as she glanced over at him. “You didn’t think I’d return? Where’s your faith?”

“I knew you’d come back, but I didn’t think Starrer would be with you. How was I supposed to believe in you? You were so angry. I figured maybe you’d let the master get to him and deal with Starrer for you.”

Beltaine faced him. “First of all, I don’t need anyone to deal with things for me. I was more than capable of kicking his ass if I wanted to. Secondly, I might get mad, but I can control my anger.”

“Not too be rude or anything, but you said you were so angry at your father that you shot him. Why should I be confident enough in your control to believe you wouldn’t do the same thing to someone who threatened your existence again?”

She wondered if she should feel hurt by his lack of trust. “Are you afraid I’ll get mad at you and kill you?” She tested the water. Finding it as hot as she could stand it, she stepped in.

Moving closer, he looked at her and shrugged. “I don’t think you would. There’s nothing in it for you. Killing me would get you more trouble than letting me live.”

She poured shampoo in her hand and started washing her hair. His hand clamped around her wrist and pulled her to him. He lifted her chin and kissed her.

“More than that, I think you like or even love me. You’ll cut me some slack when you get angry at me. How often have you gotten mad at Roger, and he’s still around.”

“Talk to Roger about my temper. I’ve learned to control it, and you’re right. It’s more trouble to kill people than to intimidate them.” She wrapped her fingers through the wet strands of his dark hair and pulled his mouth down for another kiss.

One of his hands braced him against the shower wall while the other slid around her thigh and pulled it up around his hip. She gasped as he rocked his hips and rubbed his cock over her pussy. The warm water and her own juices made his passage smooth. Her lips devoured what flesh of his they touched. She nibbled her way from his mouth to his neck, where she tasted the throbbing pulse at the tender base of his throat. Her hands wandered from his hair down to his ass where her fingers tightened and urged him to continue rubbing against her.

“We’ve never fucked in the shower before.” She grinned at Kalan as the blunt head of his cock pushed against her clit.

“We need to change that, then,” he suggested as he took his hand off her thigh to grab her ass. Angling her hips, he used the water to ease his way into her pussy.

She gave a moan of contentment. “I’ve missed that.”

He chuckled. “Missed it? It’s only been ten minutes since I finished making love to you.”

Shrugging, she winked at him. “What can I say? I like the feel of your cock inside me.”

He answered by thrusting into her. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she lifted her other leg to encircle his waist. He turned to lean against the tiled wall. His hands bit into Beltaine’s skin as he raised her up and allowed gravity to bring her down on his cock. Groans filled the air over the pounding water as his shaft went deep. Kalan leaned forward to nip the tip of her breast. Her back arched at the sharp twinge of pain.

His tongue lapped water from her breasts as his hips jerked, pushing his erection deeper. She tightened her muscles to stroke him as he pulled out. His mouth fastened on a hard nipple and began to suck in time with his movements.

Her breasts ached with desire while he used his tongue and teeth on them. Pleasure built at the base of her neck and in her pussy. Flexing her body, she drew his entire length into her and squeezed. The head of his rod hit the right spot, and she cried out his name as her orgasm burst free.

“Kalan,” she urged him on.

She could tell by the strength of his grip she was going to have bruises later on, but she didn’t care. They were marks caused by pleasure, not by pain.

A sharp crack sounded when Kalan threw his head back and hit the wall. It didn’t stop him from pumping hard and fast into her. She sighed as heat flooded her. His climax drained him until only the wall was holding them both up.

Beltaine slid off him and grabbed the soap. Lathering her hands, she smoothed her way down his chest and over his thighs. With exquisite attention to detail, she eased the sweat from his body, and any leftover tension drifted out of his muscles. Motioning to him to tilt his head, she washed his hair for him.

Chapter Two

Kalan watched Beltaine wash her own hair. He smiled when she swore as some soap got in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare laugh, angel boy,” she warned.

“I wouldn’t dare, but you might want to slow down. Why are you suddenly in a hurry?” He reached around her to turn the water off once she rinsed.

“I was thinking how Roger has a tendency to walk in on us. He doesn’t need to see you naked. It might give him ideas.” With a wink, she headed to the closet where her clothes hung.

A bit nonplussed, he dried quickly and clothed himself. Heading out to join her in the living room, he asked, “Do we have a plan to fix the Veil?”

She reached into the refrigerator and grabbed two beers. Tossing one to him, she sat down on the couch. “Well, since the book we got back for the Devil caused the rips in the barrier, it should have a spell to fix it.”

“Do we go and ask the Devil for it back?” He popped the top and took a swig.

“What’s this *we* shit? We both know who’d have to go after it.” She shook her head. “Father John has a copy in the church’s archive, remember? I’ll call Roger and see if we can go and look at it, or maybe Roger can bring it to us.”

He handed her the phone and finished off his bottle. She swung her feet into his lap as she dialed Roger’s number. Cupping her heel in his hand, he began to massage it.

“Hey, Roger. Yes, we got the bastard, but we need to look at the book Father John said he had.” She listened for a moment. “Yeah, give me a call after you talk to him.”

Hanging up, she sighed. “If we didn’t need to check on things out in the village, I’d let you do that all night.”

“Why are we heading out? There’s nothing we can do until we hear back from Roger.” He ran a finger over her ankle, up her leg to the crease where her hip and thigh met.

“There are banshees that must be sent back, and we need to keep an eye out for werewolves.” She pulled away from him and slipped on her boots.

“Why werewolves?” He followed her out of the apartment.

Beltaine stopped and looked at him. “Why did the commander send you to help me when you’ve got no clue about the creatures in Hell?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet. He showed up and told me I had to come down here to stop a war. He didn’t mention you’d be half-demon or irresistible. No one ever told me about Hell and the creatures that call it home.” Kalan shrugged.

“Talk about a crash course. You didn’t have a chance,” she pointed out as they started moving again.

“Not from the moment I saw you. So why are we watching out for werewolves?”

They stepped out onto the street, and a screech echoed through the night. Goosebumps rose over his skin. She touched his arm and pointed towards an alley entrance on the other side of the street.

Squinting, he made out a rather vague shape lurking in the shadows. Unease swelled, and he wanted to protest as she headed towards the banshee. As they moved closer, the shape evolved into an extremely thin, pale woman with long white hair. The banshee's eyes were black, without pupils. When she opened her mouth, Kalan saw fangs.

Beltaine gestured to the creature and stopped the sound before it left the banshee's mouth. "I think you need to go back home, my friend."

There wasn't any way to really tell if the banshee had emotions, but he imagined it was surprised by Beltaine's statement. It tilted its head and stared at her.

"Who are you to tell me where I should go?" The banshee's voice was high-pitched.

"I'm Beltaine."

The banshee's head went back and its eyes widened. He could tell that it recognized her name.

"I was warned about you." It shifted away from them.

"I'm sure you were. You should return to Hell on your own. If I send you back, it's going to hurt." The matter-of-fact tone Beltaine used told him she meant what she said.

"You don't fear us." It wasn't a question.

"Few creatures are scary enough for me to fear, and you aren't one of them." Beltaine moved closer to the banshee.

"I must stay. I proclaim the coming of the Horde. The master will be furious if I don't do my job."

Kalan winced as the creature's high-pitched whine pierced his head. He wanted to cover his ears, but didn't want to give the banshee the satisfaction of knowing it bothered him.

"The master was having a problem or two of his own when I saw him last." Beltaine shrugged. "Of course, I could let the angel take care of you, and that would mean instant death."

True fear took hold of the banshee's face when it got a clear view of him. He grinned, and by the way the banshee cringed, he knew it had to be a rather cruel smile. "I'll be glad to help you leave."

The creature screamed, and several apartment windows shattered around the alley. Crouching down, it covered its head with reed-thin arms. "Please, no. I'll leave."

He backed off, but Beltaine stayed where she was. He knew she wouldn't back down for a silly banshee. As she had said, few creatures ever brought fear into her eyes. Uttering one last haunting cry, the banshee fled.

"I hate those things," Beltaine grumbled as they made their way out of the alley.

"You had to threaten it with me. I thought you could handle anything." He couldn't help but tease her.

"I could have dealt with it, but it's less effort to scare it with you." She smiled. "They might call me the demon killer, but I don't kill them. I send any demon that gets out of line back to Hell. My reputation is a little exaggerated. You really could destroy them, so any demon in its right mind doesn't want to tick you off."

"You were telling me about werewolves." He brought her back to the original topic because he didn't feel like pointing out that most demons weren't in their right minds.

* * * * *

Beltaine nodded as she led them into the center of Ericksberg. She would have a talk with the commander about sending his angels into the mortal world unprepared.

"Werewolves are scouts. They're sent in advance of the Horde's arrival. With their stronger senses, they find the places where mortals are weaker so the Higher Lords of Hell can go to collect their souls. If we see a werewolf, it means their crossing is imminent. I'm not sure we could stop them once the Horde breaches the barrier."

"All Hell busts loose and we're in a shitload of trouble."

It was still a shock to hear her angel swear, but she couldn't argue with what he said. "Yes, a shitload of trouble. You'd be recalled, and the Host would be unleashed to destroy mortal and demon." Stopping, she turned to stare at him. "That's what's so weird about this whole thing. Demons and angels alike know what's in store if the Veil is destroyed. Mortals don't know the danger because we protect them from the truth. We caught the person causing the trouble."

"What's bothering you, then?"

"Starrer kept saying he heard a voice."

Kalan nodded. "Sure, but he was crazy. It's not a stretch to think he invented the voice to explain why he did what he did."

"I'd be willing to believe that, but this voice told him very specific things. It told him about the book and how to work the spells. It convinced him that killing the Devil would be easy. I'm inclined to believe someone or something is behind this entire thing besides the man being crazy."

She could tell that Kalan wasn't convinced. "Why would the Devil do it?"

"See, there's your inborn prejudice sneaking in. Why do you assume the Devil did it? Why would he take us all to the point of annihilation?"

He frowned. "He wants to take over Earth. He's not content with ruling Hell. He wants to control everything. If he had the chance, he'd try to take over Heaven again. Ow," he complained as she slapped him upside the head.

"You've got to be one of the most stubborn people I've come across." She glared at him. "Maybe that's why the commander sent you. Even when you learn something different, you'll stick with what you've been taught."

He rubbed his head and pouted. "Maybe, but you didn't have hit me that hard."

"I think you needed that. You've met the Devil. Was your impression of him that of a power-hungry tyrant?"

“Well, no,” he conceded.

“Of course not. Contrary to popular belief, he isn’t plotting to take over Heaven. Judging from his reaction, I’d say he would be trying to stay as far away from Azrael as possible instead of planning anything against God or mortal.” She fingered the burn on her neck. “Take a look at this and tell me what it is.” She pulled back her hair to reveal it.

The touch of his finger caused a blade of pain to cut over her skin. She hissed, barely resisting the urge to jerk away from him. He was the one to pull away suddenly.

“Beltaine, where’d you get this?” His voice held shock, disgust and a hint of fear.

“Someone gave it to me while I was in Hell. What is it?”

“Why would you allow it?”

She dropped her hair and gazed at him. “It wasn’t as if he gave me a choice. Now tell me what the hell the psychopath put on me.”

“It’s a symbol of destruction” Kalan shuddered.

Bile rose in her stomach. *Why me?* was all she could think. Why did God allow such cruel jokes to be played at her expense?

“The bastard marked me. Not only do I have the symbol of God on my body, I’m now carrying the symbol of Azrael. There are times when I’d love to chuck the whole damn thing and hide away.” Crossing her arms, she stared down at her feet.

Kalan put his hands on her hips and tugged her close to him. “Hiding isn’t in your nature, love. You’ll fight this marking just like you fight the other one.” He kissed her hair and smoothed a hand down her back. “Who is Azrael?”

“He looks like Starrer’s son, but he said the boy’s soul no longer lives in the body. I’m not sure who he is. I know Azrael is the name of the being many call the Angel of Death. I don’t know what his place in Hell is.” She stepped back from him and straightened her shoulders.

“The Devil seemed scared of him,” Kalan reminded her.

“I know, and he pinned the master to a wall. Azrael was the one who allowed me to leave with Starrer. It seems even the Higher Lords of Hell fear him.” She tilted her head back to look at the sky.

“What kind of being would scare the Devil and his Horde?” Kalan’s brow creased with a frown.

“I don’t know. I’ve always had a theory that Hell existed before the Devil had his falling-out with God. When they chose to disagree about the Devil’s place in Heaven, God allowed him to take over Hell. There are creatures far more evil living in those depths, and I’m afraid Azrael is one such being.”

“Why would he mark you? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Why would God allow my father to burn a crucifix into my neck? I’m beginning to feel like a game piece in a huge chess match. I move at the whim of either side.”

He took her hand in his. “Ultimately you decide what you want to do. You’re a wild card in the entire game.” Tugging her hand, he said, “Come on. I want to see a werewolf.”

“Trust me, you really don’t.” She laughed and let him lead her away.

* * * * *

Rage burned in his eyes as he watched Kalan and Beltaine walk away. The chaos mark on her neck was going to cause a problem. It meant he wasn’t supposed to touch her.

But touch her he would if she continued to involve herself in his plans. He could feel the energies seething. When the time was right, they would explode, and he would be there to reap the benefits.

Chapter Three

Roger stared in horrified silence at Father Angelo. There was no way Father John could be missing. “I dropped him off. I even walked him to his room. Now you’re telling me he’s not anywhere?”

Holy shit, this wasn’t good. Father John was the only one who could tell them where the book of Devil spells was.

“We’ve searched the rectory, the church, even the surrounding cemeteries. John is nowhere to be found.” Angelo sat down in a pew with a weary sigh. “We must inform the bishop.”

“You tell the bishop. I have to tell Beltaine that the man she considers a father is gone. It’d be almost as bad as having to tell her he died.” Roger scrubbed his face with shaking hands.

“Make her come here. Call her and tell her Father John needs her. She has to use her powers, but don’t tell her about his disappearance until she’s here,” Angelo suggested.

Roger nodded. Pulling a cell phone from his pocket, he walked outside to place the call.

“Beltaine.” Her voice shot over the phone.

“Father John needs you here, Beltaine. Right now. So I suggest you use your power to get here.” He hung up before she could say anything. Sitting on the steps, he bowed his head and prayed.

* * * * *

Beltaine appeared in front of church to see Roger sitting and praying. She bounded up the steps and kicked his feet.

“What the hell kind of call was that? You could’ve given me more information.” She moved to head around him, and he grabbed her ankle.

“Father Angelo suggested it. We’ve got a major problem, Beltaine.”

Something in Roger’s voice told her she didn’t want to hear anything he had to say. Kalan’s warmth at her back eased her a little.

“All right. What’s wrong?”

Roger took a deep breath. “Father John’s gone.”

Her stomach dropped and tears welled in her eyes. “He’s dead?”

“No, he’s gone. We can’t find him anywhere.” Roger grimaced when she kicked him.

“You could’ve phrased it a little differently. How do you know he’s missing?”

“I brought him home last night, even walked him to his room. After I got your call, I went to ask him about the book. Father Angelo told me Father John’s door was locked, and he wasn’t answering when they called him.” Roger let Kalan pull him to his feet. “I picked the lock.”

“Seems an odd talent for a priest to have,” Kalan commented as the angel followed the other two into the church.

“Not if the priest is from Dark Town.” Beltaine said as she hugged Father Angelo and ignored the bishop standing next to the priest. “When you opened the door, what did you find?”

“Father John wasn’t there. His bed hadn’t been slept in. We searched the rectory and archives. We even searched cemeteries. We can’t find him anywhere.” Roger filled her in.

“He just went for a walk or something. I’m sure he’ll show up soon.” The bishop didn’t sound worried.

“He wouldn’t have left. It’s getting too close. Tomorrow, his stigmata will return.” Father Angelo frowned at the bishop.

“Show me his room,” she ordered Roger.

She was led to where the door of Father John’s room stood open. Walking in, she glanced around. Someone had been in there besides Father John or the other priests. Someone with more power and less inclination to do good. There’d be a note, she was sure, but not an ordinary one.

“Kalan, look around. There has to be a note somewhere.” She gestured for him to search the other side of the room.

“Why would you be able to find it when my priests couldn’t?” the bishop asked.

“Whoever took Father John wasn’t mortal. He knew you’d call me, so the message is for me, not you.” Beltaine sent a blanket of power over her side of the room. Nothing flared. A touch of doubt ran through her.

“Beltaine,” Kalan called to her.

She turned to see words appear, etched deep into the mirror over the dresser. The message flared when she moved closer.

“What language is it written in?” Roger moved closer as well, intently focused on the words.

“It’s an archaic language used by angels before the Fall. Our kidnapper is trying to confuse us and make us think an angel took the Father.” Kalan squinted and mouthed the words under his breath.

“Why? There are few people, angels or demons, who could read it. I don’t think anyone but the Devil would know how to decipher this,” Father Angelo pointed out.

Kalan shot her a triumphant grin. Shaking her head, she read the words out loud as the pentagram on her neck burned.

“Don’t attempt to find the priest. The book you search for is gone as well. The Veil will fall and a new order will begin.”

Everyone was staring at her as she finished. She pulled her fingers off the glass.

“It seems you’ve been holding out on us, Beltaine.” The bishop inspected her as if she had been a dog that started talking.

“I don’t know how to read it. It looks like gibberish to me.” She remembered the burning sensation from Azrael’s mark.

“I think I know how you read it, but it’s not important. Not only does he have Father John, he has the book. So what do we do now?” Kalan looked at her.

They were all looking at her for the answers, and she wasn’t sure she had them. Oh, the book was easy enough. As much as she hated to, she’d have to go back to Hell and ask the Devil for his copy. What to do about Father John was a different story.

“Since we know whoever took him was either angel or demon, I have to believe we won’t find him until the kidnapper wants us to.”

Roger protested. “What if the stigmata comes tomorrow? Without the proper care, he could die.”

“We can only hope that God stops His torment of Father John for one week, or the kidnapper has enough compassion to take care of him.” She cupped Roger’s face in her hands. “That’s all I can do for now, Roger. I have to get the book or we’ll have more to worry about than a missing priest.”

Turning, she kissed Kalan, ignoring the angry glare from the bishop. “Keep searching. As soon as I’m back with the book, I’ll call you.”

Kalan nodded. "Be careful."

She touched the chaos mark on her neck. "I think I've got a 'get out of Hell free' card."

Closing her eyes, she gathered her power. She placed the palm of her hand over the brand and thought of Azrael.

* * * * *

"What do you want?"

Her eyes popped open when she heard the emotionless voice of Starrer's son. She was standing in the middle of the throne room. Only Azrael stood before her.

"Don't use my name often, Beltaine. For each time you do, I claim a piece of your soul."

Fear rolled over her in a cold wave. "I don't have a soul," was all she could think to say.

"Every breathing creature has a soul. Your soul is divided, demon and mortal. It fights for one side to become dominant."

"Why has no one told me?"

He shrugged. "It has never mattered before. But now events have been put into motion that demand your soul be balanced."

"What are you, some sort of scary Zen master? Are you going to teach me to balance my two souls?" She fell back on her smart mouth.

Azrael shook his head. "It's beyond my interest to show you how to do it. You'll learn or you'll die."

"Simple." She shook her head.

"Why did you call my name?"

"I need the book of spells the Devil has. The Veil must be repaired, and the other copy has disappeared." She hated having to ask.

“And so has the priest who had it. Interesting. What creature would be bold enough to kidnap a priest marked by the wounds of Christ?” Azrael’s gaze narrowed. “You may borrow the book, but don’t use it for anything other than repairing the Veil.”

“Are you sure the Devil will give it to me?”

In any other creature, it would be arrogance, but Azrael didn’t have any emotion in his voice when he said, “Tell him I told you to take it.”

“Okay.” She turned to leave. The total confidence Azrael had that a self-centered creature like the Devil would give her the book on his word alone shook her.

“Before you go to see the Devil, there is someone I think you need to talk to.” Azrael stopped her.

“Don’t bring my mother into this. I’ve had enough bad news for one day,” she groaned.

“It’s not your mother.” Azrael gestured to a shape cowering in the shadows behind him. “I believe it’s time for you to confront your father.”

Hissing, Beltaine crouched as her father materialized from the depths of the throne room. He shied away from Azrael, keeping his gaze downcast. It was the first time she had ever seen her father intimidated by someone. Of course, she didn’t blame him for being scared of Azrael. The shade turned its dark eyes on her, and a flame of hatred flared in them.

“He recognizes you, I see.” Azrael settled on the platform where the Devil’s throne rested.

“Are you going to watch us?” She didn’t take her eyes off her father. It didn’t pay to let her guard down.

“I certainly am. There is something compelling about a daughter confronting her father about all the bad things he did to her.”

“You’re a sick bastard,” she snapped. “Why would I need to confront him? Don’t you think killing him was confrontation enough?”

“No. There are unresolved issues between you. Mostly trying to figure out why he allowed you to live instead of smothering you as a child?” Azrael gestured to the phantom standing in front of her. “Here’s your chance to ask.”

Beltaine had thought she’d want the answer to that question, but now that she had the chance to ask it, she didn’t want to hear what he had to say. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Yes you do. Time has no existence here in Hell. Why would we allow it to mean anything when we torment these souls for eternity? When you return to your world, only a few minutes will have passed even if you spend a year here.”

She realized Azrael wasn’t going to let her off the hook. She would have to confront the one demon that had always haunted her. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped into her father’s personal space and made herself meet his gaze. It took all her courage and strength to stare at him. When she was younger, he would beat her until she was bloody for daring to look him in the eye like an equal.

“How dare you?” His breath streamed over her face like a breeze of fire. “You insult me by acting as if you were as good as me. You’re demon spawn and have no right to be alive.”

“Then why didn’t you kill me when I was a baby? Why allow me to live and suffer when you could have gotten rid of me at my most defenseless?” She spit the words at him.

“My life was destroyed because of you. There was no way I was going to allow you to die and leave me here to be miserable. If I hated my life, I wanted you to hate yours as well.”

“You succeeded beyond your wildest imagination, but didn’t you feel bad about abusing an innocent child?” She wanted to hit him, but he didn’t really have any corporeal shape.

“You were never innocent. It wasn’t like you were human anyway. You are a demon, no matter what any of these creatures say. You haven’t got a soul, and you’ll never be anything but a monster.” The shade’s gaze burned into her.

The confused child Beltaine used to be fought to be free of the cage she had shoved it in. She knew if she let the child go, she would end up begging her father for forgiveness. There wasn't enough nobility in her to give him the pleasure of knowing she still feared him.

"I'm not a monster. I've got friends and people who care for me. I'll never be the selfish creatures you and my mother are."

A cold laughter came from her father. "You'll always been a product of us. Your mother was a selfish whore who tricked me into having sex with her."

"Bullshit. She didn't have to trick you. You were more than willing to fuck her. Don't try to lie to me."

"I'm not lying. Don't you raise your voice to me." He stepped closer to her and lifted his hand.

"Or what? You'll hit me?" She smirked at him and reached out. "I killed you once. You can't do anything to me."

He shrunk from her touch. "Not true. I hurt you every time you think your demon side is evil. I've done my job."

Shit, he was right. All of her life she'd hated that part of herself. It was why she was so hard on her mother every time she saw her. Beltaine thought she had freed herself of his influence when she shot him, but somehow, like a parasite, he had wormed his way into her psyche. What a sneaky bastard. He knew what his abuse would do to her. She shot a glance over at Azrael.

"It comes down to the fact that you must accept both sides of your soul. The mortal part is selfish and arrogant, but holds the capacity to do great good. The demon part is just as selfish and arrogant, but it holds the part of you capable of great evil. You seem to have managed to control your different sides well so far, but there are things you need to learn. The repair of the Veil might rest upon you." Azrael shrugged.

“It’s like talking to a damn oracle,” she complained as she turned her gaze back on her father. Azrael’s comments caused more confusion than she could deal with at the moment. “I can’t forgive you, but I can forget you.”

“Easier said than done, girl. You haven’t forgotten me in the twelve years since you killed me. Do you really think I’ll disappear just like that because you want me to?” Her father growled at her.

“Maybe not, but I can start today and not worry about what you thought of me. You were a crazy bastard and deserve everything that is happening to you here. I’m done beating myself up because of your inferiority complex. Your inability to accept blame for your actions isn’t my problem any more.” She turned away from the phantom and addressed Azrael. “I’m going to get the book. If I have any trouble with the Devil, I’m sending him to you.”

“I’ll deal with him.” Azrael’s eyes rested on her father, and she could see the fear in her father’s eyes. It was satisfying for her to finally see him scared of someone else. She couldn’t blame him; Azrael scared the shit out of her.

* * * *

“You’re kidding me? You want my spell book.” The Devil stared at her with incredulous eyes.

Beltaine nodded. She’d been going around and around with him for ten minutes about the stupid book. She didn’t want to pull the Azrael card, but it looked like she was going to have to. The Devil turned to look at her mother, who stood snuggled close to him.

“Your daughter has the nerve to ask for the one thing that could destroy me.”

Her mother glared at her, but she refused to get upset by that. She had made a vow after speaking with her father that she would never allow her parents to affect her again.

“To be honest, I don’t need your permission. I already got it from Azrael.” A cocky grin crossed her face.

"You didn't?" Horrified shock graced the Devil's face.

"Yes, I did, and he told me to tell you he said I could have it."

The Devil scraped trembling hands through his hair. "You do know that asking Azrael for anything means you own him a favor in the future."

"I knew it. I'm pretty sure I can handle whatever he asks of me." It wasn't a boast. She felt she could deal with anything Azrael asked of her.

"Beltaine, dear, you don't understand who Azrael is. He'll take your soul if you allow him." Her mother reached out to touch her arm.

Stepping back, she realized she might have made the vow not to let her parents bother her anymore, but she wasn't going to get all touchy-feely with them. "I know that as well. He informed me when I showed up in the throne room. It's a little hard not to deal with him when he's marked me just like Father did." She lifted her hair to reveal the chaos mark.

"You poor thing." The Devil waved his hand and the book appeared. "I don't like the idea of you and that silly angel of yours having this, but if Azrael demands it, then I have no choice. Return it to me as soon as you can." He held it out to her, then snatched it back before she could grab it. "You are going to be fixing the Veil with it and nothing more?"

"I promised Azrael and I'll promise you, I won't do anything other than repair the barrier. I won't even read any of the other spells." Clenching her teeth, she tried to find patience.

"Oh, fine. Take it, then." The Devil tossed it to her and whirled around to take her mother in a passionate embrace. "Where were we when she interrupted?"

Beltaine closed her eyes and sent her body to the sanctuary in St. Benedict's. There was no way she wanted to see the Devil and her mother kissing. She gagged just thinking about it.

"Kalan," she called out. "I got the book."

Chapter Four

Kalan arrived to find Beltaine pacing in front of the altar. He genuflected to the cross, then touched her shoulder. Whirling, she plastered herself against him and kissed him.

His mind protested furiously. They were in a church for Heaven's sake. He shouldn't be allowing lust to overwhelm his control. His body thought the touch of hers was perfect. It wanted him to pull her closer and allow it to rub against her.

Her lips nipped at his, demanding entrance. He opened to tell her no, but her tongue slid in and he lost his voice. His arms slid around her waist to grasp her ass and tug her as tightly as possible to him. Climbing his body, she wrapped her legs around his waist and threaded her hands through his hair. Their tongues dueled and thrust, each trying to gain supremacy over the other. Her hips began to rock, pushing her mound hard into his erection. When the urge to strip her naked and take her on the sanctuary floor hit him, he pulled his mouth off hers and took a breath.

"We can't do this here, Beltaine."

She suckled the skin at the base of his neck for a second before she replied, "Why not?"

"For goodness' sake, Beltaine, it's a church." Indignation speared through his voice.

"So?"

“Have some respect for God even if you don’t have any for the church.” His tone was harsher than he’d planned.

She dropped out of his arms and put her hands on her hips. Glaring at him, she said, “I have a lot of respect for God. I just don’t think He’s petty enough to worry about where you and I have sex, but if you have a problem, then come with me.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward Father Paul’s office. “Where are we going?” he inquired as he stumbled along behind her.

“We’re going somewhere more private.” She let him get ahead of her and then pushed him through the doorway.

He tripped over the threshold. Catching himself on the edge of the desk, he turned in time to see Beltaine shut and lock the door behind her. *I might be in trouble here*, he thought as she stalked him. Her gaze pinned him and he couldn’t find the determination to move.

“What’s gotten into you?” Not that he minded or anything, but he wanted to know why she felt the need to jump him in a church.

“I had a very rough time in Hell, and I need to release some energy.”

Her smile was wicked, and his cock twitched at the thought of her mouth wrapped around it.

“We really can’t do that here. This is a priest’s office.” Kalan knew his protest was weak. What male in his right mind would refuse to take what she was offering quite willingly?

“Sit down.” Her gesture towards the leather chair behind the desk was jerky.

“Yes, ma’am.” Easing around the corner of the desk, he stayed facing her. His hand hit the arm of the chair, and he flopped down in it.

Leaning over him, she rested her hands on the arms and effectively blocked him in. Her demon blood was heating, he could tell by the flare of red in her eyes and the hint of fangs in her smile.

“Should I strip first?” Encouraging her probably wasn’t a smart thing to do, but he found there was a perverse need to give in to her.

“Yes.” She backed off and sat on the desk. Crossing her legs at the ankles, she motioned for him to stand up. “Take it off and do it slowly.”

Rising to his feet, a part of him wondered at the sudden willingness he had to obey her. The other part of him seemed to be controlled by his cock, and it told him to hurry. It wanted to be buried deep in her as soon as possible.

He unhooked his sword and laid it on the cabinet next to the desk. Sliding his vest from his shoulders, he ran his hands over his chest and whispered his nails over his nipples. A shot of pleasure bolted through him. He never thought he’d get excited by his own touch. Beltaine’s eyes followed his hands as he trailed them to his waistband. Sucking in his stomach, he unbuttoned his pants and eased the zipper down, making sure not to catch anything in the metal.

She drew her breath in a hiss as the blunt head of his cock sprang out from the leather. It felt like her gaze was burning brands into his skin. The rough palms of his hands scraped over the flesh at his hips while he pushed his pants down his thighs. He bowed over to take his boots off. Then with a flourish, he stood naked in front of her.

On every spot her eyes landed, a tingling started, until his nerve endings were strung tight. He longed to beg her to touch him. His muscles trembled with the need to run his hands over her, but he managed to control them.

“Touch yourself.”

Beltaine’s order shocked and embarrassed Kalan. He’d never done anything like that, but even while he thought that, his hand fisted his shaft. The thumb of his other hand

swiped the pre-cum off the head of his cock, and he lifted it to her lips. The tip of her tongue shot out to lick the pad clean. Humming, she winked at him.

“Tasty. Now undress me.”

This order he could handle. Grabbing the neck of her tank top in his fists, he ripped it from her. Her firm breasts glistened in the dim lighting of the office. He reached out to pinch her nipples in his fingers. She slapped his hands away.

“No touching. Just get me naked.”

He frowned but did what she told him to do. Kneeling, he pulled her boots and pants off at the same time. He ran his hands up her legs to her knees and pushed her thighs apart. When he would have leaned in to taste her pussy, she thrust him away.

“Go sit down and stroke your cock.”

“Why?” He sat down but didn’t touch himself. He wasn’t sure what she was trying to prove.

“Because I want to watch you pleasure yourself. Haven’t you ever masturbated before?”

Shaking his head, he stared at her as she slid her hand over her stomach and between her legs. She spread her thighs wide so he could see what she was doing. His mouth dropped open as her fingers slipped into her pussy and came out glistening.

Holy shit. Without thought, his hand stroked his cock and spread the pearly liquid dripping from the slit in the head down the length of his shaft. He tightened his grip, thinking about how much he enjoyed it when Beltaine had fisted him firmly. Although his hand was busy jerking himself off, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

With her head tipped back and her eyes half closed, she looked wanton, sprawled over the priest’s desk. His rhythm slowed while hers sped up. Her fingers speared into her pussy while she rubbed the heel of her hand against her clit. Moans came from her throat. He bit his lip to keep from groaning with her. When her hips started rocking to take her fingers, he started moving his hips as well.

He splayed his thighs wider and his other hand crept down to cup his balls. He fondled them as he fucked his hand. His climax gathered at the base of his spine, and he knew it would be soon. His grip tightened to the point of pain, but he didn't stop. Beltaine threw back her head and cried out as her body rippled with her orgasm.

Watching her pleasure herself was one of the most erotic things Kalan had seen in his life. His back arched as his climax shot through him. Wet warmth covered his hands and stomach. A metallic taste exploded in his mouth as he bit his lip to keep from crying out.

A chuckle from the desk drew him back to himself. He opened his eyes to see Beltaine staring at him with a smile on her face.

"So did you enjoy jerking off?" Beltaine clothed them with a lazy wave of her hand.

She climbed off the desk and straightened the papers, then headed to unlock the door. Kalan watched her from under heavy lids. He smiled and nodded.

"I did, but I can't believe you talked me into doing it here." He laughed. "You press your body against me and all my good sense goes out the window."

Strolling back to him, she sat on his lap. She wiggled around to get comfortable and made sure to rub her ass over his cock.

"Beltaine," he growled.

She kissed him. "I got the book. We'll have to find the spell soon."

"I didn't think the Devil would give it to you." He was mildly surprised to see the book in her hand.

"He wasn't going to but Azrael forced him to." She couldn't stop the shiver racing down her spine.

"The more you tell me about Azrael, the less I want to meet him." Kalan wrapped her in the warm strength of his arms. She sighed.

"I hope you never meet him. Now let's start looking for the repair spell."

* * * * *

They'd been reading for several minutes when the door burst open and Father Paul raced in. Kalan felt his cheeks flush. Embarrassed, he couldn't meet the priest's gaze. *Thank God, he didn't come in earlier.* The thought rushed through his mind.

Beltaine touched his cheek and grinned. "You're going to have to get past it or you'll never be able to look him in the eyes." She kissed him and then turned to Father Paul. "What's got you all worked up?"

"There's a demon in the sanctuary," the priest stammered and pointed back out the door.

"Really?" Beltaine sounded intrigued instead of worried.

Kalan let her climb to her feet. He shook his head when she offered him the Devil's spell book. There wasn't any way he was touching it. Following her, he was surprised to see Azubah perched on the back of one of the pews. The small demon smiled at them while the other priests fluttered around, trying to shoo it away.

"Father Paul, Azubah has been working with us. It won't bother anything, so tell your fellow priests to get out of here," Beltaine ordered the priest.

Father Paul nodded and started ushering the others out. Kalan found it interesting that the priest accepted Beltaine and was more likely to listen to her than anyone else.

Beltaine turned to the demon. "What's the problem?"

"Oh, we've got a huge problem. Tariq has crossed over." Azubah shifted, its claws leaving scorch marks in the wood.

"Shit. That is seriously bad news." She stalked over to the pew and flung herself down.

"Who's Tariq?" Kalan could tell that they both were troubled.

"He's a Higher Lord of Hell. There's a hierarchy within the demon world, especially if an invasion is about to happen. First, the vampires come. They're the spies for the Horde.

Usually, werewolves cross next. Those dogs scout things out. You've met the banshee who cries out a warning about the coming of the Horde." She stopped to take a breath.

Azubah picked up the explanation. "Loosely translated, Tariq means 'he who pounds on the door.' He's the first member of the Horde and first Higher Lord to cross over. He goes out among mortals and tries to find the ones who would welcome the demons. He's at a small club in downtown Ericksberg."

"Which one?" Beltaine jumped to her feet.

"The Red Tie Club," Azubah informed her.

"Why would he go there?" She didn't wait for an answer as she headed out of the church.

"How does she know where it is?" Kalan asked the demon as they followed her.

"I would assume she's been there before." The demon shrugged.

Chapter Five

They skidded to a stop in front of the club. It was eerily silent. Usually the doors of the club were open and dance music poured from the inside. The line to be admitted to the club should have snaked down the block, but no one stood there.

“Let’s go.” Beltaine gestured for Kalan to follow her.

“I’ll stay out here,” Azubah squeaked.

“I wouldn’t expect anything else from you.”

She pushed the door open and was struck again by the void of noise. All the men in the club stared towards the stage where two beings faced off. She recognized the tall, thin blonde. She should have known Jasper would be there. Tariq stood a foot taller and was much heavier. The demon’s red eyes gleamed with malicious delight. He seemed to think he’d found the perfect spot to start his gathering of power.

Kalan ran into her as she stopped. Steadying him, she pointed to the two figures and said, “I guess we shouldn’t have been worried.”

A hiss burned in her ear. Looking up, she saw confusion skate over Kalan’s face as he realized that Jasper was the angel facing the Higher Lord.

“We should help him.” Kalan started to push his way through the crowd.

Grabbing him, she turned him back towards the entrance. “We’ve got other problems to take care of.”

“But he’s facing a Higher Lord of Hell,” he protested, trying to twist away from her.

“At the moment, Jasper’s perfectly capable of handling him. Tariq still doesn’t have a lot of power. The best way to help Jasper is to fix the Veil.”

“He’ll get hurt.”

She pulled the angel to a stop and forced him to look at her. “Listen to me. There’s no love lost between you and Jasper. He wouldn’t appreciate you barging in to save him. He’s a member of the Host, Kalan. Let him do his job.”

He still didn’t look convinced, so she shoved him outside. Before the door shut, she glanced back over her shoulder and saw Jasper looking at her. The angel nodded and winked. She didn’t feel bad about leaving him.

* * * * *

When they got back to St. Benedict’s, Roger was waiting for them with a bloody bandage wrapped around his hand.

“What happened?” She glanced at the gauze around his wrist and raised an eyebrow.

“I got bit by some crazy dog while I was searching for Father John. It’s nothing. We haven’t found him yet. What’s going on here?” He dismissed the wound.

“A crazy dog, huh?” She pulled the bandage off.

A putrid smell rose from the wound. The others gagged as she ran her fingers over the red, jagged edges of the tear.

“It shouldn’t be infected already.” Roger covered his nose.

“Breathe through your mouth. It’ll go bad quick if it was a werewolf bite. Which it seems it was.”

“Is Roger going to turn into a werewolf?” Father Paul asked.

“Why do you ask?” She allowed a small amount of power to seep from her fingers. Roger hissed, and she knew the healing was burning away the infection.

“Isn’t that how werewolves are made? The legends speak of people getting bitten and turning at the next full moon.”

Shaking her head, she sealed the wound. “A bunch of bullshit passed on by ignorant peasants. Werewolves are born, not made. It’s in the DNA, not the saliva.” She winked at Roger. “But if you get an urge to howl at the moon, let me know. I’ll chain you up and feed you while you’re a wolf man.”

“It’s not something to joke about.” Kalan frowned at her.

“If you can’t laugh at something like this, angel boy, you’ll be crying all the time.” She handed the book to Roger. “You gentlemen go through this and find the spell. I need to go and replenish my power.”

Stopping at the door, she turned to see the trio staring after her. She hoped they’d find the spell before any other demons crossed over. She might have a chance against one or two of them, but if there were more demons than that, she’d never be able to defeat them, even with Kalan’s help.

Sending up a little prayer for help in case God was listening, she set out for the potter’s field.

* * * * *

Beltaine entered the small potter’s field at the outskirts of Ericksberg. She had been in this cemetery before, but a strong spiritual presence had unnerved her enough that she chose to use other sites around the village. The power boost she got from this particular place outweighed the nervousness she’d felt just by stepping inside the gate.

Settling down on a boulder in the middle of the field, she closed her eyes and lowered the walls around her power. She sent tendrils out to collect what the souls were willing to give her. A surge of energy threatened to overwhelm her. She struggled to master it.

“Finally, you came back. I’ve been waiting.” A voice startled her.

Opening her eyes, she saw a specter standing in front of her. A weak wave came from the spirit, and Beltaine realized that this soul was the source of her nervousness.

“If I’d known you were waiting, I’d have called.”

“How rude. Your parents certainly didn’t teach you manners.” The phantom sounded female.

“My father did the best he could to beat them into me.” Beltaine managed to keep the other lines of power open to build her reserves.

“He should have tried harder.”

“Maybe, but since I killed him, he didn’t have a chance.” She glared at the soul. “What the hell do you want?”

“Revenge. I want revenge on the people who put me in here.” The spirit’s eyes blazed with hatred.

“Revenge isn’t my thing, lady. You’ll have to find someone else.”

“But you’re perfect. You’ve got tons of power, and you wouldn’t be intimidated by those hypocrites.” The woman was so angry, she was almost foaming at the mouth.

“What set of hypocrites are you talking about?” Curiosity had always been a problem for Beltaine.

“The Board and the men who run the church.”

“Now wait a minute, not all of the priests are hypocrites. Some of them are very Godly men.” Beltaine thought about the priests she knew. “You’re right about the Board, though.”

“The men who run the church killed me, not those silly priests of yours. The Board stood by and let them because I couldn’t pay for mercy.” The woman spat on the ground.

“Why should that bother me? It’s your problem, not mine.”

“Someone on the board and in the church is helping the being who wants the Veil ripped.”

Beltaine shot to her feet. Letting go of the tendrils, she blocked off her power. “How do you know this?”

“When I have enough power stored, I can travel through the world. I’ve gone to the City. I’ve seen your conspirators meeting. I can give you their names.” The woman had stepped back when Beltaine got to her feet.

“What else will you give me? Because if I wanted to, I could force you to give them to me without promising anything to you.”

Maybe she was crazy for considering going into the revenge business for a silly soul, but the thought that the board and the church helped to bring about the end of Earth and Hell made her furious.

“I’ll give you my power. You’re going to need more than you have now. Take all of mine. Just promise you will think of helping me,” the woman bargained.

Beltaine inspected the woman with narrowed eyes. There were no warning signs telling here this was a double cross. The woman was right. Repairing the Veil would take all of her power. “Okay. Give me the names, and let me take your power. I can’t promise anything, but I might be able to help you.”

She reached out and took the woman’s hand. Power poured over her walls as if they weren’t there. The energy was volatile and seething with rage. She struggled to keep it under control. Minutes later, she was vibrating with the overflowing coffers of power she had.

The woman had faded as she was drained. Before Beltaine let her go, she gave her the names. “Misha St. Largent and the Bishop of the City.”

Fuck. She knew those two self-absorbed bastards would try to secure their own survival. It would explain why the bishop hadn't seemed concerned about Father John. The asshole knew exactly what had happened to the priest.

"Thank you," Beltaine said to the spirit.

"The best way to thank me is by dealing with those two. Most of the board members are oblivious to what goes on around them. It's those two who actively go out and hurt people for their own gain." The last of the woman's power expired, and she disappeared.

"Trust me. I'll make them pay," Beltaine vowed to the night air.

Chapter Six

The door slammed back against the wall. The three men looked up in surprise as Beltaine stalked in. Stopping, she placed her hands on her hips and glared at them.

“People suck,” she announced.

Kalan could see she was strung tight. “You’re just now figuring this out?” His tone was mild.

“Shut up. I’ve always known that most of them aren’t worth my time or trouble, but I’ve decided it would suit me just fine if two of them died.”

“That’s rather harsh.” He wondered what had happened at the cemetery to make her so upset.

“It was bad enough the bitch came here and tried to seduce you. I scared her, and I was willing to leave her alone after that, but she better get ready to hide.” Beltaine bared her fangs in a snarl.

Ah, Misha St. Largent. “What did she do? I thought you were going to a cemetery.”

“I did.” She paced in front of the desk he was sitting at.

Father Paul and Roger stayed quiet, and Kalan thought he should’ve keep his mouth shut as well, but since he’d already spoken, he might as well keep going.

“Did she bother you there?”

“Do you know what she’s doing?” Beltaine threw her hands up in the air.

“Not a clue.”

She shot him a glance. He ducked his head to hide his smile.

“She’s working with the bastard trying to start a war. That bitch and our sanctimonious prick of a bishop are padding their pockets with our lives.” She looked at him as if she were daring him to argue with her.

“How do you know that?” He didn’t really doubt her, but he couldn’t figure out how she knew the information.

“There was a spirit in the potter’s field I went to. She wants revenge against St. Largent and the bishop. When her power is at its strongest, she can travel from her gravesite. She’s seen them meeting and overheard them talking about this whole thing.” Anger poured off her.

“Who’s the mastermind behind this whole thing, then?”

“She could never see him. He had power, and it obscured her view. Damn, it has to be either the master or the commander.”

Kalan protested, “How can you think the commander would do something like this?”

She held up two fingers. “There are only two people besides God and the Devil with the kind of power this jerk has. I know the Devil has no interest in ruling earth, and we both know God wouldn’t take this roundabout way of getting rid of mortals and demons. The best thing about God is how straightforward He is.” She shook her head. “The commander and the master use any means necessary to achieve their goals, even to the extent of killing people to succeed.”

Kalan believed that of the master, but he had a difficult time reconciling her view of the commander with his. “I think your view of both of them is tainted by your upbringing. You have a hard time giving anyone the benefit of the doubt.”

"I gave you the benefit of the doubt by allowing you to work with me." She was indignant, but she seemed willing to think about it. "You might be right, but I can't think of anyone else who has the power to hide himself from all of us like this person does."

"We found it." Roger's excited shout drew them away from the argument they were about to have.

* * * * *

Kalan and Beltaine joined the priests by the couch the men were sitting on. Father Paul held the book out to her and pointed.

"How to Repair the Veil between Earth and Hell," she read out loud. That was straightforward enough. She didn't take it. Gesturing for the priest to read the spell, she paced. Kalan mirrored her movements on the other side of the couch.

"The Veil hides the secrets of Hell from mortals and keeps demons safe. If the barrier is breached or torn, two people must repair the holes." Father Paul's voice shook.

"I'm sure we can find two people easily enough," she stated.

"These two people must trust each other with their lives," Roger read the next sentence.

"That might cause a problem." She knew such complete trust was so rare as to be non-existent.

Father Paul glanced at her, then over to Kalan. The look on the priest's face said she wasn't going to like what he had to say next. "Since the Veil was created using the power of Heaven and Hell, so the two who attempt to repair it must be from both worlds."

She jerked the book from Father Paul's hands and swore when she re-read the sentence. "Shit. If this doesn't take the cake. You and I are the only two creatures on the face of this earth who can do it." She read the rest of the spell. "The Hell creature must stand on that side of the Veil. The Heavenly creature must stay on the Earth side. Placing their hands

palms together with the barrier between them, they must connect their powers to rebuild the Veil.”

Shutting the book with a thud, she headed out of the room. She didn’t check to see if any of the trio was following her. She just assumed they were.

“Where are we going?” Kalan asked as they stopped in front of the secret door.

“We’re going to fix the Veil. There’s no big ritual needed or sacrifice to slaughter. It’s simple. We combine our powers and the Veil’s good as new. Our bodies merge well, so why shouldn’t our powers?”

Kalan stayed quiet while they made their way down to the altar room in the catacombs. His breath hitched, and she knew he was feeling the oppression from the shimmering wall. Except it didn’t seem to gleam as brightly. Large holes were scattered around it, including the one Tariq must have punched in order to come through.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself to cross over into Hell. Before she took a step, she was grabbed, and Kalan pulled her into his arms. His mouth crushed down on hers. He seemed to be pouring all his anger, fear, and fondness for her into the kiss. There might even have been love in the touch of his tongue against hers, but she wasn’t willing to think about that yet.

He let her go and stepped back. Roger came up to wish her good luck.

“If you don’t trust him completely, you could die. The power you expel will ricochet back into you and destroy you. Are you willing to risk it?” he asked her softly.

She looked up into a pair of blue eyes she knew as well as her own. “It would suck if it happened, Roger, but I’ve got to take the chance. Take care of him for me.” Beltaine nodded towards Kalan.

“Of course, I will.” Roger hugged her.

She took the spell book with her as she crossed over. She might as well return it while she was there. Stepping through the Veil, she blinked at the darkness that greeted her. Was her subconscious already imagining the nothingness Hell would become if it was destroyed?

She turned and saw Kalan watching her through the filmy barrier. She could see the worry on the surface of his gaze. Walking back towards the Veil, she lifted her hand and placed it against his. Electricity rippled through her and the Veil, then poured into him. She wanted to close her eyes and absorb the power rushing in and out of her.

“Open your eyes. You must be looking at him at all times.”

Her eyes popped open, and she turned to see Azrael standing beside her.

“Don’t look at me. Share your soul with the angel. If you truly wish the Veil to be repaired, you must do all you can to fix it.”

Beltaine turned her eyes back to Kalan’s gaze. She found herself swimming in a warm sea of blue. Feelings of safety and love enfolded her. Gasping, she was swamped by those emotions.

She jerked her hand away. Kalan shouted something she couldn’t hear over the rushing in her ears. Cold fingers gripped her chin and lifted her head. Her watering eyes met Azrael’s infinite dark stare. The emotions had driven her to her knees.

“Why did you pull away?” he asked.

“I was drowning,” she said. Her breath burst from her.

“Drowning? How?”

“I looked in his eyes and it was like I fell into a sea of blue. There were all these emotions of safety and love. I was drowning in them.”

“And this is a bad thing?”

Azrael’s cold questioning was making her angry. “Yes, it’s a bad thing because it’s not real. It’s an illusion.” She gestured to where the angel was standing on the other side of the Veil. “He could never love me.”

“Ah, here’s the true test of your faith, Beltaine.” Azrael let go of her chin and moved away.

“Faith? I have faith. It doesn’t need to be tested.” She climbed to her feet and faced the creature.

“You have faith in the evilness of mortals, angels, and demons alike. You have faith that someone will hurt you for their own personal reasons.”

“Can you blame me? I’ve had plenty of examples of people doing that to me.” She wasn’t sure what his point was.

“Yes, you have, but you have also had examples of people loving you without any thought of what it could do for them. And in fact, their love of you has done nothing but gotten them in trouble.” Azrael pointed to where Roger stood, trying to stop Kalan from coming across the Veil.

She shook her head at Kalan, hoping the angel understood that she could deal with Azrael. She thought about all the trouble Roger had gotten into from the church because of his friendship with her. Yet he never once walked away from her. There had been times when he should have run the other direction. She thought on that night twelve years ago when she had arrived at Roger’s door covered in blood. He was seventeen and about to start seminary. He never blamed her for killing her father. He helped her make it look like a suicide. Beltaine had never been angry at him for telling Father John. She knew the burden of her crime was heavy to bear.

“I know he loves me,” she admitted.

“You can believe the priest loves you, yet you don’t believe the angel can. Tell me why.”

She studied Kalan through the Veil. His blue eyes and superior smile had become as familiar to her as her own reflection. She’d mapped every dip and plane on his body.

“He’s perfect. No one that perfect could love a demon spawn like me,” she said.

“That’s wrong,” Azrael smirked.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kalan isn’t perfect. If he was, he’d never have allowed you to touch him, much less fuck him. He would’ve kept his mind closed to your possibilities. Yet he didn’t. His flawed perfection gives him the strength to see beyond your demon heritage to the soul below.” The creature tapped her chest. “He risks more than death to be with you. He risks banishment from the presence of God. For an angel, that is a fate worse than death.”

Her gaze caught and held on Kalan’s lips. He was saying something over and over. She moved closer to the Veil to read what he was saying.

“I love you” was what he kept repeating. He reached out a hand to her.

Their palms met on the barrier, and a shock raced through her.

“Now is the time to believe, Beltaine. You’ve trusted him with your body and your life. Maybe it’s time to trust him with your soul.” Azrael’s voice faded as she focused on Kalan.

When she fell into that sea of warmth again, she didn’t panic. She thought back through the week they’d known each other. There had been several times Kalan could’ve killed her or gotten rid of her somehow. He had judged her from the first, but his mind had opened to the truth. His arms had held her safe when she needed a shelter and had given her freedom when she needed to fly.

Azrael was right, as much as she hated to admit it. She needed to find the courage to believe an angel could love a terribly broken demon spawn like her.

It was hard taking that first step towards giving her heart away. She gave her body away all the time, but there was no danger in that. Nothing on her body would be permanently damaged if it was broken, but she’d never heal her heart.

A flare of power brought Beltaine’s mind back to the business at hand. *Screw this maudlin bullshit*, she thought. *You’re big enough to handle any problems if it doesn’t work out.*

“I love you.” She spoke the words out loud.

The energy was like getting struck by lightning. In a blinding instant, Kalan’s pure golden power flooded her as her grey magic flowed into him. The spot where their palms met began to shimmer. The Veil started to heal itself.

Chapter Seven

Half the tears were gone when Beltaine was ripped away from the barrier. She cried out as the power started to backlash. It felt as if she were burning from the inside out. Fighting through the pain, she looked up to see the commander standing over her, his blue eyes blazing with fury.

“I won’t let a demon-spawned bastard and a bewitched angel destroy everything I’ve worked hard to do.”

She wasn’t sure if she could even speak. The pain made her head pound as if it were going to explode. “Why?” she forced out.

He drew his sword and raised her chin with the tip of the blade. “You wouldn’t understand.”

She wished she had the strength to wipe the smug smile off his face.

“Maybe I would.” Kalan pushed through the barrier. The cost the Veil extracted showed on the sweat on his brow and the grimace of pain he wore. He forced the sword away from her and faced his commander.

She wanted to scream at Kalan to go back to the other side. She could see that the commander had gone off some edge.

“You are my greatest disappointment. I chose you to go on this mission because I thought your inflexibility and habit of seeing things in black and white would block you from achieving anything. I figured you would be too busy fighting her that you would never see what I was doing. Instead you screwed her and fell in love.” The commander’s scorn dripped from his words.

Beltaine could see Kalan’s hurt grow with each comment by the commander. There was nothing she could do except climb to her feet. Swaying, she stood beside Kalan, and with a defiant lift of her chin, she challenged the commander.

“So you’ve decided not to let your lover fight your battle for you. How brave, but foolish. You have no hope of defeating me.” The commander chuckled.

He was right and she knew it. Even with what combined powers they had left, they wouldn’t be able to stop the creature from killing them.

“Maybe we can’t, but I’m willing to die trying,” Kalan said.

Beltaine wasn’t sure she was as willing, but she’d back Kalan up. For one of the few times in her life, she sent a prayer to God for someone to help them.

“Why?” The master strolled out of the darkness. “If you’ve gone to all this trouble to start a war, the least you can do is tell us why.” His tone was casual, but his red eyes stared steadily at the commander.

The angel focused on the master, allowing Beltaine and Kalan to relax slightly. She wondered if the master was the answer to her prayer, but she wasn’t going to question it if he was.

“Why? Why would I want to destroy weak mortals and useless demons?” The commander shrugged with a harsh laugh. “Power. It all comes down to power.”

“Power. You want more power than you already have. How would that be possible?” Kalan spoke up.

Beltaine wanted to slap her hand over his mouth to keep him quiet. She didn't want the commander's attention drawn back to them.

"God's attention is divided. His love for mortals makes Him weak. If there were no mortals, He could focus on His angels. On those beings who have stuck by Him and never questioned Him. It isn't right that mortals should be regarded more highly than angels." The commander gestured wildly, almost hitting Beltaine with his sword.

"But why try to destroy demons? The Father has chosen to ignore us. We're not bothering you or taking power from you," the master pointed out.

"You should have been destroyed when you chose to leave Heaven. He showed you mercy. By causing the Veil to fall, I can rectify that mistake."

"God made a mistake? How is that possible when He's perfect? Who are you to determine what decision is a mistake or not?" The master moved a step away from where she and Kalan stood. He seemed to be drawing the commander's attention from them.

"I know what I've seen. He pushes angels aside as if we were nothing. He lavishes extraordinary amounts of love and energy on mortals and demons. With all of you gone, angels would be the most important beings and I would be at God's right hand. Only He would be more powerful than I."

She could see the madness filling the commander's eyes, and for the first time, she knew what insanity looked like.

"So it doesn't matter how many people you destroy on this quest of yours. Innocent people who have never bothered you. Angels are supposed to be guardians of mortals. Your duty is to take care of them, no matter what." The master's face distorted into a frown of disgust.

"I should protect weak mortals who've never shown any interest in thanking God for anything? When bad events happen, they are quick to scream at God for not being there for

them. Yet when good things occur, they thank themselves and each other, but never God. They don't deserve to exist."

Beltaine couldn't believe what she was hearing. Who would've thought the Commander of the Host would condone slaughtering millions of people? She knew he had been on the edge, but she'd never imagined he would turn evil.

"And everyone believes I'm the evil brother." The master's eyes held a touch of sorrow.

"What?" Both she and Kalan reacted to that statement.

"Yes, the commander and I are brothers."

"Used-to-be brothers. I stopped thinking of you as related to me when you chose to leave Heaven and turn your back on God," the commander informed the demon.

"I was known as Rasul, the prophet. It was my job to deliver messages to mortals blessed by God. It was a thankless job because most of the mortals chose to ignore what I was telling them. They wanted to hear something different." The master shrugged. "I chose to leave Heaven because I was getting tired of the whining. It's easier as the master. People fear me and that makes them tend to listen to me when I talk to them." He shot a glance at Beltaine. "Well, most mortals anyway."

She shrugged. She never listened to anyone, so it didn't really matter what he'd tried to tell her. "And the commander?" she couldn't help but ask.

The angel hissed and lunged at the master. Dodging him easily, the master wound up farther away from Kalan and her. She knew that was deliberate.

"The commander was once known as Husam, the sword. He was one of the best warriors the Host has ever had. True and honest, he never questioned God or His orders. Husam had my respect for never losing faith or love for the Father." The master stared at the commander. "I don't know you. You aren't the angel Husam. You have become more of a demon than I could ever dream of being."

The commander attacked, and a sword appeared in the master's hand. Beltaine and Kalan crouched, trying to stay out of the way. Who would have thought the first battle between the commander and the master would be over the fate of the world? And that the master was the one trying to save it.

Each blow shook the ground. They were equals in strength and skill, so there were no advantages for either one. The master drew first blood, then the commander retaliated. A thin scratch traced its way down the demon's cheek. He stepped back and touched his fingers to the blood seeping from the wound. Touching the tips to his tongue, he growled at the commander. He took a sweeping swing that the commander dodged.

The battle raged on, but neither side was gaining any advantage. Beltaine noticed that the master had had several opportunities to disarm the commander, but for some reason had never taken them. He didn't seem to be capable of harming his brother. The commander seemed determined to destroy the master. One well-timed blow sliced across the master's chest causing him to drop his sword. Falling to his knees, the master clasped his hands to the wound and looked up at his brother.

"This is what you've wanted, Hasum. Get it over with quickly." The master didn't beg. He seemed resigned to his fate.

"No." Kalan jumped to his feet and blocked the commander's sword.

Amazement flashed in the eyes of the commander and the master. An angel of the Host protecting a demon was unheard of. It wasn't a fair fight. Kalan was weak from being drained of power by the Veil. On the third blow of the commander's sword, Kalan's broke in two, and he jumped back to avoid being sliced. A cut opened in his skin from neck to stomach. Kalan cried out as he folded to the ground.

Beltaine couldn't believe it. She didn't have a weapon to fight with, and she couldn't use the swords. The commander's weapon was coming down again. This time to end Kalan's life.

“No,” she screamed as she threw her body sideways to put a barrier between Kalan and the sword.

The shock of the blade entering her shoulder made her lose her breath. Gasping, she grasped the sword with her hands, trying to pull it out. Pain exploded from her palms and her chest.

Standing in front of her, the commander grinned at her. “Finally, you’ve come to the end of my patience.” He shoved the metal deeper into her.

Her legs lost their strength, and if not for the sword, she would have fallen. As her vision faded to black, a sound like a thousand wings filled the air around them. The sword tore from her body and flew several feet away. She knelt beside Kalan and pressed her hand against her wound. The blood made her hand slick.

Shaking her head, she cleared her vision. The master was crouched next to her. She caught his gaze and raised her eyebrows. He shook his head, letting her know he had no idea what was happening.

A voice like thunder boomed over them. “You dare to touch the one being marked by God and me. The one being you were ordered not to harm.”

Azrael appeared. Only it wasn’t the creature she’d seen before. Gone was any resemblance to Starrer’s son. In his place was a being almost too terrible to look upon.

Transparent skin allowed everyone to see the bones under it. His waist-length hair was done in millions of braids trimmed with ebony beads. Taller than the commander, he wore his muscles as a set of armor covered in black leather. A wind blew in gusts as he beat the large, obsidian-colored feathered wings sprouting from his shoulders. Fluttering, the wings showed Azrael’s agitation.

“Azrael.” The commander’s voice shook.

“Hasum dares to attack another angel and the master who, at one time, was his brother. The Commander of the Host of Heaven dares to believe he is worthy of being second to the Creator in power.”

Azrael stalked to where the angel cowered. The dark creature glared down at him. One feather from Azrael’s wings brushed over Kalan. Beltaine gasped as she watched the wound in Kalan’s chest heal. The master was already on his feet, but stayed out of the way.

“Azrael, can’t you see why I had to do this? Mortal weaknesses make God vulnerable, and the mercy He showed demons proves He’s become soft.” The commander knelt before Azrael.

A shiver of awe raced down Beltaine’s spine. She never thought she’d see the day when the commander would kneel before anyone. What sort of creature was Azrael?

“All I see is a creature who believes himself better than God. Isn’t that the fault you have always despised in the Devil? Yet you’ve become worse than he. He never killed innocents for his own selfish wishes. You would condemn every mortal to death by the fiery weapons of the Host. Compassion doesn’t make God weak. It shows His strength and willingness to give each person another chance. You judge too harshly, and that shows your own weakness.” Azrael reached a hand towards the commander.

“Weakness? I have no weakness. My strength made me the commander. My intelligence brought Hell and Earth to their knees.” The angel boasted even as he shrank from the creature.

“Arrogance is a weakness because you don’t understand the consequences of your actions.” Azrael gripped the commander by the nape of the neck and drew him to his feet.

“Consequences? There can’t be consequences when I was only doing what was right. It is my right. I’ve stood beside Him through the rebellion and everything. Where is my reward? That’s all I’m asking for, to be rewarded for my service.” The commander struggled against Azrael’s hold.

“Your reward? Your reward for bringing us to the brink of annihilation is your own death,” Azrael said as he shook the angel as if he were a rag doll.

“But that’s not fair. I’m not like mortals or demons. I’m an angel. Where is the mercy for me?” the commander protested.

“Are you sorry for what you did? Do you want to ask God’s forgiveness?” Azrael stared into the blue eyes of the commander as he asked the questions.

“Forgiveness for what? I did what I thought was right. You’re jealous because you didn’t think of it first.” The commander pouted like a petulant child.

There was a slight look of surprise on Azrael’s face. “You do know who you’re talking to, right?”

“I know who you are, but I still think you’re jealous of me. You’ve always been upset because I’m the commander.” He took a swing at Azrael.

Beltaine felt her mouth drop open. She could see that the commander had lost it. No one in their right mind would antagonize Azrael. Kalan moved closer to her and held a pad of material to her shoulder. She realized he must have conjured it up while she had been caught up in the drama going on before them. She winced as he applied pressure to try and stop the bleeding.

“Jealousy isn’t an emotion I have any knowledge of, Hasum, but it is something you’ve held close to your heart for centuries. It’s time for you to embrace your own death.” Azrael leaned forward.

The commander screamed and tried to push the creature away. There was no fighting Azrael as he wrapped his wings around the angel in his hands and placed a kiss on the commander’s lips. A blinding light flashed, causing the trio to cover their eyes.

Chapter Eight

When the light disappeared, they opened their eyes to see Azrael standing in front of them. There was a sadness in his eyes that was out of place in the otherwise emotionless face. He gestured for Beltaine and Kalan to stand. She leaned on her angel as he helped her to her feet. One pale finger traced a circle over her wound, and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. The pain was worse than when she was stabbed. A red, odd M-shaped scar rose where the wound had been.

“You and your angel must finish repairing the Veil. There will be no further interference from anyone.” Azrael turned to leave.

“Wait. Who are you?” Beltaine wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer, but she had to ask.

“I’m the angel of death. The one creature every mortal, demon, or angel sees before they die. I am the one creature no one can escape, and the one being they all spend their lifetimes trying to avoid. Do your job.” Azrael disappeared.

“He’s the creepiest being in Hell,” the master muttered. The demon started to walk away.

“Hold on,” Beltaine said. She held out the Devil’s book. “Can you make sure the Devil gets this? Also, thanks.”

“I’ll make sure it gets returned to him. Thanks for what?” The master took the book.

“For coming to help us.”

“I wasn’t coming to help you. I came to ensure you didn’t fail. I had no interest in meeting Azrael any sooner than I had to. The kiss of death isn’t sweet, and if I can avoid it, I will.” The master disappeared as well.

“I should have known he didn’t do it out of the goodness of his heart,” she muttered.

“He’s a demon, love. He doesn’t have a heart.” Kalan drew her to him and kissed her hard. “I almost died when I saw him pull you away from the Veil. I had to get to you even if it caused me pain.”

“I’m here. We managed to survive. Though I seem to have gained another scar. For a creature who isn’t supposed to scar, I have an awful lot of them.” She kissed him back, then pushed him towards the Veil. “Get on the other side, and let’s finish this. I want to go home and let you fuck me into the bed.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” He touched her cheek and crossed back over.

This time when they touched palms through the barrier, the connection was instant and strong. The rest of the holes in the Veil healed themselves within minutes. She wanted to strengthen the barrier, so she allowed a little more power to seep out before she broke the connection between them. She pulled her hand away, then crossed over into the altar room.

Roger threw his arms around her and hugged her tight. “I was so afraid for you, Beltaine. Don’t ever do something like that again.”

“I didn’t really want to do it in the first place, Roger.” She kissed his cheek.

Kalan took her into his arms when Roger let her go. She sighed as she laid her head on his chest. She reached out and took Roger’s hand. This was home for her. Kalan and Roger would always be where her heart sheltered.

“Well done, my angel.” Infinity rose and fell in the voice filling the catacombs.

All of them fell to their knees as God’s presence overwhelmed them.

“What sort of reward would you ask of me, Kalan?”

She wondered what he was going to ask for. It wasn’t often that God gave out rewards without asking for payment later on.

“I want to stay here with Beltaine,” Kalan said, keeping his head bowed and his eyes on their joined hands.

A soft breeze ruffled Kalan’s hair. “Are you sure, Kalan? I had planned on you taking over as Commander of my Host.”

“Did you know who was to blame for the tearing of the Veil?” she inquired.

“Yes.” The simple word didn’t answer the questions she really had.

“If you knew the commander was behind it all, why didn’t you stop him?” She knew her voice held a hint of belligerence.

“My dear Beltaine, as with any thing I do, it’s about free will. If at any time in this horrible adventure, he had come to me and asked for forgiveness, I would have fixed it all, but he never did.” Exasperation echoed in His voice.

“His arrogance makes the Devil seem like a spoiled brat,” Beltaine couldn’t help but comment.

“Yes.” The definite tone told her the discussion was done. “Are you sure, Kalan, that you wish to stay here?”

“Yes, Sir. I’ve found my true home.”

“That’s all I want to hear. What about you, Beltaine? Will you welcome Kalan into your heart and life?”

Here was her chance at happiness. Did she have enough trust that it would last? She turned and looked at Kalan. She saw the love shining in his blue eyes. Smiling, she nodded. "Yes, I love him, and I'd welcome him anywhere."

"Love each other is all I ask, then." The peaceful feeling He emanated began to fade.

"Wait. Where can we find Father John?" Roger interrupted.

"You may find him at Beltaine's apartment." God evaporated from the room.

* * * * *

Father John looked up at them when they burst through the door to Beltaine's apartment. She knelt in front of the priest. He rested a shaking hand on her head. In his other hand, he held the other copy of the Devil's book.

"Did he hurt you?" She demanded to know.

"No, child. The creature sent to kidnap me was told not to harm me. I think the bishop had something to do with it. The man had a key to my room." Father John's voice was weak, but he smiled at her.

"I know he was involved, and I plan on doing something about it, but not right now. I think we all need to rest before we take the Board on." She glanced around her apartment. "How did you get in here though? I didn't give you a key."

"The angel you know as Jasper brought me back here."

"Jasper?" Kalan raced over to the priest. "Is he all right?"

"He told me to let you know he's a little worse for wear, but he'll be fine." Father John sighed.

She knew he was tired. It had been a long night for the priest. "You're welcome to stay here for the night. You can have my bed and the rest of us will sleep on the floor."

Father John declined. "I want to go back home and sleep in my own bed tonight, Beltaine. You and Kalan need to rest without worrying about guests." He accepted Roger's hand to pull himself to his feet. He hugged her and Kalan before he and Roger walked out.

The door shut, and Beltaine turned to Kalan. Pinning her against the door, he crushed his lips to hers. Their tongues dueled while their hands stripped each other. Clothes flew across the room. She encircled his waist with her legs as he lifted her off the floor. There was no gentle teasing to make sure she was wet enough. He plunged in.

The wave of desire flooded her body and overrode any bit of pain she felt. Her head cracked against the wood of the door as she arched her back, begging silently for him to take her nipples in his mouth.

He obliged her, sucking her nipple and as much of her breast as he could into his mouth. Using teeth and tongue, he tormented her until the breast ached and she was pleading for more.

"Kalan," she whispered.

He braced her against the door and angled her hips. Sliding out, he pushed his fingers between her thighs. Thrusting hard and deep into her pussy, he pinched her clit. With his teeth on her nipple, his fingers tugging her clit, and the feel of his blunt cock head buried in her, Beltaine thought she was going to shatter into a million pieces.

"Let go, love. I'll keep you safe," he murmured in her ear as he continued to ride her.

Her orgasm built from her pussy to her breasts. It spread to the rest of her body from there. Her toes curled and she swore the top of her head was going to explode. She cried out as pleasure raced through her. Her inner muscles contracted around his cock, and she tried to milk his climax from him.

"Not yet," he said, clutching her tight to him as she collapsed into him.

She didn't say anything as he carried her to the bed without pulling out of her. He laid her down on the bed and began to piston in and out of her. At first, she didn't have the

energy to do much but lie there. Soon the scraping of his cock against her sweet spot managed to excite her. She grasped his ass in her hands and added her own strength to his thrusts. She knew she was leaving bruises on his skin. The sound of their skin slapping together filled the apartment along with their harsh breathing.

Leaning his head down, Kalan licked the crucifix scar and an unusually strong flash of pleasure ripped through her, causing her orgasm to hit with mind-numbing force. She screamed as her pussy encouraged him to come. His face contorted into a grimace of ecstasy when his climax erupted, and he sent spurts of cum deep into her.

His arms gave out and he sank down on top of her. Beltaine cradled him close within the warmth of her arms and legs. Smoothing her hand down his cooling back, she closed her eyes and smiled. She could get used to having him with her day and night. She sent a little prayer of thanks up to God for the opportunity to have an angel watching over her.

Kalan's breathing deepened and he shifted to his side, bringing her back tight to his chest. She caught a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye. Sitting up, she turned to see Azubah perched on the couch in the living area of the studio apartment. The demon's red eyes held a question.

Nodding, she said, "You're welcome to stay here, Azubah. You helped us out to the best of your ability, and we couldn't have asked more from you. Consider this your place from now on."

The demon smiled and settled down for the night.

Beltaine snuggled up to Kalan again and closed her eyes. For the first time since the whole adventure started, she knew she'd get a great night's sleep.

Epilogue

Late that night, Beltaine woke, wrapped in Kalan's arms. The room was ice-cold. Shivering, she tried to wake her angel up, but she didn't get a response.

"He won't wake up, Beltaine."

She glared out into the shadows of her bedroom. A lessening of the blackness drew her eyes to one of the corners. Azrael coalesced in front of her bed.

"What do you want?" She challenged the creature.

"Maybe I've come to bring you death."

She didn't know if he was joking or not. "You wouldn't have healed me just to come and get me later."

"The purpose you were born for has been fulfilled."

"So do it and be done with it. I'm not much for talking." Sadness filled her heart at not having more time with Kalan, but when death came in person to get you, you didn't argue.

"You're very impulsive. Sometimes it's good. Other times, it only brings trouble. I'm not here for you."

"You're not?" She leaned over and put her body between Azrael and Kalan.

Azrael's laugh sounded like ice cracking. "I'm not here for your angel either. Enjoy your time on earth. Be no one's servant, but should angel, demon, or mortal come to ask for help, give it without question. Your presence is the only thing keeping the worlds in balance." He nodded once and faded.

Kalan opened his eyes when she settled back in his embrace. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a nightmare." She kissed him, trying not to think about what Azrael had told her. She didn't want to be a hero and keep any sort of balance. She wanted to love Kalan and beat up on demons. Yet something told her the world was never going to be the same, now that she was marked by the Angel of Death.

 THE END 

Tiffany Aaron

Tiffany Aaron writes to allow others a chance to see her dreams. Her stories are based on the simple question 'what if?' and no subject is exempt from it. When she isn't writing, she's working at her local history museum. Tiffany lives with her husband and two demanding cats. She likes to watch sports and action movies in her spare time.

Visit Tiffany on the Web at www.tiffanyaaron.com, or email her at tiffany@tiffanyaaron.com.