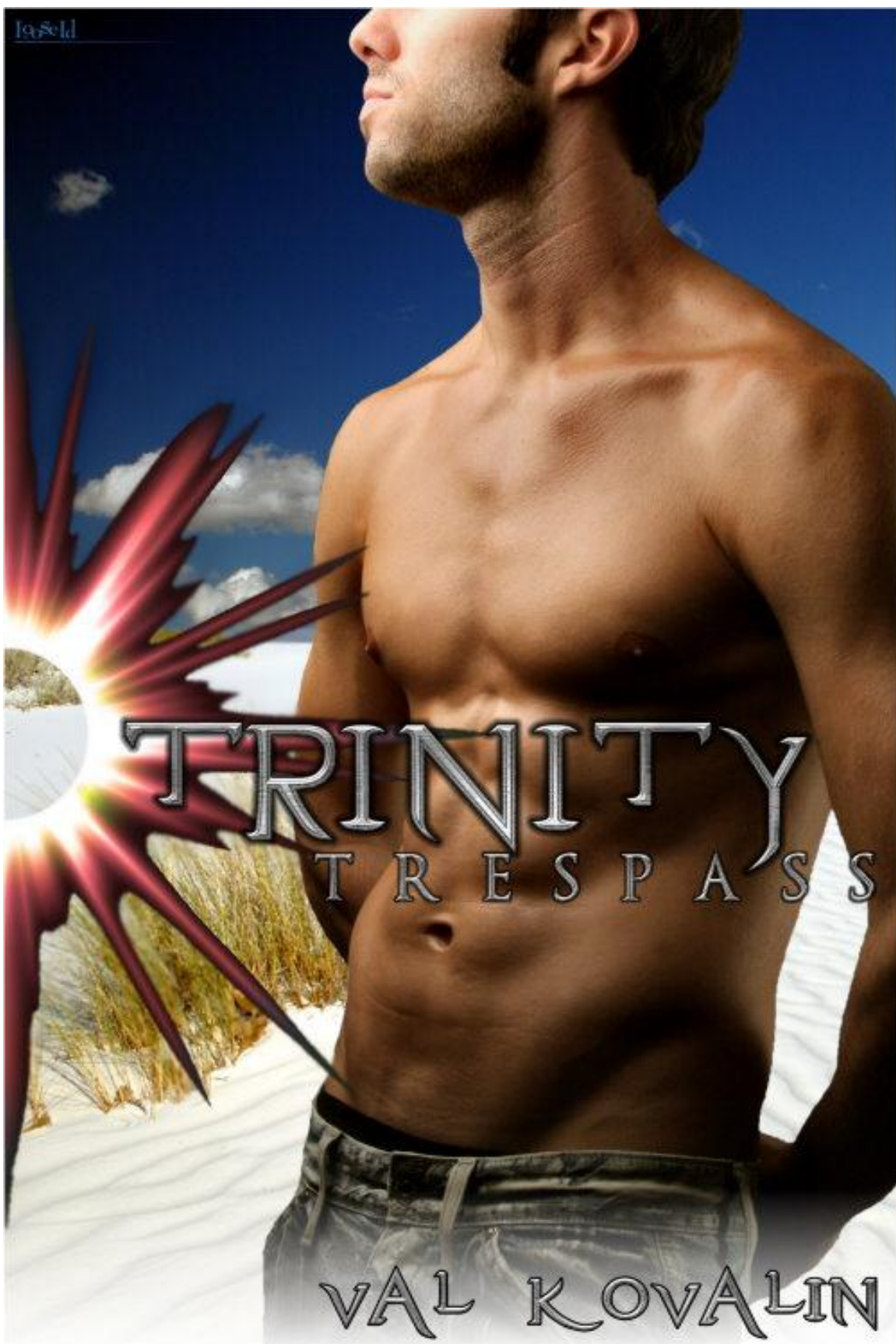


1981



TRINITY

TRESPASS

VAL KOVALIN

Trinity Trespass

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Trinity Trespass

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Chapter One

On every Cadre assignment, Parnell fought Navarro for dominance, as any demon would. They matched each other in strength, and they might have remained close friends, but instead they'd started fucking each other. Now Navarro wanted something resembling a 1950s marriage, and no longer did he even bother to hide his possessiveness beneath the demonic group-mind that floated like a fragment of ice on the boundless river of psychic energy known as the Collective. It made Parnell want to fight Navarro even while he wondered if he'd become sexually addicted to him. He refused to be anyone's slave. Besides, emotional distractions could get them both killed while on assignment.

All this simmered in Parnell's mind during their latest job as they drove from Cadre headquarters in Las Vegas east through the moonlit desert. At 0100 hours, Navarro pulled off Interstate 40 and parked his midnight blue Porsche on the gravel-strewn shoulder. Parnell shifted to full awareness of Navarro's nearness and trembled, wanting him.

Ahead lay the unseen barrier they needed to cross, and Parnell forced his attention to their situation. The Cadre higher-ups had woven the barrier into the New Mexico state line, and proximity to it already interfered with Parnell's ability to access the Collective. Every demon or angel drew power through that river of psychic energy, but once inside New Mexico, no one could lean on the Collective. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, Parnell thought and snickered.

"Something funny?" Navarro's amused tone sent prickly warmth flooding the back of Parnell's neck, and he shook his head, tongue-tied. Navarro asked, "You feel it?" as the barrier released a massive burst of psychic static.

“We’re right against it,” Parnell said. In fact, the Porsche had to be inches from it.

“I’ve heard it’s a rough crossing, and I don’t want to pass out at the wheel. We’ll get out and push the car through the barrier into New Mexico. Then we’ll step across. We can sit in the car to recover if we have to.”

Navarro had missed his second shave that day, and the passing headlights flared over his bluish black stubble. Parnell wanted to put his mouth on Navarro’s throat, suck on that pulse point, and feel it throb against his tongue. If he and Navarro could stick to friendship and fucking, he could live with that, but Navarro wanted more, and danger lay in that direction. Parnell wrenched his gaze away and stared across the desert, which lay pale in the moonlight, dotted with yellow scrubgrass. Railroad tracks ran to their right.

Headlights caught his attention. “Cops,” he said.

Navarro glanced up at the mirror. “I *knew* this would happen.”

An Arizona State Police cruiser pulled up behind the Porsche, its tires crunching over gravel. Thanks to the barrier, Parnell couldn’t sense through the Collective if these two state troopers were humans. They could be angels, who had infested Arizona law enforcement to grease their drug trade from Mexico.

Parnell ground his teeth as coldness sank through him, fear for Navarro and for himself. Since when had their closeness started to erode his courage? He never used to think about himself or Navarro when he fought the angels—the enslavers, as the Cadre called them, whereas the angels referred to themselves as *Los Elegidos de Dios*.

“What are they waiting for?” Impatience ruffled Navarro’s cool tone.

His dark eyes flicked a brief glance at Parnell, involuntary, but enough to make Parnell realize that Navarro wanted to look strong and capable. For *him*? Since when did Navarro care wh—Flustered, Parnell withdrew his gaze. He scanned the immaculate Porsche interior for anything unusual that might draw a human cop’s attention, but only one personal detail stood out.

From the rearview mirror dangled a plastic fob that held a snapshot of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb. Someone else might have displayed a family photo or maybe an image of the Lady of Guadalupe, but it would be a stretch for either Parnell or Navarro to call her “*Our* Lady.”

“Here he comes.” Navarro sounded unconcerned. “Fifty bucks says he’s human.”

Or an enslaver, Parnell thought. That might mean a fight for their lives.

At least there weren’t that many of them—demons and angels—let loose upon the earth to fight as mortal enemies. Parnell liked to think that not even God could disobey Newton’s third law of motion, and if the Cadre escaped hell at Trinity Site, New Mexico, in 1945, an equal and opposite force such as the enslavers had to get kicked out of heaven and into old Mexico at the same time, where they had been thriving on anarchy ever since. It made perfect sense to him.

The cop climbed out of the cruiser, stifling a yawn as his partner remained inside. He stretched, rolling his bulky shoulders, and adjusted his package through his tight-fitting pants.

“He could be an enslaver,” Parnell said. “So far he’s acting like one.”

“Maybe.”

The trooper swaggered over as Navarro powered down the window. His nametape read *M. Harris*, and he had the fresh face of a twenty-year-old, whereas all angels and demons appeared to be an ageless thirty-five. His gaze roamed over their rumpled suits and tense faces, and Parnell wondered what he might read into their appearance.

Navarro looked Hispanic, with sleek short hair; Parnell had dark blond hair, longish from skipping haircuts; and they both had the same tallness and lean, sinewy build. The cop probably made them for lawyers on travel, which they were. Well, Navarro’s identity as a litigator ranked up there with his need to breathe, but Parnell hadn’t practiced law since the Cadre had retired him, and he didn’t miss it.

“Gentlemen.” Harris smirked. “Need some help with this fine vehicle?”

“No, sir,” Navarro said. “We’re just planning our route.”

Obviously they now had a problem. Harris’s pupils were pinpoints lit in the glare of his headlights, his hands fidgeted over his uniform, and he looked as if he’d ingested enough illegal drugs to rewire his brain. Parnell thought it more likely that Harris had suffered too much psychic manipulation from an enslaver, probably his partner. He’d seen it before. Psychic manipulation, the oldest crime in the universe, dated back to the war in heaven. Parnell’s survival instincts went to full alert as he resisted the urge to look back at the other man in the cruiser, and his breathing quickened.

The struggle never ended. Those with greater psychic ability to harvest power from the Collective always exploited those with less. Many had tried to subjugate Parnell. Angels and demons victimized each other, and everyone manipulated the humans, who had the least ability to interface with the Collective and tap into its vast subliminal pull upon everyone. The enslavers drew power from the Collective to abuse humanity, yet the Collective itself sprang from the life force of every living thing, including humans, connecting them all. To Parnell the crimes committed by the enslavers went beyond injustice and degraded the essence of the Collective as a neutral force of nature.

Harris’s mood shifted. “License and registration, both of you.”

Parnell tried to hide a tiny flinch. He hated surrendering his name—any demon would, considering how names were once used to summon and enslave. Names no longer held even a trace of power, not now when every demon had a random surname. The females took any first name they liked, with an emphasis on blending in with the humans, but every male had named himself after Oppenheimer, with some variation on Jay, Julius, Bob, Robert, or Bobby. Names held great emotional significance and were not entrusted to just anyone. To be on a first-name basis implied a level of intimacy that few demons ever reached with one another.

Navarro handed over his car registration and their driver's licenses. Trembling, Harris gripped their information in both hands, and his tongue flicked back and forth seven times as Parnell counted, unable to stop himself. Finally it rested, oozing like a pink slug between the man's lips. Harris read aloud, "Julio Robert Navarro. Jaye Robert Parnell."

His jaw clicked as his eyes started to roll back, and he blinked and focused, staring at the ground. Parnell and Navarro waited in polite silence for the trooper to return to his cruiser and call up their spotless records on his computer—or open fire on them or drop dead or whatever might be about to happen—but Harris stood still. Parnell inhaled Navarro's clean scent, using the pleasure it brought him to counter his racing pulse.

"Out of the car. Both of you." Harris unsnapped his holster. "Hands in sight."

A shard of fear slid deep into Parnell's heart as he and Navarro climbed out of the Porsche with their hands raised. If Harris shot them at close range, their bodies wouldn't survive, their souls would return to hell, and there would be no second escape. Never again had a portal opened leading out of hell—not once during the countless nuclear weapons detonations at the Pacific Proving Grounds and the Nevada Test Site.

Harris shoved him and Navarro to face the Porsche, and passing traffic slowed as humans gawked at them in the headlights. Parnell's skin rose in icy pinpricks as he realized that Navarro probably carried a concealed weapon, whereas they had left Vegas too fast for him to pick up his own pistol. His lungs emptied of air as he imagined this cop kid shooting Navarro in front of him. He'd cared about Navarro even before they'd started fucking, and now he couldn't even think straight as Harris began patting Navarro down with rough hands.

"Officer." Navarro used his calm, addressing-the-judge tone. He could have been requesting to approach the bench. "Something you should know—"

Harris yanked a .357 Magnum revolver out from under Navarro's suit jacket. He started hyperventilating, and Parnell wondered if the young cop's mind had

started to cave in under the stress of long-term psychic manipulation. Harris's arm jerked in the darkness as Parnell strained to see the glinting gun barrel. Parnell heard it strike Navarro in the head, and Navarro hissed in pain. The sweet scent of Navarro's blood hit Parnell in the gut, and he lost control and snarled. Harris jolted back a step, staring as Navarro slammed his palm down and pinned Parnell's hand to the car.

That grounded him—Navarro's fingers on his wrist. Navarro never lost his poise, and they could get through this without a fight. Parnell wanted to put his hands on Navarro, keep him safe, dress that cut on his head, and—His concern started to tip into lust, and he couldn't afford that. He swallowed, forcing his attention to the cruiser door as it slammed. Footsteps crunched over the gravel as Harris's partner approached with mocking nonchalance, putting on that stone-cold killer image the enslavers enjoyed showing to their victims.

"What you got there, Harris?" he asked.

Parnell and Navarro turned as one to face him. The enslaver hesitated, and his lips curved as he saw the blood trickling from Navarro's hairline, but he didn't look eager to engage them, and Parnell couldn't hide a sneer. Perhaps their reputations preceded them. A spot of mustard stained the cop's shirt near his nametape, which read *L. Yazzie*, and he looked like a thirtyish Navajo man. His dark eyes glinted in his rugged face as he pried Navarro's gun from Harris's grip.

Harris blurted, "He's carrying a concealed—"

Yazzie clamped his free hand over Harris's neck, and the young cop's eyes glazed over, his shoulders slumping as the enslaver interfered with his mind. Parnell's stomach twisted, and he felt real sympathy for the kid. Yazzie said, "Los Elegidos de Dios knows you boys by sight, *Navarro* and *Parnell*. I thought we taught you Cadre assassins to stay out of Arizona."

"We're passing through," Navarro said. "Get out of our way, *L.*"

"Officer Yazzie to you, Navarro," the enslaver said.

"You *know* each other?" Harris slurred as sweat stood out on his face.

“You’re going to fry your partner’s brain, touching him like that,” Parnell said.

“Can’t control him through the Collective alone, Parnell,” Yazzie said. “Not this close to the barrier.” His smile flickered like a snake’s tongue. He knew how much they hated him using even their surnames. “Wouldn’t want him to freak out, pop a cap into one of you, and start a war.”

Parnell tried to keep his expression indifferent as he eyed poor Harris. He imagined Yazzie using the Collective to insert a vision into the young cop’s mind, maybe to cause paralyzing fear or overwhelming exhaustion. It wouldn’t be easy, even with a human who Yazzie had been degrading over time, but physical touch would smooth the way.

“Tell him to go back to the car,” Navarro said. “None of this is his problem.”

“No need, Navarro. He won’t remember anything. So what are you boys up to?”

“Don’t bother questioning us, L,” Parnell said. “You’re wasting your time this close to the barrier.”

Yazzie’s eyes narrowed. He knew as well as they did the apparent paradoxes involved in drawing information from the Collective, which couldn’t reflect everyone’s exact thoughts. However, no one could prevent his true emotions from leaking into the Collective unless he put great effort into forcing his feelings too deep within himself to detect. A deliberate lie always blared through the Collective like an off-key trumpet unless the speaker believed the lie. To use the Collective as a lie detector, one had to ask the right questions to force the other guy to attempt deception, and Parnell doubted Yazzie knew how to ask good questions. Not that it mattered this close to the barrier.

“You headed into New Mexico?” Yazzie persisted. “*Navarro*?”

Navarro gave a thin smile. “We thought we’d see Carlsbad Caverns.”

Yazzie glanced from Navarro to Parnell. “Oh? Honeymoon?”

“Maybe.” Navarro laughed.

“New Mexico is no-man’s-land. Isn’t that what your barrier is for, Parnell?”

“You’re outnumbered, L,” Parnell said. “Take your human and run.”

Navarro held out his hand for his .357 Magnum. “But first, hand it over, L.”

Harris let out a confused groan as Yazzie returned the gun and their paperwork, and a sneer creased the enslaver’s face as he sent his partner to sleep. The young cop’s knees buckled, and Yazzie gripped him by the neck, holding his full body weight as Navarro drew in a sharp breath and Parnell stared in disbelief.

“Humans outnumber us, L,” Navarro said. “We can’t let them know what we are.”

“I don’t take orders from the Cadre,” Yazzie said.

“If the humans know, they’ll kill us all.” Navarro’s dark eyes burned.

“What do I care?” Yazzie said. “You’re going to hell, but I got a ticket to heaven.”

“You sure about that, L?” Parnell asked. “You confident enough to gamble?”

That hit a nerve, and the enslaver glared at him. “Fuck you!”

Parnell laughed. An angel swearing always struck him as irresistibly amusing.

“You can expect a visit, L,” Navarro said. “Soon. They might even send *us*.”

“I hope so.” Yazzie gave a snotty little salute. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Underneath his bravado, fear shone in Yazzie’s eyes. The enslavers had no sense of impulse control, which meant the Cadre had to police their actions for them. Parnell spent his days hunting down enslavers whom the Cadre identified as likely to expose the supernatural origins of angels and demons to the humans. He wished he could call himself a defender of innocents, or at least an avenger of injustice. However, the higher-ups had saddled him with a job that taxed him to his limits: carrying out Cadre assignments, which usually involved breaking several laws while erasing all traces of the Cadre’s existence from the outside world. Any small favors he could do for humanity would only arise in conjunction with the darker deeds he needed to perform.

Yazzie dragged Harris back to the cruiser as if manhandling a drunk. Navarro and Parnell watched as Yazzie pulled left across I-40 and sped west, back toward Flagstaff, leaving them alone in the moonlit darkness.

Parnell started shivering, coming down from his fight-or-flight high. Navarro stepped up behind him and slid his arms around Parnell's waist. The suddenness made Parnell tense in surprise, but Navarro disarmed him with a hot openmouthed kiss to the back of his neck. Nothing like a risky situation to trigger the urge to fuck. In the darkness, Parnell imagined Navarro spreading him over the hood of the car and pounding into him beside the highway. His cock stirred as he leaned closer, enjoying Navarro's strength and body heat.

"Los Elegidos de Dios knows us by sight." Navarro licked his ear.

"We're famous." He rubbed his ass back against Navarro's hard-on.

Navarro's breath caught, and his grip tightened. "*Jaye*."

Parnell tensed at the sound of his name, unable to hide how it grated on him even while he needed Navarro's body pressed against him, and the tension between them turned from hot to cold. The demon name taboos went deep, and whenever Navarro used his first name, as if they were married or something, it felt like a rough hand groping him in public.

Navarro let him go with an unhappy sigh. "We need to cross now."

"Yeah." Parnell stepped away, feeling their separation like a physical ache.

They walked to the Porsche and stood at its back bumper, facing the unseen barrier, and Parnell tried to banish his erection with thoughts of the assignment. Thanks to the barrier, they had to drive to New Mexico, which deprived them of the usual luxuries demons loved, like a first-class flight and scotch on the rocks. Crossing the barrier by air could kill a demon, which the Cadre higher-ups learned only after they wove it into the New Mexico state line. Something about losing contact with the ground and passing through the barrier at top speed always proved fatal.

"What was the *point*?" Parnell burst out, just to say something.

“New Mexico has significance.” Navarro kept his tone remote, but Parnell knew him too well not to miss him overdoing it, putting a cold edge on his words. “The Cadre wants trespassers to feel small and powerless and cut off from the Collective.”

“Even when we *are* the Cadre?” Parnell asked. “That sounds like the higher-ups.”

“They like a grand gesture.” In the moonlight, Navarro smoothed his tie.

Parnell tried to think of a reductive, scientific metaphor, which he’d found could make the ineffable easier to face. He reworked his perception of the barrier, seeing it as an electromagnetic pulse designed to disrupt communication with the Collective. It couldn’t block the Collective, but it made it hard to find. It didn’t prevent angels and demons from crossing, but it made it difficult. Humans, on the other hand, breezed through unaffected. It didn’t matter to the higher-ups if humans could cross, but they enjoyed imposing their grand gesture upon all demons and angels.

“I think we should just get this over with,” he said.

They leaned into the back bumper of the Porsche and pushed, scuffing their handmade leather shoes over the gravel as the car rolled forward through the barrier into New Mexico. On the Arizona side, they straightened and exchanged a look of dread.

“Ready?” Navarro offered his hand.

“You want to hold hands?” Parnell blurted in surprise.

“Is that a problem?” Navarro’s voice held a trace of embarrassment.

“You want some kind of power merger?” Under whose control? Parnell wondered.

“I just want to keep you close. Will you just—C’mon. Before Yazzie comes back.”

Parnell grabbed Navarro's hand, ignoring a twinge of pleasure as Navarro's strong fingers entwined with his. They had never faced anything as formidable as the barrier, which drew psychic energy from the Collective even while it blocked it. If he and Navarro were lucky, they'd slip through it like gnats past a bug zapper.

They stepped forward into a hailstorm of countless electric shocks as the barrier resisted them with what felt like a massive repulsive force. Sudden fear—Navarro's fear—entered Parnell through their joined hands as Navarro forced it from his consciousness. It had to go somewhere, and it detonated within Parnell like an alien virus, flattening his immune system. Its ravenous energy fed on his life force, burning out most of his strength in its passage as fire in a closed vessel consumes oxygen.

The barrier pulsed, tearing as they passed through it, and its shock wave pulled them apart and tossed them forward. *Navarro!* Parnell felt a sense of wrenching loss. He hit the ground in a bruising sprawl, the air knocked from his lungs as the desert night dissolved into white light no human could see. It returned to darkness, leaving a scorched afterimage floating behind his eyelids as he blinked.

The highway and scrubgrass swam into view as he looked up from the dirt. Under the moonlight, New Mexico stretched out in eerie psychic silence. All around him and Navarro, the Collective continued to flow, but the barrier had unmoored them from it, and they could no longer read each other's emotions or identify lies. Now they were truly separate, each mind floating within a cocoon of privacy.

Chapter Two

They lay in the dirt where they had fallen, hidden from the road by the Porsche. Navarro had landed closer to the car, and Parnell lurched to his feet and tried to join him, but sky and earth flipped, changing places. He sprawled to one side, and the ground went on tipping as he dug his fingers into the sand, clawing for a handhold. He thought he might vomit from dizziness before it receded, leaving him too weak to stand.

“You okay?” Navarro called.

No, not even remotely okay. Terror washed through Parnell in thick, icy waves as he struggled to raise his head, which seemed to weigh about fifty pounds. He had felt great before crossing, but now the unexpected had happened. Navarro’s uncontrolled terror had flattened his defenses, and then the barrier had ripped him apart. Parnell tried not to cringe, panting in fear as he sensed the *wrongness* in the deep fatigue that held him down.

In more than sixty years, he had never been sick. He had never experienced anything worse than the shock of combat wounds. Scattered impressions careened through his head as he replayed the crossing, trying to think straight. He felt half-dead, stupefied with exhaustion.

Navarro had done this to him. Parnell felt gutted to the core by the betrayal, but a deeper instinct made him rethink his reaction. His personality made him take so many impulsive risks that he’d gained experience with feeling helpless. He knew how to surrender and let events carry him while waiting for the right opportunity to act. But someone like Navarro, who prized staying in control, wouldn’t be able to transcend his terror as the barrier overwhelmed him. Navarro would rather die

than look like a coward, especially in front of Parnell. He must have reacted on instinct, rejecting his fear with such speed and force that it turned into a psychic weapon, blazing through the simple link where their hands made contact and detonating inside Parnell's body.

"Jaye?"

Navarro ran to him, shoes grinding over the loose sand, and dragged Parnell to his feet. Parnell would have fallen without Navarro's arm around his waist as his vision grayed out, and he felt a pathetic surge of gratitude for the closeness. They shambled to the Porsche, and he tried to resist the thick tide of unconsciousness that waited to smother him as Navarro guided him into the passenger seat and then got behind the wheel. The night breeze lifted, spitting sand against the windshield.

"Drink." Navarro handed him a bottle of water. Their gazes met, and the deep concern in Navarro's eyes started to shake Parnell's ragged composure. He glanced away, trying to ignore Navarro's hand on his arm.

"Why did you want to hold hands?" His voice sounded raw and accusing.

"Was that too *gay* for you?" Navarro's eyes narrowed.

"You're not the clingy type. You must've had a reason."

"I-I just wanted..." Navarro stumbled over his words, something Parnell had almost never seen him do before. "I wanted to protect you. Keep some control over the situation." Even without the Collective, Parnell knew he spoke the truth. Not even Navarro could fake getting so flustered. "Is that a problem?"

"No." Feeling guilty, he tried to gentle his tone. "Forget it."

"What happened to you?" Navarro asked.

"Nothing," he said on instinct. To be a demon meant to hide weakness. "What about you?"

"I'm okay," Navarro blurted. "But you—"

Parnell forced down his resentment. If Navarro had managed to control his fear instead of inflicting it upon him, then they both would be okay. “It’s nothing. Really. Got the breath knocked out of me.”

Navarro lapsed into what seemed to be a worried silence, and it felt eerie not to be able to access the Collective and know for sure. At least Navarro couldn’t tell that he lied about the true extent of his damage. Parnell struggled to keep fatigue from dragging his eyelids shut. He fumbled with the cap on the bottle and swallowed the warmish water as black lights popped in his peripheral vision, and he started to feel stronger.

“Drive,” he said. “Before Yazzie finds more enslavers to come after us.”

Navarro steered back on I-40. “Let’s stop in Gallup. Not long. Just to clean up.”

“And have a quick fuck?” Parnell asked.

“If that’s what you need.” Navarro kept his voice neutral.

The remark hit too close to home. “What about you?”

“I could be talked into it.”

Maybe he could prop up his energy level with sex magic. Not that two orgasms generated much psychic energy, but he would take what he could get. As the flat desert whipped past in the headlights, fear scrabbled in the back of Parnell’s mind, and he tried to distract himself with trivial thoughts. Tomorrow was April 22, Oppenheimer’s birthday, and it was never much fun to celebrate San Roberto Day apart from the Cadre. The day after *that* would be Easter Sunday, which meant he’d picked a bad weekend to lose his strength—Oh fuck. He was starting to obsess about the barrier damaging him, which would only lead to panic.

He shook his head, and Navarro asked, “What?”

“At least we’re still alive. Blessed be San Roberto.”

“Peace be upon him,” Navarro said.

Struggling with his anxiety, Parnell tried to focus on Oppenheimer’s snapshot suspended from the mirror. The humans had Che Guevara on T-shirts,

wristwatches, mouse pads, and other stuff, and the demons had Oppenheimer, even though he had never known about them. How would Oppenheimer have reacted to his face appearing on all that merchandise, or Che, for that matter, spinning in his communist grave? Parnell stifled a laugh. At least it kept him from thinking about—

“I’m taking over this assignment,” he blurted. “You just don’t know how or when.”

“We could be partners.” Navarro gave him a sidelong glance that mingled impatience and amusement with a trace of worry still lingering underneath. “You don’t have to settle for being my...” He trailed off, as if considering his options.

“Rival?”

Navarro snorted. “You flatter yourself.”

“Accomplice? Fuck buddy?”

“You *are* good in the sack. That’s worth a lot.”

“How sweet. You put a price tag on it?”

Navarro laughed, and so did Parnell as his tension loosened and slipped away. He and Navarro had always found the same things funny, even back before they knew each other and nothing existed between them except an overwhelming physical attraction. He sipped more water, feeling stronger, and lust began to coil through him as he imagined Navarro’s hands on his naked body, pinning him down. Maybe the barrier hadn’t wrecked him so completely that he couldn’t repair the damage with sex magic.

“You work with me or you work *for* me,” Navarro said. “You’re not taking charge.”

It amused Parnell to imagine doing so. On this particular assignment, the higher-ups required him and Navarro to rescue a renegade named Chavez, who had escaped Los Elegidos. Chavez claimed to be an angel-demon hybrid bred by his master, Hidalgo, who sought to raise an army against the Cadre.

Parnell wanted to meet Chavez. He already admired how Chavez had the balls to escape Juarez, enter the forbidden zone of New Mexico, and travel most of the way to the Cadre on his own. Besides, Chavez had insider information on Hidalgo, who happened to be the keeper of Juarez. Keepers of cities, whether angels or demons, fascinated Parnell with their extreme power and corresponding vulnerability. Sometimes he fantasized about being one.

“You listening, amigo?” Navarro asked. “This assignment is mine. I’ve already stolen it from Mr. Sanchez.”

Parnell’s stomach gave a queasy roll. Of course the keeper of El Paso would want control over any assignment involving Juarez, which bordered his own city. Parnell hated Mr. Sanchez, who tended to fixate upon less powerful demons he wished to acquire for his sadistic games. Whenever Parnell had to interact with him, Mr. Sanchez managed to communicate through glance and tone that he wanted to strip away Parnell’s power and make him crawl—something that Parnell had never told Navarro.

He swallowed. “You must have called in every favor you had coming.”

Navarro’s teeth flashed in a cold knife-blade smile. “I enjoy obstructing Mr. Sanchez.”

Parnell stared at him. “Why? He’s never opposed you.”

“He barely knows I exist.” Navarro shrugged. “Consider it a grudge I hold from afar.”

Parnell fell silent. Navarro had never before revealed any feelings toward Mr. Sanchez. Now he seemed to be offering an alliance, but Parnell shared his problems with no one, not even Navarro. For an instant, he let himself fantasize. Maybe their current assignment to acquire Chavez would draw them close to Mr. Sanchez’s ongoing surveillance of Hidalgo. If Parnell saw an opportunity to destroy Mr. Sanchez and get away with it, he wouldn’t hesitate to take it.

Lights glowed ahead in the darkness, and he checked his watch. At 0200 hours, they reached Gallup, a sprawl of houses and ugly strip malls under grainy

streetlights, which looked as if they had washed out of the main timeline back in the mid-1960s. Navarro found a motel off the highway, parked, and strode off to get a room, his car keys rolled up in his fist.

Parnell tilted his head against the seat and closed his eyes. Okay, sex magic. It wouldn't be easy, not with the barrier blocking the Collective, but he could do it. At least he thought he could. He groped for a scientific metaphor with which to cut the task down to size. Like every living thing, he formed a closed circuit with the Collective, drawing and feeding back psychic energy in an endless loop. Fucking raised energy, and an orgasm spilled that energy out of the loop where he could use it.

He felt a flash of shame. To him, the pleasure of fucking was its own reward, and he never needed the psychic energy it generated as a by-product. Now he felt like a junkie lining up a shot of artificial strength to cover real weakness. But what choice did he have? He'd take everything he could get and hope Navarro didn't notice.

Navarro returned and moved the car closer to room 6 as moonlight sifted over the flat-roofed stucco motel, which looked about to melt into the darkness. Someone had smashed or shot out the nearest streetlight. In the headlights, the door looked sun bleached, its blue faded to silver, and its brass number 6 wobbled on a loose screw. Parnell caught Navarro scanning him with a worried expression.

To distract him, Parnell nodded at the blood and dust smeared on Navarro's face. "You went in looking like that, and they didn't call the cops?"

"I think they needed the cash. C'mon. Let's hit the shower."

Parnell stepped into the stale air that smothered the motel room, eyed the two double beds in the gloom, and felt a welcome surge of lust. Navarro brought in his garment bag and overnight case and shut the door, and Parnell switched on the bedside light, which gleamed on a cheap print attached to the wall. In Nevada, it might have shown cowboys playing cards in a saloon, but here, it depicted three black San Ildefonso bowls.

Navarro tossed his luggage on the bed nearest the bathroom as Parnell stripped down to his shorts. Parnell already had a hard-on, and its slick tip pressed against the cotton fabric, leaving a damp patch. He covered it with his hand, flushing as he realized how he must look to Navarro, who hadn't even loosened his tie yet—too eager and easy to manipulate.

Meanwhile Navarro draped his folded suit jacket across the table. His tie followed, and so did his cuff links, which clicked against the glass tabletop as the loose cuffs of his shirt fell away from his wrists. Shivering with need, Parnell watched the shirt slide off the broad planes of Navarro's back. Navarro dropped his trousers, revealing a silky black thong.

Parnell stared, then snorted. "Fancy!"

"I try." Navarro gave a hungry smile as he scanned Parnell's expression.

How typical of Navarro, who enjoyed provoking Parnell's laughter almost more than his lust. Parnell watched in delight as Navarro worked the black fabric off his thick erection and slid the scrap of cloth down past his ankles. As soon as Navarro stood naked, Parnell stepped into his arms, and they clung to each other. Parnell's eyes slid shut in helpless pleasure as Navarro pressed one palm to the small of his back and stroked the other up the length of his spine.

Navarro's trembling matched his. Whenever they first stripped down for each other, something desperate took over, and their bodies pressed close as if starving for contact. Parnell kissed Navarro's throat, sucking the pulse point as their breathing evened out and their urgency shifted into pleasure. Navarro stretched the waistband of Parnell's shorts and let it snap back.

The elastic caught Parnell just under the curve of his buttocks, making him flinch and snort with laughter. Navarro's hot hands closed over his bare ass and squeezed hard, and Parnell groaned, thrusting against Navarro in blind need. Navarro's hands closed to fists, and he ripped the cotton shorts off Parnell's body, which excited Parnell more than he wanted to admit.

"Oooh, macho!" He sucked Navarro's earlobe. "So forceful!"

Navarro laughed. "You like that?"

"Can't you tell?"

They crowded into the bathroom and stepped into the tub, still locked in a rough embrace, and Parnell realized how much he needed Navarro. Navarro could say things to make him laugh even while they were fucking, until he lay wrung out and gasping, tears in his eyes. Parnell had several such memories, which he used like well-thumbed snapshots to ward off fear and loneliness. When he and Navarro lay apart in their separate houses, divided by the glittering sprawl of Las Vegas, he conjured up the sight, scent, and taste of Navarro and yearned for him.

Warm water blasted from the showerhead as Navarro turned the tap, soaking them. Red-tinged drops streamed over his brow as clotted blood rinsed from his dark hair. Parnell stroked his palm over the small tattoo on Navarro's left shoulder, which read *TRINITY 1945*, its lettering blurred by the passing of decades.

Navarro soaped up his chest and abs, then worked the lather down into his groin. He glanced at Parnell as he sank his fingers into the soaked dark curls, obviously enjoying Parnell's hypnotized stare. The water flattened the chest hair around his taut nipples as he rinsed the soap from his body, and his erection strained toward Parnell, bobbing as his breathing deepened.

Parnell's lips parted. "Let me." He wanted to drop to his knees and suck him off.

"Better not." Navarro gave him a teasing smile. "You'll make me come."

"Just for a minute."

A hot flush swept up Navarro's face. "I want to come inside you."

He turned Parnell to face the tiled wall and ran a hot soapy washcloth over his back. The strength of Navarro's hands made Parnell shudder as darts of pleasure struck low into his balls and his cock throbbed. He closed his eyes and leaned into Navarro's touch—and grunted as Navarro pinned him hard against the wall. Navarro pressed his cock between the cheeks of Parnell's ass and thrust against him.

“Want you.” Navarro crushed his mouth against Parnell’s neck. “Oh, Jaye.”

The emotion in his voice sent a shiver through Parnell. Instead of greed, it sounded more like surrender. For the first time, Parnell wondered if Navarro called him Jaye because he couldn’t help it. He turned in Navarro’s arms, their wet skin gliding together, and took Navarro’s mouth in a hard kiss. Their lips and tongues met, neither yielding to the other as Navarro fumbled to shut off the tap. They left the bathroom, water glinting on their bodies.

The dry air in the main room cooled Parnell’s wet skin as they crossed the worn carpet, which felt grainy with sand blown in off the desert. He and Navarro fell across the nearest bed, each wrestling to roll on top as the mattress dipped beneath their combined weight. Parnell loved to push Navarro to the limits of his strength, making Navarro work to pin him down.

He flushed hot with alarm as he remembered his own weakness—he couldn’t let Navarro know the barrier had damaged him. Not when he didn’t quite trust Navarro. Underneath their friendship and attraction, he recognized a dark side to Navarro, an urge to possess, just as he had his own urge to kill in self-righteous anger. Would Navarro try to enslave him now that he couldn’t defend himself? In the past, absolutely. Now, probably not, but Parnell had no experience with emotional closeness and didn’t know how far to trust it. He didn’t want to take any chances. He gave up their usual wrestling match, forcing himself to lie still beneath Navarro, who pitched flat across him, overcompensating. Navarro laughed as he rose on one elbow, and Parnell managed a mocking smile.

“Trying to trick me?” Navarro bit his earlobe and licked its rim.

He gripped Parnell’s wrists, then dragged them high on the mattress, and Parnell hissed in surprise. Navarro switched his hold faster than Parnell could react, pinning both of Parnell’s thumbs in his fist to the mattress. Parnell flexed his triceps, wondering if he could break free, but Navarro leaned hard enough to restrict the blood flow.

“Ease up.” Parnell allowed a low snarl to enter his voice.

“Not even if you beg,” Navarro said. “I know you like it rough.”

Fear and excitement fluttered through Parnell’s stomach, tightening his balls. Navarro slid his free hand down to tease Parnell’s erect nipples. He rolled each stiff point between finger and thumb until Parnell gasped and squirmed, his cock leaking translucent fluid across his stomach. He strained against Navarro’s hold. “You know I hate that.”

“So you say. Jaye, you look amazing.”

“No, I *really*—”

Navarro pinched Parnell’s right nipple, and Parnell’s hips jerked as he tried not to shout, his mind flooding with sensation. Navarro clamped Parnell’s writhing form between his thighs as he leaned down and sucked Parnell’s nipple past his teeth, tormenting the oversensitized nub. It forced a hoarse scream from Parnell’s lips as he surged against Navarro’s weight, his thumbs still pinned within Navarro’s fist.

His trapped cock slicked his thighs with fluid, and his balls drew up, tight and aching. Navarro released him and sat back astride his hips, giving him an appraising stare. Parnell lowered his wrists, trembling as sweat chilled his hairline. He closed his eyes, unable to face Navarro after reacting like that.

“You could make me come, watching you.” Emotion made Navarro’s voice unsteady.

The yearning in his voice, seductive and demanding, pulled at Parnell. Parnell opened his eyes, but Navarro had already turned away. He grabbed his overnight bag and spilled out a bottle of lube and a handful of foil-wrapped condoms, not that demons needed to practice safe sex. No, that would be for the countless human men and women whom Navarro attracted.

“Getting a lot of action?” Parnell asked.

“Some.” Navarro’s pupils dilated, lost in his dark eyes. “But I want *you*.”

He leaned in to cover Parnell's mouth with his, and his tongue slid forward in gentle exploration. Parnell groaned, pressing up against him. No one could kiss like Navarro. They wound together, stretched full-length across the bed, making out like teenagers as Navarro's hand slipped into the cleft of Parnell's ass.

He pushed in two lube-slick fingers. Parnell grunted with the shock of it, clenching around Navarro's fingers as their lips ground together and Navarro moaned. He sucked Navarro's tongue, trying to relax as Navarro worked the lube into his passage, opening him with the rough massaging strokes he craved. Soon his hips rolled with the rhythm Navarro set. Half-crazed with pleasure, Parnell broke the kiss and let his head fall back to the sheets as he drew in deep breaths.

"Be mine," Navarro said with fingers inside him. "Let me take care of you."

"What?" Stunned, Parnell rose on his elbow. He slid free, shoving Navarro in the chest.

Navarro looked up, dark eyes clouded with lust. "What's wrong?"

"Don't say anything," Parnell said. "Just do me."

Anger glinted in Navarro's eyes, and the fine hairs lifted across Parnell's body as he remembered he no longer had the strength to back Navarro down in a fight. Navarro flipped him facedown, slamming the air from his lungs as the bedsprings rasped and shook. Parnell's fear blazed into excitement as he fought back on instinct, planting his knee into the mattress and trying to pull free.

Navarro forced him flat and dragged a mound of pillows under Parnell's hips, tilting him up, and spread his cheeks apart. Parnell cried out in helpless need as Navarro pressed in the blunt head of his cock. Groaning, they rocked together as Parnell rose on all fours and Navarro filled him. Parnell's head dropped forward, wet hair slanting into his eyes. He floated on mingled pleasure-pain as he thrust into Navarro's fist.

"Fuck me," he whispered, dry-mouthed with yearning.

Navarro withdrew and shoved back inside him with slow, intense force, stretching him, and Parnell gripped the mattress, trying not to scream. He wanted

to keep some shred of self-respect. It pleased him to feel Navarro trembling, to hear his chest hitching and his breathing growing harsh. As Navarro started fucking him, Parnell realized that their sexual energy had started to rise even though he could no longer feel the Collective. He had to remember to seize that energy right at climax. He needed it. He couldn't let it spill away, unclai—

He heard himself let out a tight whimper as his hips lifted to meet each thrust, and he surrendered all pride. He didn't just need a thick cock up his ass—he needed *Navarro*, though he'd never admit it. Not when Navarro wanted to snap a leash around his neck. Parnell's throat thickened as he imagined Navarro claiming him and keeping him weak.

"Sweetheart," Navarro said. Sometimes he blurted out words like that while they were fucking, the way someone else might shout profanities, and Parnell always ignored it. Navarro leaned down to kiss his neck. "Say my name." His voice grew rough with desire. "Please, Jaye."

"No." Parnell couldn't think. He needed the energy, the pleasure. He couldn't make Navarro stop calling him Jaye, but he wouldn't reciprocate with Julio. Names no longer held power, but the emotional significance remained. He wouldn't allow Navarro to use his sexual neediness to manipulate him to a first-name level of intimacy.

"Please." Navarro thrust deep inside him. "Just—Please—"

"Don't talk," Parnell said. "Give it to me."

"Not until you say my name." Navarro went still, pinning Parnell beneath his weight.

"Don't try to control me!"

Anger surged through Parnell, and he shoved his hips back, taking Navarro's cock tight inside. He clenched his muscles, drawing the sexual energy in his mind like water to a sponge. With a harsh cry, Navarro withdrew, only to spurt over Parnell's back, his orgasm releasing more energy. Parnell visualized taking it all, unable to tell if it worked until his strength took a sudden leap as if he'd snorted

cocaine, and he let out a gloating laugh. They had always been competitive as lovers, each wanting to make the other lose control and come first. A petty power struggle, it meant nothing, but he almost never got the upper hand with Navarro. Those few times that he had, Parnell enjoyed it too much.

Navarro lashed out and slapped him full-strength on the ass, and Parnell grunted from the impact, knotting his fists in the bedspread as he came in a hot, sticky rush. He drew in that energy as well, letting it seep through his system like hot whiskey. The mattress shook as Navarro dropped flat beside him and stared up at the ceiling.

“Hey, buddy.” Parnell felt drunk with pleasure. “You lost that round.”

Navarro shrugged. “I know.” His flat tone stripped away Parnell’s satisfaction.

The mattress dipped as Navarro rose, and he went into the bathroom, leaving the door open as he washed. At his abrupt departure, Parnell tried to sort through his conflicting thoughts. For too long he had craved Navarro’s touch every moment of every day. Before Navarro, he had attempted to avoid taking lovers, even though going without sex felt like denying himself food. He’d feared he might find one skilled enough to use pleasure to enslave him. He stayed with Navarro because he sensed their emotional connection ran both ways as it deepened, but that brought its own vulnerability. If the outside world knew that they cared for each other, an enemy had only to strike at one of them to harm the other—a danger that Navarro seemed to disregard. The things he’d started to say, right in midfuck. “*Be mine.*”

Parnell closed his eyes, listening to Navarro cross the room, and the sheet rustled, ghosting over his back as Navarro drew it up. “Time to go?” he asked.

“Soon.”

He stretched as Navarro lifted his forearm clear of the sheet, and metal clamped around his wrist with a familiar ratcheting sound. Parnell shot up on his elbow in a panic and pulled against the handcuffs that locked him to the metal bed frame. At full strength, he might have snapped the chain. Now it held, the impact

numbing his arm from wrist to shoulder before pain returned, and he realized the sex magic hadn't restored him.

He stared at Navarro through the damp hair falling in his eyes. "What the fuck?"

Navarro, dressed in black boxer briefs, watched him. "Can't you break free?"

Parnell screamed in rage, lunging off the bed, but the cuffs held, and he sprawled to his knees on the carpet. Even so, anger felt better than fear. He grabbed the table lamp by its heavy ceramic base and threw it at Navarro, who deflected it with arm and shoulder. It clunked against the wall, leaving a dent in the plaster.

"Keep it down!" Navarro said. "You want someone to call the cops?"

Parnell slapped his free hand over the phone on the bedside table, and the receiver clattered free in a tangle of plastic cord, the dial tone blaring. Who could he call? The front desk? Should he try to fight back, naked and handcuffed? Navarro ripped the phone from the wall, threw it jangling across the room, and towered over Parnell, clenching his fists.

"So the barrier fucked you over?" he asked. "That's something I *need to know*."

"Back off!" Parnell jerked his wrist against the cuffs, trying not to hyperventilate.

"Why did it damage only you? Why not me?"

"It happened. Get over it." Parnell wouldn't tolerate Navarro treating him with guilt or pity. "Who cares why?"

"Because we have to *return* through the barrier!"

Navarro flushed red, shaking with rage as Parnell pressed against the bedside table, fumbling for something else to throw. How could they segue so fast from fucking to fighting? They hadn't had a fistfight since the days when they didn't know one another well, and now Navarro looked ready to tear him apart. The drawer opened a crack, and when Parnell dipped his fingers inside, pain blistered

the tips. He yanked his hand back, glimpsing a shiny red Gideon Bible inside, and snapped his gaze to Navarro.

“Don’t hide things from me,” Navarro said. “Not on a mission.”

“Hand over the key.” Parnell tried to draw strength from his anger as his energy plunged, leaving him cold and dizzy. It never lasted long, the power one could harvest through sex magic from a couple of orgasms, but it should have lasted longer than this. His energy boost had just run out. That meant the barrier had injured him even worse than he’d thought. He couldn’t believe how vulnerable he felt, naked and handcuffed to the bed, on his knees on this gritty carpet. He resisted an almost uncontrollable urge to cover his genitals with his free hand as Navarro’s hard stare raked over him. He shifted his weight and turned his shoulder toward Navarro, keeping in profile so at least he didn’t have to face him like a target.

“You’re going to get us killed.” Navarro enunciated each word, forcing them like a knife under Parnell’s skin. “Because you’re afraid to ask for help. Afraid to tell me the truth. You selfish coward. You’re afraid to trust m—”

“Go to hell,” Parnell said in a parched voice.

Navarro swept his belt up from the floor and slashed it across Parnell’s shoulder, making him hiss in shock. Parnell had an instant to turn and shield his face as Navarro swung the belt again, full-strength and too fast to grab. *Out of control*. The leather sliced into Parnell’s back as if to peel him open, forcing a grunt of pain through his clenched teeth, and Navarro struck him twice more. The raised welts stung as sweat beaded on his skin, and he surged against the bedside table, crowding it against the wall.

“You think that hurts?” Navarro said. “Wait till you get us both killed!”

He reversed the belt and swung it, smashing the buckle like a vicious punch into Parnell’s shoulder. Parnell strained against the handcuffs as panic rose like a black wave inside him, dissolving his human veneer into grains of sand. He wouldn’t take it from Navarro. He wasn’t his slave. He wouldn’t submit—

“Wait till you die and you’re back in hell!” Navarro said.

He swung the belt, and Parnell lunged, snarling as the buckle popped across his knuckles, and he ripped the belt from Navarro's grasp. Their gazes locked as distant traffic droned past on the highway. Navarro backed off, remorse and deep resentment flashing across his face, and his stare turned chilly and remote.

Parnell had seen this look before. The gears had begun to turn in Navarro's head, weighing pros and cons and calculating Parnell's net worth against the pain he caused. Parnell crouched against the bedside table, afraid to breathe, feeling as if he were condemned and waiting for a sentence from the bench. Navarro's lips trembled and compressed, and Parnell felt a burst of compassion at his anguish.

"I'm stronger than you are," Navarro said. "You'll do as I say."

His compassion dissolved into dust. "You don't own me."

"I did fifteen minutes ago," Navarro sneered. "You seemed to enjoy it."

Dull rage expanded beneath Parnell's breastbone, and humiliation followed, making him jerk against the handcuffs and wrench his gaze away from Navarro. Never again, he thought. But the resolution felt too familiar. How many times before had he sworn off Navarro, only to have his lust erode his better judgment?

"I'm going out," Navarro said. "I'm calling the Cadre for news."

Well, that made things even worse. With Navarro established as the point of contact to which to relay orders, the higher-ups would see Parnell as his lackey. Parnell watched as Navarro gathered his clothing and went to the bathroom to undergo his calming ritual of shaving and dressing. He realized he still gripped Navarro's belt in his fist and tossed it under the bed. Curling his blistered fingertips into his palm, he remembered the Gideon Bible in the drawer.

Navarro emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later, resplendent in his charcoal gray suit, looking ready to present an opening argument in court. Closer inspection revealed shadows of fatigue that underscored his eyes, and Parnell felt a half-conscious worry for Navarro beneath his greater desire to knock him flat on his ass.

"Please," he ground out. "Don't leave me here naked."

Navarro rummaged in his overnight bag and tossed jeans and a T-shirt on the bed. The shirt billowed, revealing a printed black-and-white photo of young Oppenheimer with a caption that read, *First Director of Los Alamos National Laboratory, 1945*. Parnell pulled the shirt over his head but couldn't put his arms through the sleeves with his wrist handcuffed, so he left the fabric bunched around his neck.

He fumbled for the jeans as he sent a resentful stare at Navarro's fine clothes. Navarro could have handed him his suit, but no. Clothes showed status within the Cadre. Navarro now looked like the lead attorney on an important case, and he intended Parnell to feel like the guy they'd send out for coffee.

"What, no boxers?" Parnell wanted to put his fist through the wall. "No black silk thong?"

"One less thing to rip off you later." Lust and anger darkened Navarro's voice.

"Oh, very funny."

Navarro strode out the door, and the night sky tilted into view past his head before he pulled the door shut. It bounced in its frame, swinging ajar as an 18-wheeler rumbled past on the highway. Parnell worked the jeans on with one hand, trying to smooth his pubic hair away from the teeth of the zipper. He trembled with humiliated rage. The welts on his back stung, and he ached inside, stretched and sore from taking Navarro's cock.

He had started this mission at a disadvantage when Navarro received their orders first, tracked him down through the Collective, and pulled him out of a poker game, insisting they leave Las Vegas at that moment, which left Parnell no time to pack. He couldn't retrieve his favorite weapon, a SIG SAUER SPC 2022 with an extra fifteen-round magazine and silencer, so that left him unarmed and dependent upon Navarro even before Navarro's fear had ripped him open, allowing the barrier to wreck his strength. If he didn't take the mission for himself *now*, he might as well be Navarro's slave.

He managed to reach his discarded suit and transfer his wallet and cell phone to his jeans pockets. After shielding his hand inside a pillowcase, he retrieved the Gideon Bible and tucked it under the bed. Brief contact with the book would cause no lasting harm, but even so, he broke into a sweat as if in proximity to fissionable material about to go supercritical. The irony made him smile as he reminded himself that soon the Good Book would set him free.

Navarro's footsteps neared from across the parking lot. He reached the doorway and hesitated as if they were strangers. "The Cadre just intercepted a call to Hidalgo. He's headed to New Mexico to hunt down Chavez."

Parnell struggled with his anger, suppressing it beneath his stronger need for information. He forced out a few grudging words. "Hidalgo must have a death wish. The higher-ups will order us to tear him apart."

"Yeah, but he's an angel, right?" Navarro gave a tense shrug instead of his usual amused smile. "He assumes he's going straight to heaven."

"Who called Hidalgo?" He couldn't look at Navarro for long when his resentment still simmered hot and tight beneath his breastbone.

"*Chavez*. He's threatening to become the keeper of Albuquerque. If angels and demons can become keepers, why not an angel-demon hybrid? Not only that, he's going to claim the city on Sunday. *Easter*. Can you imagine?" Navarro's eyes flashed as he warmed to the subject. "Instant power, but amplified by two thousand years of focused belief. He could..." He trailed off, his eyes heavy lidded with pleasure, as if he imagined claiming the power for himself.

"Take over Mexico?" Parnell blurted. *Keeper*. The word reverberated inside his mind.

"Sure. Why not? He says he's going to use the power to burn Hidalgo to ash."

"We can kill Hidalgo for him," Parnell said. "But we can't let anyone take the city."

"That's why I need your cooperation," Navarro said. "But you'll do as *I* say."

He approached to unlock the handcuffs and poised himself to block Parnell from springing up. Instead, as the metal circle snapped open, Parnell dropped to his knees on the carpet and tackled Navarro across the opposite bed. Navarro lunged up on one elbow, and Parnell swung with the Bible gripped through the pillowcase.

The bare cover smacked Navarro in the face, and he toppled to the bed as if he'd walked into a knockout punch and started to slide to the floor. Parnell couldn't deny how gratifying he found that, and his anger flared as he considered letting Navarro drop. Instead a grudging protectiveness made him break Navarro's fall, and he slid an arm under his shoulders. Navarro's weight made Parnell exhale hard as he lowered him to the floor.

Navarro sprawled across the worn carpet, head tipped back to reveal a freshly shaven throat. His cheekbone, reddened from its contact with the Bible, would soon blister and peel. He looked so refined, so handsome, so strikingly out of place in his three-thousand-dollar suit, lying on the floor of a fifty-dollar-per-night room, that Parnell didn't know what to call such a tableau. Perhaps "Vanquished Demon Lawyer." He burst into nervous laughter as he stripped Navarro of cash, cell phone, car keys, and the .357 Magnum.

Navarro's lush dark lashes fluttered as his fingers flexed in the shag carpet. After grabbing his shoes, Parnell sprinted outside, where a cold wind scraped trash across the parking lot and chilled his bare feet. He reached the Porsche at a dead run, powering off the locks with Navarro's remote, and floored the accelerator as Navarro dashed from the motel room.

In seconds, he reached I-40 and headed east toward Albuquerque. An 18-wheeler chugged west on the opposite highway, and Parnell blazed past, leaving it frozen on the desert landscape, where it vanished far behind him. He glanced at the speedometer and checked it again as it read 120 miles per hour and climbing. He eased off the accelerator, worked his T-shirt on the rest of the way, and stuffed the .357 Magnum into the glove compartment.

The cell phones rang—first his, then Navarro’s—both showing the 505 New Mexico area code. He imagined Navarro pacing the motel room and trying to get through, but he had seized the mission for himself, and he would get the credit. Profound relief flooded through him, sharp as broken glass.

Chapter Three

Parnell reduced his speed to seventy miles per hour, which would attract no attention, and followed I-40 southeast in a vast, sweeping curve that carried him through the silent town of Grants at 0430 hours as the night sky billowed onward. He felt alone and insignificant under the canopy of stars, and he wondered, as always, why he'd been allowed to escape hell.

Sometimes he thought he might be the only demon who found the mystery surrounding the Cadre's purpose to be a heavy emotional burden. Why had they come to earth? To fulfill their part of a divine plan? Most, including Navarro, believed their liberation had been random and that they should live life to the fullest before death removed them from the physical plane of existence. With no way to know, Parnell envied those humans guided by their religious faith.

Meanwhile, he remained alone. But he usually worked alone or sometimes with Navarro, guarding the secrecy of the demons while they interfaced with humankind and the enslavers. It left him little time for metaphysical questions about purpose. The Cadre paid him generously from its fortune amassed from decades of managing the salaries of demons laboring in the human workforce. Few demons were chosen to retire from their jobs to serve Cadre interests full-time, but Parnell had received that dubious honor. Of course, no one told him why, and he dared not ask. Fatigue sank into his bones as he drove, and he remembered the barrier ripping him apart.

Would he ever manage to heal and regain his strength? Intuition told him no. He tried to shrug off his fear, but the exhaustion that dragged at him made him bone weary. It seeped into his soul, threatening to worsen over time until it

dissolved his essence and turned him into a mindless lump of flesh. He could ignore the damage done to him, but not for long. It felt like slow annihilation.

His thoughts returned to Navarro, who had reduced him to this, and he wondered at his lack of resentment. Instead he felt emptiness. At least he knew Navarro hadn't harmed him on purpose. Parnell considered this, and a different emotion rose past the despair in his heart. Gratitude, clean and profound. Navarro hadn't acted with malicious intent, and that meant a lot. It meant he could be trusted.

Thoughts of Navarro gave him renewed purpose, and he turned his thoughts toward survival. Nothing could make him return to Las Vegas too weak to defend himself. If he did that, Mr. Sanchez would come for him. Navarro would defend him, and fighting a keeper like Mr. Sanchez would get Navarro killed and sent to hell. Parnell gripped the steering wheel as his hands turned to ice. He couldn't bear to consider it. He would rather go to Albuquerque on Easter and take power for himself.

The idea took shape like a fever dream. As a keeper, he'd have enormous power to heal himself and fight back, tapping into the psychic energy generated by the population of his city. For a keeper, such power welled up like groundwater via the Collective, cycling through the keeper-city bond. He could use what he needed and let the excess pass into the earth of his city to complete the closed circuit.

Parnell considered the downside. The keeper-city bond lasted for life, and it made a keeper vulnerable. If separated from his city, he would last exactly six months before the pent-up power streaming through his bond burned him out like an overloaded circuit. Excess power needed to return to the earth of its city. Decades ago, those demons who had claimed cities without the Cadre leader's permission were sentenced to death by separation.

Sometimes he wondered if keepers were supposed to fulfill a greater purpose than just holding and guarding raw power. Were they intended to serve the two sources of their power—the land itself and its population, whose collected

unconscious they could access through the Collective? Maybe being a true keeper involved sacrifice, like the chosen one in ancient times who ruled the land as a king for a year and a day and then willingly drained his blood into the soil to ensure a good harvest. Parnell snorted as he imagined a midlevel demon like him asking the Cadre leader, Ms. Lancaster, whom he'd only ever met at official functions.

Ms. Lancaster had become the first keeper by accident in 1945, when she had first visited Las Vegas and walked among the Mormon settlements from the 1850s. A two-way connection had blazed to life, revealing that the power of every city resides in the oldest spot, waiting to claim the first to arrive with potential to use it. Immediately Ms. Lancaster had assigned all the nearby cities to demons, except for Tucson and Phoenix, which the enslavers grabbed first.

Of course, New Mexico remained significant to the Cadre. If Parnell took Albuquerque, the Cadre would come for him, especially because of the extra power boost he would receive on Easter that would make him stronger than most keepers. What would it be like to have that kind of power, amplified by two thousand years of focused belief? Would the Cadre kill him for insurrection? Let them try.

He stared east, recognizing the lights of Albuquerque sprawling across the base of the Sandia Crest, which bulked its darker mass against the night sky. At 0600 hours, he entered the city limits, and the highway swept him over the Rio Grande, immortalized in movies and novels and songs. Water glinted under the bridge lights as sandbars broke up its wide, curving sprawl. His headlights picked out a white-on-green highway sign: EXIT 157A—RIO GRANDE BLVD. 1/2 MILE, and beyond it, HISTORIC OLD TOWN.

At Old Town, he circled the perimeter, investigating the ways into the maze of silent shops. Thick stucco walls blocked his line of sight, and *ristras* of red chile peppers swayed from the rough-hewn beams as the breeze picked up. A side street led him to the tiny plaza where grass alternating with brick walkways surrounded a gazebo-style bandstand. To the north sat the San Felipe de Neri Church. The power to claim the city lay within.

Chavez had to be nearby, staking out the place to kill any competitors while he waited for Easter. Parnell parked in front of the church, and silence stretched. Behind the thick walls of its front courtyard, the church sat wrapped in sleeping power. Inadequate adjectives sprang to his mind: old, perilous, and Catholic.

Now he faced the flaw in his plans: the power to claim the city lay inside a *church*. Parnell imagined crossing the threshold and bursting into flames. Would an angel-demon hybrid such as Chavez have to worry about that? It had happened to a demon who stepped inside a Denver church in 1946, and Parnell remembered collapsing from the residual pain that had flooded into the Collective in that instant. No demon had trespassed sacred ground ever again.

He rubbed the tension from his neck, thinking it through. The demon had burned up in a Denver church, and Denver already *had* a keeper, so there was no sleeping power to claim. In addition, the church wasn't the oldest spot in Denver, which also might have conferred protection upon a would-be keeper. If Parnell were to claim power in the oldest spot in Albuquerque, would the act be enough to protect him from burning up even though he'd have to enter a church to do so?

Most demons who were keepers had claimed power on secular ground because most western cities in the United States didn't happen to have their oldest spot located in a church. But one demon had set the precedent that Parnell needed. Mr. Sanchez had been forced to seize control of El Paso through the Ysleta Mission. If someone as corrupt as Mr. Sanchez could take power on holy ground and survive, then surely Parnell could as well.

Parnell pocketed both cell phones and left the revolver in the glove compartment. His watch read 0615, and dawning light edged the Sandia Crest as he climbed out of the car, leaving his shoes behind for the moment. He stood barefoot on the cold asphalt, stretching the stiffness from his legs and back. The breeze flattened his T-shirt against his chest.

"Don't move," said a man with a Mexican accent.

"Chavez?" Parnell asked.

“Get your hands up.” Streetlight glinted on a gun barrel.

Parnell lifted his palms to shoulder height. To his left, Chavez waited out of reach, aiming what looked like an M1911 semiautomatic .45 caliber pistol—a damn big gun—at him. Any closer and Parnell might have disarmed him for fun—or maybe not, considering how Chavez held the pistol. Beginners always squared their shoulders to the target to control recoil, but he stood sideways in a Weaver stance that narrowed his body mass, and he had the steady hands of a professional.

For an angel-demon hybrid, he appeared ordinary, passing for human maybe even better than most angels or demons did. The breeze ruffled his longish dark hair. He looked about six feet tall and was wearing a flannel shirt with the shirttail hanging over his cheap jeans. Hard labor had shaped his powerful shoulders, and he had the trim boyish hips of a horseman. Angels and demons all had an ageless look, somewhere around thirty-five, but Chavez looked *young*, no older than his early twenties.

“Lift up your shirt,” Chavez said. “Turn around slowly.”

“You want to check out my ass?” Parnell laughed.

Chavez’s dark eyes flared with anger. “I’m about to kick your ass, *vato*. Do it.”

The breeze chilled Parnell’s skin as he obeyed. “See? No weapons.”

“Show me your ankles.”

Parnell tugged up the legs of his jeans to prove he didn’t have an ankle holster. They stared at each other as Chavez hesitated and tucked the pistol under his shirt. He stepped closer, narrowing the conversational distance as people south of the border tended to do. It sent a thrill of desire through Parnell even as he inhaled the chemical tang of industrial soap on Chavez’s skin.

Obviously Chavez had been trying to wash up in gas-station restrooms. Beneath lay the faint scent of his sweaty skin from days on the road. He needed a real shower, and Parnell took dark pleasure in a fantasy of joining Chavez and soaping up that firm body. Anything to supplant his memory of his shower with Navarro in Gallup and the humiliation that had followed. Parnell’s anger flared as

his T-shirt shifted over the welts Navarro had slashed into his back. Fantasizing about Chavez made him feel guilty, and that only increased his resentment toward Navarro. Chavez gave him a careful once-over. "Where are your shoes?"

"In the car. It's a long story."

"What's your name?"

Parnell eyed him, and Chavez flushed, returning his stare. Obviously Chavez understood demon name etiquette enough to want to push him. To give one's name with no fear while adding an insulting trace of scorn could make the recipient feel insignificant, and Parnell knew just how to do it. He put on an arrogant smile, running a dismissive gaze over Chavez, and handed out all three names. "Jaye Robert Parnell."

Chavez's lips tightened, but he attempted to laugh it off. "J. Robert, huh? Just like your T-shirt. You my rescue?"

"You want sanctuary? You got it. We can be in Vegas by this evening." Parnell checked his watch, knowing Hidalgo would be en route and Navarro too.

"We're on my timetable, vato," Chavez said. "I got a loose end to wrap up."

"We know about your Easter plans," Parnell said. "Stay away from that church."

Chavez laughed, but it sounded forced. "You intercepted my call."

"I'm sure you know the Cadre is watching Hidalgo."

"Relax," Chavez said. "I don't want to claim the city. I was baiting *him*. That's all."

"Why don't you come with me and let the Cadre take care of Hidalgo?"

"Back off." Chavez's eyes flashed. "He's mine."

"He's the keeper of Juarez, and you're what? A low-level slave? Let us handle him."

"Fuck that! I took the risk to lure him here. I get to kill him."

Blood rose, heating Parnell's skin as they faced each other. Navarro might have been the one, with his cool poise, to eclipse all other men in Parnell's eyes, but the reckless type attracted him every time. Chavez looked like he wanted to fight, despite Parnell standing three inches taller and outweighing him by maybe twenty pounds.

Chavez closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He lowered his voice. "Why do you think I ask for sanctuary? I can't go on working for him. He's depraved."

"You think we're not?" Parnell wanted to laugh. He shook his head in disbelief.

"Even with everything I hear about the Cadre...no, you're still not as bad as him."

"Look, what's your name?" Parnell tried for a casual tone.

"You know who I am."

"Your given name. C'mon, I told you mine." Had the enslavers taught Chavez to observe the same name taboos as the Cadre did? Parnell couldn't imagine why. He'd never heard of humans stealing names to summon *angels* to do their bidding.

Chavez sighed. "Roberto."

Parnell tried to hide his surprise. "For Oppenheimer? I thought enslavers didn't—"

"It's just a name, vato. I have my father's name. So I was told."

Angels and demons were never born and had no fathers. Parnell wondered what it would be like to be an angel-demon hybrid, born of parents on the physical plane of existence. He wished he dared push for answers, but Chavez fell silent, his eyes glazing over, and Parnell sensed him about to unravel. "Roberto? Bob? *Bobby*."

The nickname made Chavez's eyes flare with annoyance. "What?"

"Let's talk over breakfast."

Back in the car, Parnell wedged on his dress shoes, which looked strange with jeans and no socks. They found a diner where they were the only customers. An elderly Hispanic waitress emerged from the kitchen to show them to a booth. Her

head didn't even reach Parnell's shoulder, and her hair, shoe-polish black, curled like feathers. His face went cold as he spotted the silver crucifix she wore on a chain around her neck.

"This okay?" She stopped next to a booth that overlooked their parking spot.

He and Chavez slid into the vinyl seats, facing each other, and Parnell offered the waitress an insincere smile, which she ignored. She slapped down two huge laminated menus. "*Bueno.*" Her shoes squeaked as she turned and marched to the kitchen.

Hmmm, could she be psychic? Some humans took a strong dislike to the fallen without knowing why. Parnell glanced at Chavez, catching him in midstare, not watching the waitress or her crucifix. No. Chavez had been checking *him* out. It almost made Parnell smile though he knew it probably meant nothing. Usually Navarro scored all the attention with his striking good looks.

Chavez blurted, "You as curious about me as I am about you?"

Parnell gave a slow nod. "Have you ever dealt with the Cadre?"

"No. You're my first."

It sounded sexual. Parnell gave him a mocking smile.

Flushing, Chavez dropped his gaze. "So you intercepted my call."

"The Cadre keeps a close eye on Hidalgo. Lately he's been tearing up El Paso and Juarez, killing people." Parnell watched Chavez, wishing he dared to try to find out more about angel-demon hybrids. The Cadre higher-ups had placed the subject under a need-to-know restriction that exceeded his clearance level. "You helping him with that?"

Chavez looked pained. "He tells me to kill? I have to do it."

"So he owns you."

"Not anymore."

"We guessed as much when you ran and he followed. You want to kill him?"

"You a cop, vato?" His eyes narrowed. "You have something of that demeanor."

“Demeanor?” Parnell sneered. “Fancy word for a minor hit man.”

“Oh, I’m minor?” Chavez’s gaze grew heated, but his lips curved in amusement. “Is that why I rate only one demon such as you for my rescue?”

Parnell laughed, and their gazes locked. A sunburst of gold ringed Chavez’s pupils, turning the brown irises amber—nothing like Navarro’s midnight black eyes. His stare wavered as his tongue touched his parted lips, and he let his gaze drop to caress Parnell’s mouth and lift in bold invitation. It left Parnell speechless.

The waitress approached with coffee, and Chavez turned to give her his cup. No question he had sex appeal and knew how to use it. Parnell forced down an uneasy surge of lust, suspicion, and embarrassment. Did he look that easy to manipulate? What did Chavez hope to gain?

“You know what you want?” The waitress doled out a grudging shot of coffee for Parnell.

“Yes, ma’am.” Parnell averted his gaze from her crucifix and decided to order the usual amount of food demons needed because of their high metabolism, even though it would look excessive to humans. “The steak and eggs with the eggs scrambled and the steak medium rare—”

Her lip curled. “You get it only one way here.”

“Okay, fine. Two side orders of toast and hash browns. Also, the huevos rancheros breakfast with two eggs, fried, and green chile. And a bowl of oatmeal.”

She scribbled on her order pad, flipped it shut, and gave Chavez a hard stare. Obviously she thought Parnell had ordered for both of them, which made them a couple. Chavez looked embarrassed. He dropped his gaze to his scraped and battered knuckles and started to conceal his hands under the table.

“That’s for me,” Parnell said. “Know what you want, Bobby? Don’t hold back.”

Chavez hesitated. He handed over the menus. “The same.”

Their waitress's stare crawled over them, and she marched back to the kitchen. Parnell sipped his coffee and assumed a calm expression. "So? You want to skip breakfast and go fuck?"

"What?" Chavez's eyes widened.

"That was some look you just gave me."

"First, the breakfast," Chavez said, deadpan, recovering fast. "I have my price."

Parnell's wariness shaded into amusement. "And after?"

"We'll see."

He decided to push him. "You're not just offering me your ass so *I'll* kill Hidalgo?"

Chavez's eyes went black. "I don't have to listen to this."

"Wait." Parnell switched tactics. "Stay, Bobby. At least eat breakfast."

"My *name* is Roberto."

"I know. Sorry." Parnell struggled hard not to laugh at how seriously Chavez took himself. "Look, tell me what you want."

"I want you to stand down, *Parnell*, while I kill Hidalgo. Then we can leave."

"Okay, but you need me to tell you where he is. As soon as he gets to town, he'll start making calls, and the Cadre will know his location." Parnell watched Chavez's gaze go unfocused as his body betrayed a listening tension. "Let's take the fight to him. Don't wait until Easter. Let's kill him today."

"Where is he?"

"He's not here yet. I'll get a phone call. We've still got time."

"For what?" Chavez gave him a challenging stare.

"Breakfast." His pulse increased even as he forced down guilt over Navarro. "A quick fuck. Whatever you want."

Chavez appeared to be thinking it over. They sat in silence, and soon the kitchen door swung open as their waitress emerged with a stocky Hispanic man—

probably the cook—who carried their breakfast on a huge tray. He wore a food-stained apron tied over his jeans, and his biceps bulged beneath the rolled sleeves of his T-shirt. His expression remained so bland that it only emphasized his obvious curiosity about them.

“Thank you,” Parnell said, meaning *leave us*.

“No problem.” The cook gave an annoyed half shrug as he and the waitress exchanged glances. They both retreated to the kitchen.

Parnell looked down at the steaming food, so hungry that he felt lightheaded. Chavez’s throat moved as he swallowed, and he seemed hypnotized by the food. He must have been starving during his days on the road since he first fled from Juarez.

“Eat.” Parnell couldn’t resist needling him. “Unless you want to pray first.”

Chavez rewarded him with a scornful smile. Parnell started in on the huevos rancheros and almost groaned in delight at the heat of it and the blend of the spicy salsa with the rich egg yolks. He stirred in the refried beans, eager for a new taste. Meanwhile Chavez stared at his food with full attention, picked up his fork, and took a small bite of egg. Intense emotion, almost anguish, flashed across his face as he began to eat.

They burned through their breakfast like competitive eaters at a national contest, and Parnell darted glances at Chavez, marveling at how he came to be eating breakfast with an angel-demon hybrid. “So what’s Hidalgo doing in Juarez?” Parnell asked. “The killings? The abductions?”

“You’re doing that cop routine again, vato.”

Okay, he’d have to drop the subject of Hidalgo if he hoped to build any rapport. Parnell washed down the next bite of food with coffee and decided he needed to open up. “I was a cop for twenty years. A lawyer for the next thirty.”

That earned him a second look. Chavez ate, studying him. “For the Cadre?”

“For various district attorneys inside Cadre territory.”

“A demon working for the prosecution?”

"It fit my personality."

"You still a lawyer? No? What do you do now?"

I commit murder for the Cadre, Parnell thought. "I play poker."

Chavez tried for polite if unconvincing interest. "Texas Hold'em?"

"Are you kidding? Seven-card stud."

"You're just an old-fashioned guy, huh?"

Parnell glanced up and caught that look again—direct, appraising, and hot. It made him drop his gaze even as his cock swelled against his zipper. He thought of Navarro and forced down his anger and guilt. "Roberto," he said.

"So now you address me with respect?" Chavez's mouth took on a smug tilt.

"Look, Hidalgo is stronger than you. He's the keeper of Juarez. He owned you."

"You think I can't handle him myself?"

"I'm just pointing out the risk. Suicides don't get back into heaven." Parnell wondered where an angel-demon hybrid would go after death. Did it depend upon his actions? Chavez's face froze. He looked far from certain where he'd end up after death. "I'll kill him if you want," Parnell said. "Or I'll help, and you can take the credit."

"Why would you help me?"

"You're a bigger prize than he is. You're an angel-demon hybrid."

"So I'm your prize, huh? Not if I don't cooperate."

"That's what I'm saying. What do I have to do to...*obtain* your cooperation?"

"I wouldn't mind a fuck." Chavez's voice grew rough. "Just to raise energy."

He didn't have to make excuses. Forcing away thoughts of Navarro, Parnell let his gaze drift over Chavez, imagining that hard, muscled body beneath him. He wouldn't mind a fuck either. It would give them pleasure and help him to forget the humiliation he had suffered at Navarro's hands. Navarro, who had many lovers back in Vegas. Why shouldn't he—

It suddenly occurred to him that he could use sex magic on Chavez. Maybe he could shape the energy they would raise anyway through fucking and overwhelm Chavez's mind, sending him to sleep for a few hours. It shouldn't be hard, he thought, noting the weary tension in the lines of Chavez's body. That would put Chavez out of harm's way while he tracked down Hidalgo.

He remembered his last attempt at sex magic back in Gallup. The effect had only been short-lived, which told him that his own weakness required a more permanent solution than sex magic, but he couldn't afford to think about that now.

He forced his thoughts back to Chavez. He could do what he needed with sex magic to keep Chavez out of the way. After all, it amounted to no more than psychic manipulation by someone with greater ability to use the Collective over someone with lesser ability. Chavez had already admitted to the Cadre when he'd asked for sanctuary that he had only limited psychic ability, and Cadre intelligence had confirmed it.

The waitress approached with a suspicious glare and handed over their check. Parnell paid and left a 20 percent tip on the table. Long ago, before he had enrolled in the Denver Police Academy, he had waited tables in a diner, and just because he was fallen didn't mean he was cheap. He led Chavez outside, scanning the parking lot for danger.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll stop by the drugstore first."

"Okay. Do it," Chavez said, and they got into the Porsche.

Chapter Four

They checked into Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town with their toothpaste, toothbrushes, shaving supplies, and lube, and got a room on the tenth floor. Chavez grabbed the entire bag of toiletries and disappeared into the bathroom. He shut the door, and the lock clicked on, so that meant no soaping each other up in the shower.

Parnell shrugged off his disappointment and used the room phone to call the concierge to arrange for someone to pick up casual clothes and shoes in both his and Chavez's sizes. He sat on the bed, lining up his two cell phones on the pillow, and his rang two seconds later with a New Mexico area code. This time he answered.

"Where are you?" Navarro sounded furious. Even so, his voice tugged at Parnell's heart.

"Albuquerque. And you?"

"Where *exactly* are you?"

"Never mind that." Parnell couldn't help gloating. "I have Chavez."

"Wait, don't hang up!" Navarro's angry tone shaded into worry. "What about Hidalgo?"

"I don't know." Parnell's satisfaction ebbed away as he realized he wanted Navarro. If they could put aside their power struggle even just long enough to talk about the assignment, it would help fill the craving inside him. "No news from Vegas."

"Let me help. Don't try to take Hidalgo alone. He's a keeper, and he'll have backup."

Parnell remained still, unable to hang up. He listened to Navarro breathe.

“Please,” Navarro forced out. “C’mon, Jaye. You can take credit for the mission.”

Parnell’s throat tightened. “I’ve got to go.”

He disconnected, and the other phone—Navarro’s—rang with a 702 area code from Vegas. His hands grew sweaty as he answered. “Parnell.”

“We intercepted another call from Hidalgo.” The woman didn’t acknowledge his name, and it took Parnell a second to place her as Ms. Trujillo, personal assistant to Ms. Lancaster. Navarro had neglected to mention that their orders were coming from so lofty a source. In his surprise, Parnell almost dropped the phone, and Ms. Trujillo asked, “You there?”

“Yes, ma’am. Hidalgo’s in Albuquerque?”

“With four enslavers and two humans to drive them around in two luxury sedans.” She rattled off the Mexican plate numbers and descriptions of the cars, which Parnell committed to memory. “Here’s the dump where he’s checked in.” She recited an address, and he memorized that as well.

“Ma’am?” he asked. “What’s the name of the motel?”

Ms. Trujillo snorted. “You’ll need to see it for yourself to fully appreciate it.”

Parnell filed that away for later. “How will we know Hidalgo?”

“He looks like a young, dissipated Omar Sharif.”

He wouldn’t have guessed she was a movie buff. “We need a little more than that.”

“Big flashy knife scar on his brow that he never got fixed.” She laughed. “*Es muy hombre.*”

Great, Parnell thought, already forming an image of the keeper of Juarez. He’d probably have to dice Hidalgo into little pieces to stop him. “Orders?”

“Kill him.” Ms. Trujillo’s voice sharpened. “New Mexico is off-limits to the enslavers.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He forced down his dread, knowing that even damaged, he could do the job.

“You have carte blanche to kill any of his employees.”

“Even the humans?” His gut twisted, and he hoped that they were deprived *pistoleros*.

“We can’t afford to pull punches. Not this close to Easter.”

“Understood,” he said, feeling unclean. “I’ll call when we’re done.”

“See that you do.” She disconnected.

The shower shut off. Water trickled into the bathroom sink as Chavez started brushing his teeth. Parnell wondered how best to use sex magic to send Chavez to sleep, especially with the barrier interfering with his access to the Collective. Under normal circumstances, he had only to connect his mind to the Collective to feel it pulsing all around him like a great river of energy. It verged on a tactile sensation, which he would use to shape energy with swift assurance, much as a sculptor shapes clay, guided by the feeling of the raw material itself.

He had never before had to deal with something like the barrier. It would probably make accessing the Collective feel like placing his hands on clay and trying to sculpt with no sense of touch. How did nonpsychic humans manage to manipulate energy? Without access to the Collective, Parnell might as well be one of them, yet they did it. A judge back in Vegas used to listen to guided imagery CDs in his chambers to improve his golf swing, and Parnell could always sense him unknowingly working a tiny magic through the Collective. Visualization might be the way to go with Chavez, though Parnell knew he would probably feel as if he were fumbling through a set of empty mental exercises without direct feedback until the result. Either Chavez would fall into an enchanted sleep or he wouldn’t.

The bathroom door opened, releasing steamy heat as Chavez emerged with a towel wrapped around his hips, carrying his pistol in its battered canvas holster. He tossed the bottle of lube, but Parnell missed the catch from staring at him, and the bottle thumped to the pillow.

Oh, he was beautiful. The sun had burned his arms, neck, and face brown while leaving the rest of his body pale bronze. A scattering of chest hair surrounded his flat, dark nipples, which had tightened in the cool air of the room. Chavez was no pistolero with tattoos inked like sleeves over his arms, but he did have one knife scar on his wrist, and his lean musculature gave him the appearance of a professional boxer.

Chavez gave a slight smile. "You still want to?"

"If you put away the gun." Parnell returned his smile.

The pistol disappeared into the drawer of the bedside table, presumably with the inevitable Bible, but Parnell no longer wanted to remember Navarro beating him with a belt back in Gallup. He rose, trembling with nerves, and put his hand on Chavez's shoulder, which felt hot and damp from the shower. He half expected Chavez to shrug off his touch.

Instead Chavez waited, and his gaze went heavy lidded, fixed on Parnell's throat. He'd combed back his wet hair, which set off his even features, and his chest moved with his slow breathing. Self-consciousness crept over Parnell as he realized that without access to the Collective, he had no idea if Chavez even wanted him.

Tilting his head, Parnell leaned in for a kiss, and Chavez drew back with a scorching stare. He looked shocked and indignant. Parnell tried not to smile, but he found it both funny and hot. "You'll give me your ass, but you won't let me kiss you?"

"Take it or leave it." Chavez's gaze grew insolent.

Parnell moved his hands to Chavez's waist, careful not to disturb the towel, and when that met with no objection, he eased the both of them down to the extrafirm mattress, which resisted their combined weight. Chavez knelt and Parnell sat, propping himself up on his arm.

"Take your clothes off," Chavez said.

Parnell gave him a lazy smile. "Make me."

In one smooth motion, Chavez shoved him flat on his back and straddled his hips. Parnell winced at the sudden pressure on the welts on his back. He drew a startled breath as Chavez ripped his T-shirt up over his chest, head, and arms, and wound the cloth around Parnell's wrists, pinning them to the mattress.

Oh yeah. Now Chavez had him desperately excited, and Parnell feared he might lose it and cream his jeans. In a daze of pleasure, he stretched out beneath Chavez, who leaned on his bound wrists. The towel had come loose, leaving Chavez's good-size erection pressing hot against Parnell's stomach.

"You like this," Parnell said.

"You like it even more." Chavez's eyes glittered in his flushed face. He lowered one hand and swirled his fingertips in the cloud of fine brown hair that fanned over Parnell's chest and stomach and thickened into a heavy line that disappeared into the low-slung waistband of his jeans. Maybe Chavez liked hirsute men, or maybe he enjoyed the contrast to his own body, which had almost no hair above the waist to obscure its clean lines.

Parnell tilted his hips, inviting Chavez to open the snap on his jeans. Chavez did as if hypnotized, his movements slow, and sank his fingers in the thatch of brown hair that lay beneath. "Darker...than the hair on your head," he breathed.

"Yeah..." Parnell couldn't concentrate from staring at Chavez's mouth. He eyed the full, curving upper lip and the succulent lower one. "You don't know what you're missing," he said. "C'mon, Bobby, kiss me."

"I don't do that." Chavez's eyes flashed as he snapped out of his daze. He yanked open the jeans, making Parnell hiss as the teeth of the zipper grazed his erection, and reached for the bottle of lube. He took Parnell's hard-on in his slick fist and gave it two rough strokes.

"Wait—" Parnell arched off the mattress. "You're gonna finish me."

"Maybe I'll pound *your* ass." Chavez laughed.

The arrogance didn't bother Parnell, but the trace of scorn stung like a lash—too much, too soon after his fight with Navarro. He tore his wrists free of the T-shirt

and grabbed Chavez by the throat, then rolled the enslaver beneath him. Chavez went still, sucking in rapid breaths as Parnell relaxed his hold.

He eased his hand down, stroking Chavez's chest. "How do you want it?"

"Fast and hard." Chavez's eyes went wide, unfocused, and black.

"You got it."

He slid his jeans off and shifted behind Chavez so that they lay on their sides, and he then poured lube in his hand. Chavez had a beautiful uncircumcised cock, which pressed into Parnell's hand, flushed and glistening, the foreskin drawn back. Chavez's heavy breathing deepened to a muffled groan.

"Scream if you like." Parnell bit his neck. "I don't mind."

Chavez shuddered in his arms. "Not gonna happen."

"Is that a challenge?"

Parnell rolled Chavez facedown, and Chavez allowed it, turning his face to one side as his back heaved with his rough breathing. His lowered lashes shadowed the clean line of his cheekbone, and he trembled hard, gripping the sheets. When Parnell pressed his slick fingers inside Chavez, he found him as tight as a virgin. Panting, Chavez thrust back with his hips, fucking himself on Parnell's fingers. Pleasure swept across his face, but when he sensed Parnell watching, he turned his face to the mattress. "Don't look at me," he said through clenched teeth.

"Are you kidding? I can't keep my eyes off you." Parnell slathered on more lube and pushed his aching cockhead into that tight hot ring of muscle, and his desperate moan mingled with Chavez's careful exhale. "You all right?" he asked.

"What? From the onslaught of your huge, magnificent prick?"

Parnell burst out laughing. Chavez snickered, relaxing as he pressed back upon Parnell in one smooth movement, taking him all the way in. Parnell almost cried out from the sudden shock of pleasure as he came to rest, his cock sheathed in Chavez's ass. Sweat sprang out on his body at the heat and tightness inside Chavez's channel, which stretched to accommodate him. He started to speak and

realized he needed to get his voice under control. He took a moment to bite and suck Chavez's neck until Chavez flinched away, and he saw that he'd raised the beginnings of a bruise. "You're very sarcastic, Bobby."

"Don't call me that." Chavez clenched around his shaft, breathing hard.

They began to rock together, keeping their motion small at first. Parnell spread the firm cheeks of Chavez's ass, watching as he thrust deep and pulled back, gripped by the silken hot press of muscle. Waves of pleasure moved up his spine, signaling that he'd better start working that sex magic.

He could no longer sense the Collective, but he knew it surrounded him. He closed his eyes to picture the energy they were raising. A web of shimmering strands filled his mind, the filaments of light ripening from pale saffron toward deep peach. He opened his eyes, holding the image as they fucked.

Chavez sighed and said in Spanish, "Not bad."

Parnell understood Spanish because the Cadre required it, but his accent made him sound like a public defender who had learned the language from basic CDs in his car on his lunch breaks. He said in English, "I can do better."

He pushed his cock balls-deep into Chavez's ass, massaging the prostate, and Chavez surged beneath him. Parnell did it again, and Chavez rewarded him with some gratifyingly intense cursing in Spanish. Sweat gleamed on Chavez's neck as Parnell remembered his visualization and the judge in Vegas who for damn sure hadn't had such distractions.

"Faster," Chavez said in Spanish. "Hard and fast like I said."

The energy net shimmered deep orange as Parnell's eyes went unfocused. Startled by the vibrant color, he tightened his grip on Chavez. Normally he accessed the Collective through abstract thought, not images. Now his intuition told him that the deepening hue corresponded to rising sexual energy. The mattress shook with their rhythm as Chavez fought Parnell for his climax, slamming his hips back to increase their tempo. Muscles stood out, rippling in his back, and his hair curled in wet tendrils that stuck to his neck.

“Bobby,” Parnell said. “You’re so tight. How long has it been?”

Chavez blurted in Spanish, “Fourteen months. They forbid it. They withhold it. They punish us. They know through the Collective if we—Oh God!” He shouted, spurring against the sheets, and heat poured off him.

Parnell guided that energy into the silken web, which now flared the orange-red of a stove burner behind his closed eyelids. Would this even work? His wrenching climax caught him by surprise, and he funneled it into his visualization as he slowed, arms wrapped around Chavez, pumping inside him. He saw the glowing net of energy they had raised and took it for himself, then swept it over Chavez. “Sleep,” he said.

Chavez relaxed, tension streaming from his bunched muscles as his breathing deepened. Parnell lay tangled with him, exhausted, his head spinning, unable to believe his sex magic had worked. His cock went soft as he eased back from Chavez, whose legs had shifted apart, revealing heavy testicles shadowed with fine, dark hair.

Parnell rose from the bed, trembling as if he had run a marathon. He’d bought maybe two hours to go kill Hidalgo. Could he do it, damaged from the barrier? Maybe. He had plenty of experience with gunfights. He needed to keep the fight physical and attack so fast that Hidalgo couldn’t achieve the concentration necessary to wield his greater psychic power. Besides, the keeper of Juarez had already traveled far from his source of energy.

He washed up at the sink and wrapped a towel around his waist to answer a knock at the door, where the bellhop passed in a shopping bag of the clothes he’d requested. He sent the kid off with a twenty-dollar tip and upended the bag on the bed. White socks, briefs, running shoes, straight-leg jeans, leather belts with fancy western stitching, and two polo shirts. It all made him smile. He and Chavez were going to look like retired golfers at a dude ranch.

Leaving the bright pink shirt for Chavez, Parnell chose the forgettable tan one. He set his cell phone on the bedside table beside a scrawled note: *Running errands.*

Back soon. Reach me on speed dial 1. Wait for me. Chavez lay sprawled in deep relaxation as the scent of soap and semen rose from his hot skin. Parnell realized how attached he could get to this enslaver, this angel-demon hybrid. He already liked his cocky attitude and nonchalant bravery.

He lingered, ogling the firm globes of Chavez's rounded ass, which he longed to slap to see it shake and redden with the print of his hand. It couldn't be more different from Navarro's sleek buttocks, which always made Parnell want to dig his fingers into the hard muscles and hang on tight.

Guilt swept over him as he remembered the passion in Navarro's voice back in Gallup when calling him Jaye. He struggled with his resentment and fear that Navarro could so affect him. What difference did it make if he and Chavez fucked when Navarro had countless lovers back in Vegas? The innermost part of him that valued truth over easy rationalizations dismissed this question. Navarro was waiting for him, and he knew it. As soon as he capitulated and accepted the level of intimacy Navarro wanted—as soon as he started calling him Julio—Parnell would be the only lover in Navarro's life.

He forced his thoughts back to the present and glanced down at Chavez, who continued to sleep. He tried to tear his gaze away. He was acting like an idiot—one good fuck should have been enough to satisfy him. He couldn't afford to see Chavez as anything more than an acquisition to surrender to the Cadre at the end of his assignment. He had his own uncertain future to negotiate, and he had Navarro with which to contend. Even so, he felt an uneasy blend of fascination and lust toward Chavez, and maybe a twinge of protectiveness. Chavez seemed *young*, too inexperienced to face someone like Hidalgo. Parnell touched the tumbled dark strands of Chavez's hair. He added two twenties to his note in case Chavez wanted to order lunch, pocketed Navarro's cell phone, and went out.

First he got a full tank of gas for the Porsche; then he paid cash at the nearest gun shop for a holster for Navarro's .357 Magnum, a speedloader, and hollow-point

ammunition. If he had to start a gunfight in a crappy motel, he didn't want a jacketed round piercing the walls and killing some poor sap who didn't deserve it.

The address Ms. Trujillo had supplied led him to a shabby motor court west on Central, beside an irrigation ditch. He circled the block, noting the approaches the police might take, and parked under gnarled cottonwoods alongside the ditch, facing the Porsche outward for a quick getaway.

The motel's neon sign looked anemic in the blazing sunlight, but it did make him laugh: SANGRE DE CRISTO MOTEL, no doubt named after the mountain range. He snickered in helpless disbelief at the thought of a gunfight at the Blood of Christ Motel.

The place looked like condemned property. An L-shaped line of flat-roofed rooms edged a parking lot so cratered by potholes that it looked damaged by mortar fire. The only cars in the lot were the two with Mexican plates parked in front of room 9.

Fear tightened its stranglehold on Parnell as he considered the odds that he might die, and he sat with his head tipped back, sucking in deep breaths until all emotion fell away. Better to kill Hidalgo now than to have him ambush them later. He adjusted the .357 Magnum in its holster at the small of his back and rigged his speedloader with hollow points, then tucked it into the front pocket of his jeans. Navarro's cell phone he left on the passenger seat.

Two men in suits left room 9 with a takeout menu and departed in one of the cars, and Parnell hoped they were the humans, assigned the lowly task of picking up lunch. That left him to face five enslavers. The desert air sliced into his lungs, and traffic crawled past on Central as he climbed out of the Porsche and crossed to Hidalgo's temporary lair. A faint breeze ruffled his hair as he walked along the line of empty rooms, keeping under the ragged tin-lined eaves, and reached room 9. He drew his weapon and kicked open the door.

Three men played cards at a table. Parnell shot one through the face and the second through the chest as blood webbed the wall behind them. The roar of the

.357 rounds left no room to breathe. The third clawed his pistol free of his shoulder holster and fired as Parnell leaped past him into the room and shot a fourth man rising to his knees on the bed over a scattered newspaper.

Parnell swept his gun barrel back. He and the last cardplayer fired, and his opponent dropped like a sack of sand across the table. He checked his watch. Six seconds had passed, and he had two bullets left. He scanned the room, which reeked of fresh meat and gunpowder, and noted the blood-spattered newspaper, a dead face with no scar, keys splayed on the table, and three more dead faces with no scars.

The bathroom door burst open, and Parnell dived for cover, rolling over the corpse on the bed. He landed on his knees between the beds as Hidalgo charged out, roaring, pistol in hand. The keeper of Juarez looked exactly like Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia* except for the white scar on his forehead. They fired point-blank at each other, so rattled that they both missed, and Hidalgo bolted out the door.

Parnell followed, then paused on the threshold, with one round left and no time for the speedloader. To fire double-action might make his hand shake on the long trigger pull. Instead he thumbed back the hammer, lining up his sights on Hidalgo, who sprinted across the parking lot. He adjusted his aim by a hairbreadth and squeezed the trigger. The hammer dropped, and his last bullet tore into Hidalgo's back with enough force to kill a human.

Hidalgo screamed, sprawling to the ground as his two men returned and braked hard into the lot to shield him with their car. One opened fire toward room 9, and Parnell dropped flat as shots splintered the open door and dinged the other sedan parked out front. His hands worked in smooth rhythm, popping out the cylinder, ejecting the hot casings, and reloading.

Hidalgo's men sped away with their master east on Central. Parnell pocketed his casings and ran back to the Porsche, then took Central west at thirty-five miles per hour as police sirens diminished behind him. Sweat soaked his shirt, and his hands grew slick on the steering wheel as he turned north on Atrisco Drive.

He could do nothing about the dead bodies left at the scene, but at least the corpses of angels and demons never left any clues as to supernatural powers. Once the souls departed, the flesh that remained for autopsy might have belonged to any human. He parked outside a Walmart on Coors Boulevard, trembling and sucking in deep breaths as unsuspecting humans rolled shopping carts out to their cars. Navarro's cell phone trilled like a huge cicada, making him flinch.

"Parnell." It issued as a croak from his dry throat.

Chavez's voice exploded into his ear. "Where are you?"

"Errands. What's up, Bobby? You sound a little—"

"This man called? Your partner? This Julio Robert Navarro?" Chavez's voice kept climbing and winding tighter. "I tell him to come over. He tries to overpower me. I'm gonna toss him out the window."

"No!" Parnell gripped the phone. "Roberto!"

"You went after Hidalgo, didn't you? You kill him?"

"He got away." Parnell tried to steady his breathing.

"I'm taking power," Chavez said. "Tomorrow. I'm gonna kill him myself."

"Roberto—"

"*Chinga tu madre!*" Chavez disconnected.

Parnell dropped the phone as his heart constricted with fear for Navarro. He turned the key in the ignition with shaking hands and followed Coors Boulevard north to east I-40, increasing his speed as fast as he dared while scanning for cops. Fifteen minutes later, he burst into their room on the tenth floor, where the window stood open, the curtains floating in the breeze.

"Jaye?" Navarro's voice came from the bathroom.

Parnell's tension ebbed away, leaving him drained and dizzy. His eyes watered, and he blinked hard, edging the door open with his foot. Navarro sat on the floor, handcuffed to the sink pipe. He wore his black suit, now impeccably dry-cleaned, and a line of blisters marked his cheekbone where Parnell had struck him

with the Bible. A massive bruise had just started purpling around his right eye. Parnell's heart clenched at the sight of Navarro, safe and alive, and he could not look away. They stared at each other as Navarro's control slipped and he swallowed hard.

He burst out, "You *fuckhead*!"

Parnell blinked, unable to sort out his swarming thoughts. "Is this about the Porsche?"

"You took on the keeper of Juarez without waiting for me?"

"It wasn't that big a deal."

"Fuck you! It *is* a big deal." Navarro started shaking, the handcuffs chain clanking against the pipe. Not even in Gallup had he looked this overwrought, with blood darkening his face and tears glittering beneath the rage in his eyes. He shouted, "What is it about teamwork you don't understand?"

Parnell's knees gave out, and he sat on the edge of the tub. His mind went blank.

Navarro half-consciously strained against the cuffs, his wrist already reddened and swollen. He dropped his voice, almost pleading. "Jaye, you need to trust me. No one can survive alone. You need to accept my help, or you're going to get yourself killed."

Why did Navarro continue to remind him of his weakness? Before he could stop himself, Parnell sneered, "I didn't know you cared." The words flew out, and he winced, regretting it immediately. The gunfight had left him numb and scattered, his brain unable to regulate his mouth.

"Obviously you haven't been paying attention," Navarro said in a harsh whisper.

His face grew dark with repressed emotion as he stared at the floor, fighting for control, and remorse sank through Parnell. Navarro looked like a defeated fighter, head bowed, unraveled by emotion. Beneath his suit jacket, his back rose

and fell as he tried to slow his breathing. Parnell feared to touch him but imagined tracing his lips over the dark hair that lay in a precise line along Navarro's strong neck.

Navarro rolled his shoulders. "Get something to pick these cuffs, would you? I have paperclips in my bag out on the bed. Chavez tossed my key out the window."

"You don't want to just bust that pipe?" Parnell asked. "I bet it would feel good."

Navarro gave him an arch glance. "Malicious destruction of property?"

"So what? After all the first-degree murders we've committed for the Cadre?"

"I prefer not to break the law if given a choice."

Parnell didn't know whether to laugh or nod in recognition. How typical of him and Navarro—and perhaps any demon cursed with a conscience—to seek out such small and apparently meaningless ways to balance out the evil acts that working for the Cadre required. Navarro wouldn't break the law, no matter how small, if he could help it. Parnell tried to defend or avenge those human innocents caught in the crossfire between the Cadre and Los Elegidos.

He didn't know why he did it, and he had always shied away from the intimacy it would require to discuss something so personal with Navarro. Did they hope to redeem themselves in the eyes of God? How would that be possible, considering all the crimes they had committed? Parnell didn't even like to think about such things. Their compulsion to atone made him and Navarro vulnerable, and he wondered if it might someday lead to their destruction.

He found a paperclip in Navarro's overnight case and returned to crouch on the bathroom floor and work the straightened wire into the handcuff lock. The small space forced them to press together, and Navarro's hot stare grew distracting, making Parnell self-conscious as he fumbled to pick the lock. Finally the cuffs clicked and popped open, and Navarro's freed hand shot up to grip the back of Parnell's neck.

Parnell's knees hit the floor as he landed astride Navarro's lap, and heat flooded his body as Navarro held his face and kissed him as if drinking him in. Their lips ground together and relaxed, softening, and Parnell groaned in yearning and delight. Navarro's tongue glided into his mouth, fingers winding in his hair to keep him close. When they separated, Parnell had a full hard-on, and the outline of Navarro's erection showed against the fabric of his trousers. Navarro pulled him close, guiding their mouths together.

"Please, Jaye," he whispered against Parnell's lips. "Please. *Please*."

"It's okay." Parnell ran his hands over Navarro's face and chest, unable to stop.

"No, you never think. You react, everything on impulse," Navarro said. "You're so fast, strong, and unpredictable that no one manages to kill you, but—"

"Enough." Parnell cut him off with a kiss.

Navarro moaned, arching up against him. Their tongues met, probing and flexing as they struggled for dominance. Parnell rocked atop Navarro's lap, wanting the heat and friction as his cock throbbed, leaking inside his shorts. Navarro yanked up the back of Parnell's shirt and smoothed his hot palms across the long muscles of Parnell's bare back. His fingertips skated over the welts he'd put there, and Parnell flinched away before he could stop himself.

"If you die, it will tear me apart," Navarro said. "Do you care about me at all?"

The question shorted out Parnell's mind. Dazed, he hesitated. Sorrow froze the emotions on Navarro's face, all traces of warmth disappearing beneath his most distant expression, and Parnell experienced a wave of helpless remorse. He could do nothing as Navarro pushed him back so they could both get to their feet. Parnell moved away, adjusting his erection, and saw Navarro doing the same. It made him feel stunned with loss.

Now the bathroom became too small for both of them crammed in together. Navarro slipped past Parnell into the main room, opened the freezer-refrigerator under the bar, then shook some ice into a washcloth as Parnell followed. Navarro

lay on the bed and pressed the ice pack to his bruised eye, and his silence made the air in the room feel flat and dead.

He went still as a corpse. Parnell's skin prickled as he followed Navarro's gaze to the bottle of lube on the bedside table, and he sensed those mental gears turning, calculating his worth. Navarro gave him a cold smile. "Were you and Chavez having fun?"

Parnell's face went hot. "How many lovers do you have back in Vegas?"

"You're my favorite." Navarro's smile deepened, but he looked dangerous.

"So..." Parnell groped for something to say. "You got popped in the eye."

"Yes, *Chavez* hit me in the eye." Navarro bit down hard on the name.

"He said you attacked him." Parnell took refuge in a cop's tone, flat and indifferent. "Any particular reason why you would do that?" He thought he already knew the answer, but he wanted Navarro to feel defensive.

"To see what he's got." Navarro shrugged. "He's fast, but not as strong as we are."

A convenient half-truth. Even without the Collective, Parnell sensed the jealousy and possessiveness Navarro tried to hide. His stomach tightened at the hard glitter in Navarro's dark eyes. Had Chavez stumbled out of bed half-naked to open the door? "Tell me what happened."

"He pulled a gun. Made me kneel. Hit me in the face with it. That slowed me down enough so he could lock me to the sink." Navarro laughed, but it had a cold edge. "That'll teach me to stay out of fights when I'm carrying handcuffs."

"You pack any aspirin?"

"In the bag there." Navarro gave a slight smile. "Trying to take care of me?"

Ignoring that, Parnell sat on the bed and rummaged through Navarro's overnight case until he found the aspirin bottle and shook out two tablets, which Navarro palmed and dry-swallowed. Parnell recognized some of his clothes inside the suitcase. Of course, Navarro had already maneuvered him off balance by

rushing him out of Vegas with no time to pack his things. How like Navarro to bring him to New Mexico and keep him dependent and deprived of any supplies more useful than, say, a toothbrush and five extra pairs of socks.

“You couldn’t remember to pack something important, like my *gun*?” he asked.

“No time to look for it. I cleared your place in three minutes flat.”

Parnell saw a battered paperback stuffed in with the briefs and socks. He held it up to the light, and his entire world shifted as he recognized the Bhagavad Gita, creased from his endless perusal. Now he felt cracked wide open, his defenses swept away at the thought of Navarro choosing to bring him any book, let alone *this* one. The caring in Navarro’s gesture reached a blind need deep within him, pulling at him as sunlight draws forth a seedling.

Navarro glanced up past the ice pack. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” He tried to sound offhand, but his throat closed up.

“That was the only book on your nightstand.”

“Yeah, I—You know—Oppenheimer...”

It occurred to Parnell that most readers came to the *Song of God* because of Gandhi, not Oppenheimer. He stared at his copy, which tended to fall open at chapter sixteen, *The Divine and Demoniac Natures Defined*. In Sanskrit terms, he and Navarro had fallen from *deva* to *asura*, but the Bhagavad Gita spelled out how to leave the darkness and live within the light. It had never burned Parnell’s hands. Maybe this promised redemption, even for him and Navarro.

“Have you read it?” He imagined Navarro absorbing the text with his eidetic memory.

“I never made the time until two years ago.”

That coincided with him starting to say the name Jaye. Navarro set aside his washcloth of ice, his expression open and serious, and a cube tumbled to the bedspread. Awareness rose between them and swept like a heavy, delicious caress

over Parnell's body, making the blood rise to his skin as he realized that Navarro had cared enough to learn about what he found important.

Navarro took Parnell's hand and guided it to his hot, battered face. Parnell's heart gave a wild surge, and he held still, memorizing Navarro's features as the dark eyes slid shut, thick lashes lying against bruised skin. Navarro kissed Parnell's palm, the heat of his mouth triggering a pulse of lust. "Let me buy you dinner," Navarro said.

Chapter Five

First Parnell called Ms. Trujillo with a situation report, admitting his failure to kill Hidalgo or detain Chavez. Her tone could have stripped paint as she issued new orders.

Tomorrow the Cadre wanted him and Navarro to stake out San Felipe de Neri Church, starting before the first Easter Mass at 0700 hours and waiting until midnight if necessary for Chavez or Hidalgo to approach, whereupon they were to execute Hidalgo and capture Chavez, killing him only as a last resort. It didn't matter how many humans witnessed it, so long as Chavez didn't seize power and the Cadre took possession of him, an angel-demon hybrid.

Parnell considered his plans to claim the city of Albuquerque as he and Navarro dressed for dinner and went down to the dining room. Should he do it? Was he that desperate? He'd felt half-dead since coming through the barrier. Fatigue dragged at his muscles, and he fought down another wave of panic at the thought of returning to Vegas damaged.

The hostess's professional smile wavered at the sight of Navarro, who looked as if he'd lost a prizefight, but their expensive attire must have reassured her. She led them to the best table in the room. Their waiter arrived, a Hispanic kid, maybe twenty-two, who had the tragic eyes and wavy hair of a Botticelli angel.

"Ouch." He stared at Navarro's bruised face. "I'm Alejandro, and I'll be your server tonight. Can I start you out with—"

"Champagne," Navarro said. "The best you've got."

Alejandro's gaze flitted from Navarro to Parnell, and he blushed as if imagining them in bed together. He retrieved their champagne and darted glances

at them as he poured. “Where are you from?” When Navarro told him, his eyes brightened. “Viva Las Vegas! What do you gentlemen play?”

“Poker,” Parnell said.

“Craps.” Navarro didn’t gamble. He just liked how discordant the word sounded.

“You gentlemen here for a special occasion?” Alejandro asked.

“Anniversary,” Navarro said, no doubt referring to today being San Roberto Day.

“I knew it!” Alejandro recited the specials and managed not to comment—though his eyes widened—as Navarro ordered two for each of them. Smiling, he went to put in their order.

Curiosity kindled in Navarro’s eyes. “What do you think?”

“We’re not gentlemen.” Parnell tried to hide his irritation that Navarro ordered for him.

“About *him*.”

“Gay. Conceited.” The kid’s uniform had been hand tailored to flatter his physique, and years of jury selection had trained Parnell to see and interpret such details. His mood lightened as he glanced at Navarro. “You trying to make me jealous?”

“Are you? Jealous?” Navarro smiled. Ignoring that, Parnell drained his champagne glass, which Navarro refilled. “Have you heard from Chavez?”

“Only that one time he called.” Parnell snorted. “You know. Earlier, when he—”

“C’mon, what’s so funny?”

“More or less told me to fuck off.”

“Yeah, that’s real nice language from an angel.” Navarro burst out laughing, and so did Parnell, though he noticed diners glancing over from nearby tables. He and Navarro had to watch their control and not get too demonic, too loud, and too

outsized. “Or whatever he is,” Navarro said. They locked gazes and grew serious, and Parnell knew they would pay a severe penalty if they failed to deliver the angel-demon hybrid to the Cadre.

“Let’s talk about tomorrow,” Navarro said. “We’ll need to work separately.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Navarro explained anyway in his pedantic way. “You and I will set up surveillance from different points outside the church. Whichever one shows up first, I’ll handle. You remain undercover for the second man.”

“No, you stay undercover,” Parnell said. “If Chavez arrives first, maybe I can get through to him.” He forced his expression to cool indifference as Navarro eyed him. “I might have a rapport wi—”

“Really?” Navarro sneered. “Between your cock and his ass?” A dangerous glint flared in his dark eyes, and it sent a thrill of excitement through Parnell. “Or between his cock and *your* ass?”

Parnell kept his tone level, struggling to hide how Navarro affected him. “Tomorrow, I’ll go first.”

“If you insist.” Navarro edged his hand close until it brushed Parnell’s wrist. “But your ass is mine.”

Alejandro delivered their salads with a flirtatious smile but had no time to chat. In seconds, Parnell and Navarro finished their salads and started to devour the contents of the breadbasket.

“At least Hidalgo already has a bond to Juarez and can’t claim power.” Navarro looked uneasy. “If Chavez slips past us and takes power, I’d hate to think what Ms. Trujillo might do.”

Parnell went still. “She’d give us to Mr. Sanchez.”

The thought of those immense hands paralyzed him. He remembered the peculiar smell of the keeper of El Paso—sweet baby powder dusted over something

unclean and metallic, like nickels, gripped in a sweaty fist. Mr. Sanchez wouldn't be satisfied using the Collective to torture them. He was a hands-on guy.

"Jaye," Navarro said.

Parnell blinked, unclenching his jaw. His face and hands were icy.

"I know you hate him." Navarro's dark eyes narrowed. "I know why."

It made Parnell feel pathetic that another man wanted to victimize him, even though he couldn't possibly win a fight against the keeper of El Paso. He knew why Mr. Sanchez wanted him. Years ago, he'd had the poor judgment to let a low-level demon fuck him, and details had spread to Mr. Sanchez—something about his extreme sensitivity to pleasure and pain. Parnell hadn't wanted to investigate further once he'd uncovered that.

"I'm careful," he said. "But he's waiting for his chance."

Navarro paused, then said in an even tone, "Together, we could kill him."

Parnell froze with his champagne glass at his lips. Just when he thought he knew Navarro, the surprises kept coming. He blurted, "You're joking."

"No. If he threatens you, he threatens me."

He chose his words with caution. "The Cadre would see it as insurrection."

Navarro shrugged. "Only if we got caught."

Alejandro delivered their entrées and watched while they tasted the prime rib. The tender slices streamed juices, parting before the knife like butter. Parnell inhaled the rich scent, and the first bite made him close his eyes in pleasure. Navarro nodded in approval, and Alejandro stepped back as if about to snap a photo. "So romantic!" he said and hurried away.

Navarro glanced at Parnell. "He would leave with us if we asked him."

"What? For a threesome?"

"Why not?" Navarro's smile deepened. "You're blushing. You know I love that."

“No, I’m n—” Parnell sipped his champagne. His face remained hot, damn it. He imagined Navarro pinning down his wrists while Chavez sucked him off, and he got an instant hard-on. He adjusted his dinner napkin over his lap to hide it.

“It doesn’t have to be Alejandro,” Navarro said. “I’ll do it with whoever you want.”

Even without the Collective, Parnell could hear in his voice that he meant it. Navarro watched him with a cool smile, no doubt remembering the bottle of lube back in the hotel room where he’d encountered Chavez. Parnell could no longer pretend he didn’t know how much Navarro cared about him. He needed to tell Navarro about his plans to take power on Easter. If he wasn’t careful, he might end up wrecking Navarro’s life along with his own.

Navarro’s smile grew wicked. “I’m not afraid to compete with anyone over you.”

“Really?” Parnell tried to figure out what to do. If he took power, he’d risk placing Navarro in the crossfire when the Cadre rolled into town to punish him. If he didn’t take power, he’d risk Mr. Sanchez wiping out Navarro in a fight to claim him.

“I can hold my own,” Navarro said. “Think about it.”

Finished with their prime rib, they moved on to their baked salmon as Navarro poured the last of the champagne into Parnell’s glass. Parnell used to find it annoying when Navarro lavished little courtesies upon him, as if he were the girl in their relationship. Obviously Navarro did it to tease him, but Parnell had come to see his real need to be chivalrous and protective. Navarro actually *had* been married in the 1950s to a human woman, but Parnell’s discreet research hadn’t revealed how she had died. He hoped for Navarro’s sake that the Cadre hadn’t killed her.

“You ever think about us?” Navarro asked.

Amused, Parnell dropped his gaze to his plate. Leave it to Navarro to revive their oldest argument, though tonight he kept his tone light and teasing. Their

strength made them attractive targets to the higher-ups who might try to claim either one of them, and Navarro wanted a defensive partnership, his and Parnell's power combined, with him in charge.

"Admit it," Navarro said. "The sex is..."

"Good?" Parnell cut open his baked potato.

"Mind-blowing."

"C'mon, buddy, you're embarrassing me."

Under the tablecloth, Navarro clasped Parnell's knee. "Move in with me when we get back to Vegas."

Parnell hesitated. If he took power in Albuquerque, he wouldn't be going home ever again. He shifted his knee out of reach, trying to match Navarro's playful tone. "Not this again. You *still* want that power merger?"

They'd had serious fights over Navarro's desire for something Parnell considered a last resort for low-level demons desperate to protect themselves against everyone who was stronger. To prevent anyone from amassing too much power through subordinates, the Cadre higher-ups permitted no more than two demons to create a permanent psychic bond through the Collective. Even so, it reminded Parnell of slavery. Two demons were stronger than one, but only one could control the combined power, leaving the other completely dependent upon his partner.

"Don't look so suspicious." Navarro's eyes gleamed, revealing how much he loved the hunt, which never failed to make Parnell enjoy being pursued. "I want *you*. It could be like a marriage."

"Yeah, with me submitting while you wield our combined power."

"I can defend us and protect you." Navarro veered too close to seriousness.

Parnell gave him a big, mocking smile. "Give your power to me!"

That got him the laugh he wanted. "You're too impulsive."

"Come on, buddy, that's the way I am. What do you want from me?"

Navarro ran a seductive look that felt like a heavy caress over his body. "You."

"Really? Is that why you order our food, pay the check, and try to dominate me?"

"You love it when we're fucking. When I dominate you."

The blood rose hot beneath Parnell's skin. "Maybe."

Navarro leaned close, smiling, pressing the point. "So you admit the sex is good?"

"Do I have to *admit* it? Can't you tell?"

"Will you concede the possibility that good sex can lead to a good relationship?"

Parnell laughed. "*Concede*? You mind not questioning me like I'm a hostile witness?"

"All right, but I'm not giving up. You want coffee or dessert?"

"Are you kidding?" Parnell imagined Navarro's hands on his body.

"Good. Because I want us back in our room. Now."

At Navarro's signal, Alejandro brought them the check. "You two have a good night."

As they took the elevator up to their floor, Navarro kept his hand on Parnell's shoulder, and Parnell relaxed into his touch, smiling in anticipation. Navarro said, "Years ago, I investigated you. I went around and talked to people."

Parnell laughed. "What for? We were never opposing counsel."

"We could have been."

"No one I prosecuted had the money to get you for defense."

"Hey, I did my fifty hours of pro bono like anyone else." His fingertips rose, stroking Parnell's neck, and it made Parnell's eyes slide half-closed. They reached their floor, and Navarro steered him into the hall. "I wanted to know about you," he said. "I heard you had every cop in Vegas intimidated. No one dared hand you a case with even the smallest procedural infraction the defense could exploit."

Years? Parnell tried to imagine Navarro observing him for that long. Since before the Cadre had started pairing them for assignments? He felt self-conscious and incredulous, but couldn't help flushing in excitement. A strikingly handsome man like Navarro could have any man or woman he wanted, and Navarro chose *him*? They crossed the silent hall to their room. Parnell searched for his keycard.

"I watched you prosecute once in district court," Navarro said.

Parnell glanced at him, startled. He shifted his attention back to the door.

"You had the coldest eyes. I never thought you'd turn out to be so..."

Needy, Parnell thought. His stomach clenched.

"Passionate," Navarro said.

Somehow Parnell got the door open past the distraction of his wildly beating heart. They stepped inside their room, which lay in deep shadow except for a beam of light from the bathroom spilling out across the carpet. Navarro locked the door behind them. The keycard slipped from Parnell's hand as Navarro pressed him against the wall and sealed his lips in a bruising kiss. With an eager moan, Parnell opened for him and sucked Navarro's tongue into his mouth.

Eyes closed, he framed Navarro's face in his hands. They were the same height, and Parnell kept him close, trying not to grip too hard or seem too desperate. Beard stubble prickled beneath his palms, and Navarro gave a pleased murmur, almost a sigh, as they kissed. Parnell smoothed his thumb over Navarro's left eyebrow, finding by touch the place where the thick dark hairs tended to quirk upward.

They separated to catch their breath. An ardent light kindled within Navarro's eyes and flared into a big smile, transforming his face. It knifed straight into Parnell's heart as he realized he had brought happiness to one person in this world. He had never before witnessed such unguarded joy in Navarro's face, and it made him feel deeply moved but unworthy.

He maneuvered Navarro backward across the room as they resumed kissing. The past didn't exist, the future didn't matter, and the world narrowed to the heat

of Navarro's mouth on his. The room filled with their involuntary moans, sucking noises, and heavy breathing.

Parnell's suit jacket dropped to the carpet behind them. Navarro stripped him to the waist, shoving aside his attempts to help as they moved through the room. His tie and shirt fell away. Blood rose hot to his skin as Navarro stroked his bare chest, smoothing over the faint scars from combat as if healing him. They reached the wall near the bed, and Parnell had only managed to remove Navarro's jacket. They shared another hungry kiss.

"Take off everything," Navarro said. "Watch, shoes, and socks."

Parnell fumbled with his shoes and socks, then kicked them aside. His watch slipped from his wrist to drop to the carpet. Taking a deep breath, he slid off his trousers and shorts. His cock lifted, swollen and flushed, and he couldn't face how needy he must look. With a tight swallow, he raised his chin and scanned his lover's face by the light from the bathroom. Navarro's eyes widened, unfathomable and black as deep space. Shadows underscored his parted lips.

"So sexy," Navarro said. "You drive me wild when you do that."

"What?" Parnell asked.

"When you stare at me like that. Like you're going to fight me."

He spun Parnell around to face the wall. Parnell caught himself on his palms.

"Don't move." Navarro held him still. "Hands on the wall."

Parnell tensed as Navarro stroked the welts on his back. That brought back their fight in Gallup, and neither he nor Navarro was the type to apologize. Now, without the Collective, Parnell didn't know if Navarro regretted or savored the sight of the marks he'd slashed into Parnell's body.

Navarro used his body to pin Parnell to the wall. Parnell squeezed his eyes shut in excitement as wool fibers and crisp broadcloth pressed against his bare skin. A slick coolness turned out to be Navarro's silk tie. He couldn't help smiling as Navarro shoved his hand between them and fumbled with his trousers.

“Hey, buddy,” he said. “Dinner but no foreplay?”

“Dinner and champagne,” Navarro said.

Cloth slid apart. Navarro’s thick cock lifted free and lined up with the cleft of Parnell’s ass. Trembling, Parnell slid back along its hot length, and he almost lost control and begged Navarro to force it inside him. A deep groan swelled beneath his breastbone, and his hands sweat where he gripped the wall. He couldn’t hide how much Navarro affected—*enslaved*—him, but he didn’t have to admit it.

“Don’t make me wait,” Parnell said.

“Yeah.” Navarro’s voice thickened with lust. “I-I got to...”

Navarro reached behind them to the nightstand and grabbed the same bottle of lube Parnell had used with Chavez. The squeeze bottle hit the carpet as Navarro greased something, cock or fingers. Panting in anticipation, Parnell braced himself against the wall for his lover to enter hard and fast.

Navarro teased Parnell’s hole with slick fingertips. Parnell jerked beneath the unexpected caress, straining for more. Navarro rubbed and withdrew, pressing openmouthed kisses to Parnell’s neck. He continued the soft touches, building the pressure toward penetration, hot and delicious. Parnell lowered his head to the wall as Navarro’s fingers glided inside, opening him.

“Finally.” He sighed. “Oh, yeah...”

“Impatient?” Navarro sounded as if he was smiling.

“Always.”

Navarro replaced fingers with cock and pressed the fat crown inside. Parnell’s breath caught and deepened into a groan as Navarro filled him in one smooth motion. Pain turned into pleasure, coiling at the base of his spine. He widened his stance, turning his face as their combined weight forced him to the wall. His cheekbone angled against the glossy plaster as Navarro took him with slow, controlled thrusts.

“Feels good.” Parnell rocked his hips back, increasing their rhythm. “So good.”

“Don’t rush,” Navarro said. “You’ll make me come too fast.”

“Need it. Need you—”

Grabbing his waist, Navarro slowed him down, and Parnell almost fought him. Instead he went still, drowning in sensation. Navarro’s thick cock impaled him, seated all the way inside, stretching him. It sent electric twinges through Parnell if he so much as breathed. Sweat soaked his hairline and beaded on his chest.

Navarro’s fingertips teased his stiff nipples, making him hiss and flinch, and his writhing pushed him past pleasure into pain as his channel ached from the girth of that cock. Panting, he tightened his hands to fists on the wall, forcing himself to hold still as Navarro’s hot palm pressed under his leaking cock and cupped his balls.

Dazed with sensory overload, Parnell tried to squirm free. A hoarse whimper escaped his lips, and the sound flooded him with shame. In the next second, he no longer cared. A glistening thread of precum pulsed from his cock as Navarro toyed with him, squeezing and caressing his balls. His erection bobbed against the wall, smearing the plaster with fluid.

“Only you. Every night.” Navarro kissed his straining neck. “I want you like this.”

“C’mon,” Parnell forced out. “Please. Fuck me. Jerk me off.”

“Not yet.” Navarro pinned Parnell’s wrists to the wall, preventing him from touching himself. “I love having you like this.”

Desperate for release, Parnell clenched his muscles around Navarro’s shaft and pressed his hips back. Navarro’s breathing grew rough, and he seized control, overwhelming Parnell with deep, powerful thrusts. Each slammed across Parnell’s prostate, forcing a cry from his throat as Navarro held him down. Parnell ground his jaw shut on the animal sounds, reducing them to harsh grunts as his hips lifted to receive each stroke.

“Jaye.” Navarro crushed his mouth against Parnell’s neck.

Parnell gave a tight moan, gripping the wall as Navarro emptied himself in spasm after spasm. The hot fluid filled him, its salty odor rising to mingle with the clean scent of their skin. Aftershocks coursed through Navarro's body and into Parnell. They subsided against the wall, and Parnell felt dizzy, almost disoriented, as if he might melt through the plaster. His erection hadn't yet diminished, straining as if to split its skin. He groaned as Navarro withdrew. "Hey, buddy. You forget something?"

"Give me a moment," Navarro said, guiding him to the bed.

Parnell stretched out across the mattress as Navarro disappeared into the bathroom. He cupped his hand over his erection as Navarro washed at the sink. Only two strokes might bring him release.

"Don't do it!" Navarro said, laughing.

He returned to stand at Parnell's feet, still wearing trousers and dress shirt, with his tie tossed over his shoulder. His dark hair stood in spikes where he'd dragged his wet fingers through it, and his gaze drifted over Parnell with open pleasure, tangible like a caress. He gave a wicked smile. "You look well and truly fucked."

Parnell snorted. He lay still, enjoying the attention.

What a strange day it had been, even for San Roberto Day, which the Cadre always celebrated by reveling in the physical pleasures so long denied to them in hell. First Parnell had pinned down Chavez and taken his ass that morning, and now Navarro had just given him a world-class fuck—with more to come. What would happen if he, Navarro, and Chavez ever had a threesome? Who would dominate and who would submit?

"I have something for you." Navarro undid his tie and draped it over the chair.

"What, a striptease?"

"That's part of it."

Parnell rose on his elbows, forgetting to conceal his erection, and Navarro's fingers fumbled over the buttons on his shirt. It made Parnell smile, knowing he could distract him. He watched the pale shirt sliding down off Navarro's shoulders. Beneath, a sleeveless undershirt clung to Navarro's torso, and he stripped off both and let them fall to the floor. Shadows rippled over lean muscle as he turned into the light.

Dark hair fanned over Navarro's chest and forearms. It curled up from his groin, thick and unruly, as he drew off trousers and shorts, and it almost hid the sway of his heavy genitals. Parnell loved the contrast of body hair and hot skin beneath Navarro's conservative suits and silk ties. His gaze fell to the thick white scar that marked Navarro's thigh, where an enslaver had tried to slash open his femoral artery. Parnell had seen it happen, and he swallowed, banishing thoughts of fear and death. He wondered what it would be like to fuck Navarro, which he had never done.

Not that Navarro had any sexual inhibitions. But he had always withheld that particular pleasure for some unspecified time in the future. Now Parnell imagined them face-to-face as he pushed back Navarro's knees and sank inside the heat of Navarro's body, watching the pleasure rise in the fine dark eyes.

"Let me fuck you." Parnell couldn't remember the last time he'd dared to ask.

Navarro didn't even blink. "When you move in with me. That's a promise."

Fucking as currency? He stared up at Navarro, sensing danger. "No. Don't ask that."

"We won't do the power merger."

The thought of it almost made Parnell lose his erection. He could never hand over his power to anyone, not even to Navarro, and not even to create a combined reserve with which to protect them both.

"Just move in with me," Navarro said. "Give up your lease."

Parnell shook his head. He dared not speak, as lust began to erode his caution.

“Okay. You can have me right now.” Navarro held his gaze. “Just say my name.”

“No.” Parnell’s stomach clenched. Navarro kept pushing to go to first names, knowing it signified the ultimate intimacy. They weren’t a married couple. They would never get to that level of closeness if Navarro kept trying to force him. His voice dropped to a low snarl. “Don’t try to manipulate me.”

Navarro turned from the light. Shadow hid his face and form as he knelt on the carpet, gripped Parnell under the knees, and dragged him close. Parnell fell flat to the mattress, grunting in surprise. Navarro’s lips, swollen from kissing, closed around his cock.

It sent a bolt of pleasure straight to Parnell’s brain. He arched his back with a wordless shout, grabbing fistfuls of the bedspread. Navarro pinned him down, spreading his knees wide, and Parnell’s head tipped back as the pressure increased from Navarro’s mouth.

With lips and tongue, Navarro made him corporeal. Sweat trickled over Parnell’s straining muscles, and blood pounded through his veins to the rhythm of the name Navarro wanted to hear—Julio. Parnell ground his teeth shut, taking the pleasure and refusing to say the name. It would mean too much to say it, and he didn’t even know if they had a future together anymore.

Navarro had begun to use sex magic on him. What else could keep inserting the name Julio into his mind to the rhythm of his heartbeat as their psychic energy rose with his impending climax? Navarro was shaping their rising energy just as Parnell had with Chavez. The name throbbed on Parnell’s tongue, begging to be spoken. What did Navarro want to prove? That he could manipulate him sexually? That he would reward him for giving in and accepting the intimacy that he wanted? Parnell worked one hand free and slid it down over Navarro’s hair, thick and lush despite the severe haircut but trimmed too close to grab.

Pressure swelled within him, and it made his eyes water and his vision blur as he screamed from release so long delayed, it felt like pain. His hips thrashed as he

climaxed, and still Navarro held him down and consumed him, tormenting his oversensitized flesh with swirling tongue and lightly scraping teeth.

“Too much!” Parnell burst out. “Stop! Julio, st—”

Coldness sank through him. He lay shuddering as Navarro drew back.

“Hey, amigo.” Navarro’s voice reached him, dark and gloating. “You lost that round.”

Rage swept through Parnell like a flash fire. Had Navarro given him pleasure only to trick him into saying his name? He struggled not to react. Only Navarro could move him so fast between emotional extremes. Exhausted, he tried to release his anger, and it finally departed, leaving him shaking like a husk. That in turn reminded him of the barrier and the damage done, thanks to Navarro, and he pushed it from his mind for the umpteenth time and inched back up the bed, pulling the sheet over his chilled body. Navarro lay beside him, radiating heat, which felt so damn good. After a moment, Parnell closed his eyes in weary pleasure.

“You said my name.” Navarro drew up the bedspread to cover them both.

“Inadmissible,” he said.

Navarro laughed. “Under what law?”

“You manipulated me.”

As their breathing fell into synch, three insights drifted through Parnell’s mind, overwhelming him with sorrow. Navarro would never change; despite this, he loved Navarro, yet he loved his freedom even more. He had no choice but to take power on Easter Sunday, and he could not let Navarro stop him or share the punishment that the Cadre higher-ups might try to inflict upon him. He had to break off their relationship, and his decision lodged in his heart like a sliver as he tried to imagine life without Navarro. It hurt to breathe. His chest felt as if encased in ice, but he had made his decision.

“I’ll never give you my power,” he said. “No power merger.”

"I won't give you mine." Navarro sounded lazy and relaxed. "Where does that leave us?"

Parnell stroked his palm over Navarro's chest as he breathed, wanting to take a gentle tone but knowing he couldn't pull it off. He could barely force the words through his aching throat. "There is no *us*, buddy."

Navarro's chest went still. "What are you talking about?"

"You're better off without me." The words spilled from Parnell in a flat tone as he tried not to notice the tension that swept over Navarro's body. "The barrier damaged me, and I don't think I'm going to recover. When the Cadre calls us back to Vegas, I'm staying here." Too late—he felt like kicking himself for that last statement. He didn't want to open the option of exile for Navarro.

"Jaye..." Navarro sounded stunned, unable to process his words.

Parnell blurted, "A second trip through the barrier will kill me."

Navarro flattened his palm over Parnell's hand where it rested on his chest. "Then we won't do it." He turned his head and stared at Parnell. Slow awareness followed by horror flared in his dark eyes. "I crossed unharmed, but you were hurt. Did *I*—"

"You had nothing to do with it." Parnell put all his conviction into the lie. His mouth went dry as he sensed Navarro one heartbeat away from figuring it all out. Navarro's identity centered upon being a protector, and he must have suffered intolerably years ago because of his wife's death. No matter what had happened to her, he would have seen it as his failure to save her. Parnell realized he would do anything to spare Navarro from reliving that pain.

He held Navarro's gaze and followed up with the truth. "It doesn't matter what caused the damage." He fed Navarro a distraction. "When the Cadre calls, you need to go back to Vegas."

Navarro shot up on one elbow. "You expect me to leave you here, weak and alone?"

“Don’t try to stay with me.” Parnell’s throat tightened. “You have too much to lose.”

“I can save you,” Navarro said. “I’ll take you home. I’ll convince Ms. Lancaster to dissolve the barrier.”

Speechless, Parnell attempted a mocking smile. “That’s arrogant. Even for you.”

“I can negotiate anything.” Navarro’s dark eyes burned.

Parnell’s voice started to shake. “Not if you’re...emotionally involved.”

“You fuckhead.” Anguish flashed in Navarro’s eyes. “I’m not emotionally involved.”

Parnell didn’t need the Collective to recognize this as a lie, and he might have laughed had he not felt his heart breaking. Navarro cared so much that it showed in his unsteady voice and deep, glittering eyes. How could Parnell give up a man like Navarro, who loved him this much? He wasn’t strong enough to fight his neediness *and* Navarro, and break off their relationship.

Navarro glared at Parnell, and his chest moved with his rapid breathing. Parnell watched him in dismay. Fate had left Parnell with no choice but to seize power without permission and take the consequences, but Navarro still had a choice. What would the higher-ups do to him if he stood by Parnell? At worst, kill him. At best, take away something he loved. It would devastate Navarro if he could no longer practice law.

Parnell made his voice cold. “So, by your own admission, we have nothing. Don’t risk the status you’ve earned in the Cadre. Not for your occasional fuck buddy.”

“Your term, not mine,” Navarro said. “You think I care about my *status*? Are you *trying* to insult me? You think after more than sixty years on this earth, I can’t make my own decisions?”

He grabbed Parnell by the back of the neck and pulled him into a passionate kiss. Parnell's mind shorted out as his body pressed close, and he responded with everything he had. Navarro pulled back to say, "Tell me again we have nothing."

Breathless, Parnell said, "Cut your losses."

Navarro stopped him with fingertips to his lips. "I'll do as I please."

Chapter Six

Easter Sunday arrived with heavy overcast skies and chilly predawn light that seeped through the curtains. Parnell slid into exhausted semiconsciousness as the heat of Navarro's naked body eased away from him. Sheets rustled and bedsprings creaked as Navarro got out of bed, and Parnell swallowed against a metallic taste in his throat. He felt half-dead, even after sleeping.

"Hey." His voice sounded raspy. "Come back. We got time."

"Time for what?" Navarro assembled the day's outfit.

"For whatever you want."

The closet door whispered on its track, the garment bag unzipped, and Parnell struggled to stay awake. Since when did he need sleep more than sex? He must have drifted off, because Navarro's hand on his shoulder startled him, and he inhaled the scent of fresh-brewed coffee that now permeated the room.

"Get up." The mattress dipped as Navarro sat on the edge of the bed, looking formidable in his gray suit and a burgundy silk tie. "It's Easter Sunday. We've got a job to do."

"You already showered?" Parnell sat up in confusion, and the sheets slid around his waist.

"Pick up the pace," Navarro said. "No coffee until you do."

Parnell dragged himself through a five-minute shower and three-minute shave as the full impact of Easter Sunday and what he must do threatened to overwhelm him. How could he take power without bursting into flames? Where exactly in the church did it lie? Would he die and end up in hell? How could he keep Navarro safe?

He dressed in his gray suit, his former uniform as a prosecutor, which slid from its filmy dry cleaner plastic, looking elegant and expensive. Of course Navarro had reclaimed the .357 Magnum, and its weight in his shoulder holster lent a slight asymmetry to the line of his suit jacket. Parnell stood in front of the mirror, knotting his blue tie while he gazed at Navarro's reflection. An intense, selfish longing to confide in Navarro swept over him. Navarro understood and coveted power as he never had, but he couldn't afford to involve Navarro, not even to ask for advice.

"You bring a weapon for me?" he asked.

Navarro dug around in a grimy plastic shopping bag stuffed alongside his luggage and drew out a battered revolver in a cheap leather holster. Back when Parnell did police work, he would have called it a throw-down piece—something to plant on whatever unarmed body the Cadre had required him to shoot. He took it, not surprised to find its serial number filed off.

"I had to buy it on the street," Navarro said. "In Gallup."

"As long as it works." Parnell secured the weapon under his suit jacket.

"You look exhausted." Navarro eyed him with open concern. "Watch yourself out there."

"Yeah, I will."

"I mean it," Navarro said. "Always be careful. Don't expect me to protect you."

"I've never expected that."

The words flew out of Parnell's mouth, sounding insultingly casual, and Navarro went still as if from a deep, clean knife wound in that first stunned instant before the pain hits. The blood drained from his face, leaving his dark eyes cold and distant. Parnell watched in an agony of regret, knowing that any apology he tried to offer would make the situation worse.

Navarro turned away, his tone even. "Let's go."

They checked out of Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town and stowed their bags in the Porsche, which they left in the hotel parking lot to retrieve later. Back in Gallup, Navarro had used an untraceable name to rent a nondescript white compact car, and they took that to the plaza at Old Town, where they parked on Romero Street, which bordered the church on the west.

Parnell's watch read 0500, two hours before the first Mass. They split up and searched the area surrounding the church, making certain no one else lay in wait. At 0630, the parking lot on Church Street started to fill with the cars of the faithful, and Parnell and Navarro stood in the front courtyard, scanning the crowd.

The mostly Hispanic congregation streamed past them into the church, dressed in their finery. Children scampered back and forth, the girls in frilly dresses and the boys in suits with short pants that stopped at their scabby knees. One chubby toddler lost his balance and steadied himself with a hand, plump as a starfish, planted against Parnell's shin.

Motionless, Parnell watched the kid in flattered fascination, realizing he'd been mistaken for human, and Navarro gave him an amused glance. A young woman approached wearing a blue satin dress with a tiny matching hat and scooped up the kid with an apologetic smile.

"I'm walking the perimeter around back," Navarro said.

"Wait." Parnell stepped closer, wanting to confide in him, kiss him, or at least touch him. Navarro studied him with a puzzled frown, and Parnell settled for adjusting the knot of Navarro's tie and brushing imaginary lint from his lapels. He didn't care if it made them look like lovers. "Be careful."

Navarro nodded and strolled away, turning his shoulders to angle against the swarm of mostly diminutive churchgoers, which set off his tallness. Parnell watched Navarro go as an icy lump formed in his throat. He wrenched his gaze away, letting the crowd sweep him across the brick walkway to the wide step that led to the church doors.

Made of bricks, it formed a perfect half-moon platform. Parnell started trembling hard as he stepped up and edged across it toward the church threshold, where the double doors stood open. A recent paint job brightened the intricately paneled wood, leaving it the violet blue of the mantle of the Queen of Heaven. His hands grew sweaty at the sight of the narthex, which lay beyond in shadow.

The narthex looked like a simple foyer that led to the nave. If he tried to cross the threshold, would he explode from the inside out in white-hot flames? Maybe not, since Mr. Sanchez had set the precedent. Parnell suppressed a nervous laugh. How bizarre to be invoking Mr. Sanchez as a source of comfort. He forced his thoughts back to the problem at hand. Where did the power reside? All the way back in the sanctuary? At the altar? Would the untapped power of the city recognize him as someone who could wield it and flow to him, shielding him from death?

Parnell turned to face the crowd, standing just outside the curving adobe lintel. He drew in deep breaths, trying to find the courage to cross the threshold. Should he inch one foot across? Should he let out a kamikaze scream and charge into the nave? He bit his lip, holding back a nervous snicker. A flash of pink drew his attention, and he remembered the polo shirt he'd left behind for Chavez.

He went hyperalert, straightening to his full height, and everything slowed to crystal precision as he spotted Chavez walking toward him, half-shielded behind a large family that approached the church doors. Blood drained from Chavez's face as he saw Parnell, and he stopped short at the edge of the brick platform as the crowd parted and flowed around him.

Parnell shook his head and mouthed, *Turn back.*

Chavez stared up at him with burning eyes. He jerked his chin to the left as if to say, *Step aside!*

The air between them crackled with antagonism, but their eye contact connected them, and Parnell felt grateful that he wouldn't be alone in the next instant. He stepped backward over the threshold as stunned incomprehension flashed over Chavez's face, followed by horror.

Heat blazed through Parnell, shooting up from his feet and out through his head, turning his vision blue-white. He tried to scream, but his teeth fused shut as pain filled him like a bomb blast, towering and expanding its mushroom cloud of pure energy until it threatened to rend the veil of flesh that contained him. He took another dragging step backward into open space.

His fingertips brushed a wall, and he swung around and put his back to it as colors swarmed him, thick with energy, corporeal, pulsing with thousands of souls. Parnell drew in a shuddering breath as his eyes swam with tears. His pain receded like the tide, uncovering a vast shore of strength. His spine straightened, the bones shifting with the release of unbearable pressure. For the first time since he crossed the barrier, he didn't feel half-dead.

He stood inside the narthex.

Parnell's mind blanked in terror, and his balls tried to shrink inside his body—but he wasn't dead. He stood against the wall, too weak with relief to lift a finger, and his skin prickled all over with the possibility that he might yet burst into flames. Perhaps if he *moved* or if a few more seconds passed. Nothing happened. Did that mean that he had become the keeper of Albuquerque?

He took an experimental breath. Two elderly ladies in black, murmuring together in Spanish, shuffled past him at a glacial pace, their hats at the level of his chin. They paused, and one slanted a puzzled glance up at him, probably wondering why he leaned against the wall, shivering like a spooked horse.

“Estás bien?” Her eyes glinted like dark beads in a network of soft wrinkles.

He managed a polite nod, and Chavez stepped inside, staring at Parnell over their hats as they resumed their journey to the nave. Parnell felt a burst of fear for Chavez, not knowing if an angel-demon hybrid would combust upon holy ground, but the easy familiarity in Chavez's posture told him that Chavez wasn't just immune to holy ground—he had probably been raised Catholic, just like everyone else in the congregation. Chavez detoured around Parnell like a knife fighter, staying well out of reach, and went to the nave to look inside. His fists opened and

closed at his side, his back rigid with tension, and Parnell sensed him grieving for the power that could have been his.

Something huge caused a seismic shift within Parnell as his new power settled, and his entire field of vision jittered like a faulty television screen before sharpening to breathtaking clarity. He felt...all right. No, *good*, filled with vitality. He almost groaned with relief, realizing as his knees went weak how terrified he'd been that the barrier had left him irreversibly damaged.

His euphoria chilled, turning into fear. He had seized power without permission, and the Cadre would try to execute him and punish Navarro, but he couldn't think about that now. Parnell shut down that entire line of thought as he'd learned to do as a cop, and fed his mind a distraction—Chavez—whom he still needed to apprehend. Chavez turned, his gaze hardening as they watched each other.

Parnell looked back through the open doors. In the courtyard, Navarro stood like a dark blade against the leaden sky, his tie flapping over his shoulder in the breeze and his jaw rigid with tension. His dark eyes scanned the crowd, and their gazes met through the open church doors. Navarro's face emptied in shock and came alive with panic.

"Jaye!" he roared, and all within range whipped their heads around.

Inside the church, someone gave a polite cough. "May I help you?"

A priest approached to show Parnell to a pew. Parnell stood his ground, the tendons straining in his neck and his throw-down piece pressed into his back. Of course, the priest wore that outfit—the black suit with the sinister Roman collar. Medium height, he had to look up to meet Parnell's gaze, and his wispy gray hair and bifocals placed him in his fifties. His skin shone like white rose petals. He came to an uncertain halt, and his welcoming smile faded.

"What are you?" he breathed.

Parnell's mouth went dry. Great. A psychic priest. Just what he needed. His heartbeat slammed as he considered drawing his gun. He had to say something fast

before the priest figured out how to annihilate him, but his mind went blank. He remembered Sri Krishna's words as quoted by Oppenheimer, and it made him smile.

"I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," Parnell said.

The priest's eyes popped open, and he crossed himself. The force of it singed the air between them like a shock wave, rocking Parnell back on his heels, but it did no further harm. Parnell took a cautious step back and beckoned to Chavez, who stepped to the door with the reluctance of a suspect headed for questioning.

Sunlight broke from behind heavy clouds as they stepped outside, where Navarro met them, lips compressed into a bloodless line. Squinting in the brightness, Parnell reached for Chavez's arm to march him across the bricks in their half-moon shape, but something caught Navarro's attention. He stepped in front of Parnell, pivoting to face the crowd as a gunshot split the dry air and froze Parnell in place.

Navarro swayed against Parnell as if he had stumbled, but went on toppling. Panic sliced through Parnell's confusion as he caught Navarro in his arms, smelling the blood and gunpowder even as Navarro stiffened from the impact of the bullet. Navarro's weight sent Parnell to his knees, which struck the bricks with such force that pain shot up his spine. Chavez had already thrown himself flat on the ground, as if gunshots happened all the time back in Juarez, which they probably did.

Catholics screamed and some crouched, looking for cover. Navarro managed to draw his .357 Magnum in a white-knuckled grip, but blood seeped through his suit jacket. Blood spotted the bricks, and its rich scent rose in a thick cloud, dizzying Parnell as he drew it into his lungs and wrapped his arms around his lover, panting in shock. Navarro's fierce gaze sought his face.

A flash jerked at Parnell's attention—sunlight glinting off mirrored sunglasses.

Hidalgo stood across the street, holding a pistol half-hidden against his leg. Sunlight gleamed on his white scar above the sunglasses, and his two remaining

men quivered like hunting dogs on the leash, waiting for his orders. His face went rigid as he and Parnell locked gazes, and Parnell narrowed his grief and terror down to a focused beam of hatred.

Power blazed up inside Parnell as he pulled it from the earth in one huge pulse. Additional energy streamed off the Catholics that surrounded him, and he swept it up like cobwebs, forcing it all into a laser to burn Hidalgo alive. It pulsed out of his control and arced across the plaza in a supersonic lash, and glass shattered everywhere, bursting simultaneously from the church, cars, and shop windows. Glass fragments bounced off Hidalgo and his men, who shielded their faces and turned away.

Instinct made Parnell crouch and shield Navarro, while Chavez crawled to them as if he were an extra in a World War II film. Chavez closed cold fingers over Parnell's wrist, and Parnell shook him off, scanning for Hidalgo, who had disappeared with his men. Navarro lay across his lap, reeking of blood. Parnell tightened his arms around him, unable to detect breathing and unable to sense his life force without the Collective. A low, snarling keen reverberated in Parnell's ears, and he realized the ugly sound came from him.

Chavez took the revolver from Navarro's limp hand and tucked it under his own shirt. "Bring him," he said. "We got to go."

Chapter Seven

Parnell sat with Navarro and Chavez at a cocktail table at the Hyatt Regency Albuquerque hotel, waiting for the Cadre hearing that would decide their fates. He wished he could talk to Navarro in private, if only to say good-bye. Now that they could sense each other again through the Collective, he longed to close the protective distance Navarro had created between them.

Did Navarro resent him for seizing power? For choosing not to confide in him? Probably, which must have helped Navarro to take his advice and cut the tie between them. On the surface, Navarro seemed in a good mood, laughing and telling jokes, and he looked sharp in his black suit, but the fine skin around his eyes bore tiny creases of pain from yesterday's ordeal.

At 1500 hours, the hotel bar remained a dead zone, with soothing lighting, no music, and only one other person present across the room—a sleepy bartender slicing lemons with ponderous precision. Chavez slouched on Navarro's other side, dressed in immaculate jeans and a white polo shirt that Parnell had bought him for the hearing. Parnell hoped that such clothes would make Chavez look insignificant and therefore offer him some protection from the higher-ups. All three of them drank club soda to keep their heads clear for the trial that lay ahead.

Yesterday they'd had no Cadre medics, drivers, and safe houses—no support network to catch them after Navarro took the bullet meant for Parnell. They couldn't go to a hospital for fear of the cops, so they ended up in a cheap motel room south of Central, where Chavez assisted while Parnell dug the bullet out of Navarro's shoulder and sewed up the torn flesh. If Navarro had been human, he probably would have died from blood loss.

They had moved on to a suite at their present location, where Navarro spent the next several hours sleeping and consuming vast amounts of protein while Chavez watched over him. Parnell had gone to the airport to retrieve the five most powerful demons in the Cadre. It scared him more than he cared to admit that they had found it necessary to dismantle the barrier and fly to Albuquerque. Obviously they were scrambling to react to the gravity of the situation—his seizing power in Albuquerque and *extra* power on Easter—and they wanted to travel as fast as possible. Upon arrival, none had spoken to him beyond the minimum required, and now they intended to convene a hearing to decide what to do about him, Navarro, and Chavez. Now, with the barrier gone, the Collective flowed once more through the back of Parnell's mind.

Navarro stirred the ice in his drink. "Tell me again who's going to be there."

"Ms. Lancaster, Ms. Trujillo, Mr. Reyes, Mr. Vance, and Mr. Sanchez," Parnell said.

Chavez studied his hands. "That's the leader, her assist—"

"And the keepers of Denver, Reno, and El Paso," Navarro said.

"At least you get a hearing." Chavez shrugged. "In Juarez, you'd get a bullet in the head."

Navarro gave him a look of fraying patience. "I'll speak on your behalf if you let me."

Chavez shook his head. "You'd sell me in an instant to protect your boyfriend."

That made both Parnell and Navarro laugh, but Navarro broke off, glancing away as the tension spiked between him and Parnell within the Collective. Parnell sipped his club soda, trying to hide his sorrow. For his survival, Navarro needed to disassociate himself from Parnell—even denounce him—after this hearing.

"Boyfriend?" Parnell said. "How quaint."

Navarro said under his breath, "Boyfriend is too inadequate a word."

Did that mean something good or bad? Parnell wanted to grab Navarro's hand and press it to his mouth. He wondered if he would ever see Navarro again after today. Would the Cadre even let him live?

"Careful." Chavez studied the tabletop. "I can feel all that through the Collective."

Parnell flushed, ignoring him as they finished their drinks. A frozen silence descended.

Navarro smirked. "Okay, two demons and an angel walk into a bar." Despite his sorrow, Parnell couldn't help snickering, and Navarro waved him to silence. "Let me get to the punch line."

"Someone's here," Chavez said.

The keeper of Denver stood at the bar, watching them with a trace of sympathy. From his years living in Denver, Parnell knew Mr. Reyes as a stand-up guy, but he didn't dare speak to him under these circumstances. Like every demon, Mr. Reyes spared no expense on clothes, because one's wardrobe expressed a complicated language of power, prestige, and respect for one's superiors. In his three-piece suit, he looked like a movie star playing a lawyer. He beckoned, "Gentlemen!"

They followed Mr. Reyes to the elevators, where they rode up to the conference room Parnell had reserved for his hearing earlier that morning. Everyone held their emotions on a tight leash below the level of the Collective. The metal doors slid apart, and Mr. Reyes led them into the hall. Parnell felt as if ice water were closing over his face.

Navarro glanced at him, dark eyes serious and intent. He leaned close to whisper in Parnell's ear. "Abandon all supports and look to me for protection. I shall purify you from the sins of the past. Do not grieve."

After a confused instant, Parnell almost burst out laughing. Only Navarro would appropriate Sri Krishna's supreme line from the Bhagavad Gita. It gave him the shot of courage he needed, and he drew himself up and followed Navarro into

the conference room.

The higher-ups sat at a table of gleaming hardwood, with water glasses at hand and two sweating carafes set within easy reach on coasters made of cork. Mr. Reyes took his seat while Mr. Vance meditated with his eyes closed. Ms. Trujillo gave them a chilly smile, and Mr. Sanchez stared at Parnell as if he wanted to peel the clothes and flesh from his body. Ms. Lancaster sat in the center, studying Chavez with narrowed eyes.

Parnell sensed the uneasiness of the higher-ups, who were all keepers, except for Ms. Trujillo. Keepers never enjoyed leaving their own cities, even for a few harmless days, and he hoped they wouldn't hold it against him. A smaller table awaited him, with no water glasses or carafes, which didn't surprise him, and he took the middle seat, facing his judges, with Navarro and Chavez flanking him.

"Gentlemen," Ms. Lancaster said. "Thank you for coming."

Her power streamed through the Collective, filling the room in crackling waves. Of the higher-ups, only she had nothing to prove, and therefore she wore fifty-dollar suits off the rack, such as today's navy blue outfit, possibly from Kmart, which she'd paired with white tennis shoes. If evaluating her for jury selection, Parnell would have guessed her to be a kindergarten teacher. She lived in seclusion, liked to play golf, and looked to be in her thirties as all demons and angels did.

She added, "This won't take long."

Parnell froze. Had they already decided to kill him?

Ms. Trujillo spoke into a small tape recorder. "This is an informal hearing at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Albuquerque, New Mexico..."

The keeper of El Paso yawned. He had the massive neck of a bodybuilder, and his head gleamed as if he'd waxed the tight brown skin. Mr. Sanchez kept his head shaved, and his eyebrows looked plucked. He stirred, obviously sensing Parnell's revulsion through the Collective.

Parnell snapped his gaze to the pack of chewing gum next to Ms. Lancaster's hand, allowing the green of its wrapper to fill his mind. Underneath, his power simmered, and he wanted to use it to crush Mr. Sanchez like a big bald beetle. He wondered if he could.

"State your names for the record," Ms. Trujillo said.

He had to swallow, which of course they noticed. "Jaye Robert Parnell."

Navarro spoke with easy confidence. "Julio Robert Navarro."

Chavez put a hard edge on his voice. "Roberto Chavez."

Ms. Lancaster glanced at Navarro. "You are Mr. Parnell's advocate?"

"Yes, ma'am. May we know the charges?"

"There are no charges. We merely seek information."

"But...your presence," Navarro said. "It's unprecedented."

"Las Vegas can survive without me for a day. Summarize, Mr. Navarro."

Navarro smoothed his tie and stood as if in a formal court of law. "Esteemed members of the Cadre, on April twenty-first, Mr. Parnell and I were tasked by Ms. Trujillo to travel to New Mexico to locate Mr. Chavez and escort him back to Las Vegas..."

Thanks to the Collective, they *had* no defense other than the truth, which Navarro had no choice but to present in the best possible light while stressing Parnell's loyalty and trustworthiness. In keeping with the image that they hoped to present of absolute submission, Navarro would testify while Parnell sat looking meek and defenseless, with his gaze downcast, which didn't come easily to him.

Ms. Lancaster broke in with questions, walking Navarro through their encounter with the enslaver on the Arizona-New Mexico border. As he continued, she folded a piece of chewing gum into her mouth. Her left hand cupped what looked like a black velvet jewelry bag.

Mr. Reyes frowned. "You stopped in Gallup? On a time-sensitive mission?"

"Sir," Navarro said. "Only to clean up. To avoid attracting attention, sir."

Mr. Sanchez gave a greasy chuckle. “And to fuck.”

“Yes, sir,” Navarro said without even blinking. “But we kept it short.”

The keeper of El Paso smirked, studying Chavez. “Our guest disapproves.”

Chavez gave him a look of contempt. “You really think I give a damn?”

Parnell’s stomach did a slow roll as the tension in the room sharpened to unbearable levels. The higher-ups stirred, raking their gazes over Chavez as Mr. Sanchez purpled. The keeper of El Paso leaned his massive elbows on the table. “You know, I could have you screaming on the floor.”

Chavez held his stare. “I *know* you’re wasting our time.”

Ms. Lancaster broke in. “Mr. Sanchez, back off. Mr. Navarro, continue.”

What kind of snake pit had Chavez come from in Juarez? Not many had the balls to stand up to Mr. Sanchez. Parnell freed a corner of his mind to wonder about this while he forced his emotions below the Collective. One of the higher-ups had been ceaselessly scanning them for falsehood since they’d entered the conference room. Parnell endured the next feathery brush through his upper consciousness and tracked it back to Mr. Vance, whose eyes flashed blank as computer screens.

Navarro finished testifying. He took his seat, his gaze lowered in respect.

“Mr. Parnell?” Ms. Lancaster asked. “Do you have anything to add?”

Would this be his only chance? “Yes, ma’am.”

“Go ahead.”

Parnell stood, wondering how to begin. “May it please the court—”

Mr. Sanchez broke in. “Does this look like a fucking courtroom?”

Perhaps he’d been too formal. Parnell hesitated, his expression freezing.

“Well?” Mr. Sanchez said. “You cocksucking excuse for a lawyer.”

The most autocratic judges in Nevada had never come close to provoking him like that. Forcing down his rage, Parnell groped for a meek response, and Ms. Lancaster said, “Another word, Mr. Sanchez, and I’ll have *you* screaming on the floor.”

The keeper of El Paso closed off, silent and dense as a chunk of concrete. He dropped below Parnell's ability to sense him through the Collective until he seemed inert—inorganic, even. Blank and heavy, his face resembled the visage on a stone Buddha. A small and cheap one, Parnell thought as his hands curled into fists. Something easy to smash.

Ms. Lancaster glanced at Parnell. "You had something to say?"

"I—Only that I acknowledge the irresponsibility of..."

He tried to stop his voice from shaking. His first day in court had been as bad on that hot afternoon in 1970. He'd sat at the prosecutor's table in a trial involving a liquor-store robbery and felt like he might drown in despair. The enslavers were known for their dominion over the criminal world, but the Cadre had chosen to infiltrate the citadels of authority. First they'd needed cops and then lawyers, so Parnell had obeyed a direct order to become one when he'd really wanted to remain a cop.

"The irresponsibility of?" Ms. Lancaster prompted with a mocking smile.

"Acting on behalf of the Cadre without permission. I wish to affirm my allegiance."

Navarro shot to his feet. "Your Honor—Ma'am—Ms. Lancaster, Mr. Parnell acted with discretion and at considerable personal sacrifice to secure the city for the Cadre. Had he opened fire, he would have risked exposing us. Had he failed to act, he would have lost the city to the enslavers. His decision gained us the city *and* Mr. Chavez, which fulfills our original mission."

Ms. Lancaster glanced at Chavez. "A dubious acquisition, perhaps."

Navarro stood his ground. "The only known angel-demon hybrid and the first living enslaver to pass into our power."

Shaken, Parnell closed his eyes in helpless gratitude as Navarro's strength surrounded him through the Collective, shoring him up. The words of Sri Krishna blazed through his mind like skywriting, making his eyes open. *To love is to know*

Me. Thus, one shares in My glory and enters into My boundless being. All his acts are performed in My service, and through My grace he wins eternal life.

All five higher-ups shifted their unblinking stares from Navarro to him.

Parnell fought a surge of fear. Had they seen something in his aura, something indicating a religious epiphany? The words rolled through his mind, reverberating into the Collective. He kept his face blank, trying to dampen their effect. The passage referred to *bhakti yoga*—devotional worship, whatever that meant—and it had nothing to do with him. In the farthest corner of his mind, he wondered if a demon could find redemption through love.

Navarro gave a discreet cough, reclaiming their attention. “Ms. Lancaster?”

“Noted,” she said. “Sit down, Mr. Navarro. Mr. Parnell, explain.”

Navarro obeyed. Still standing, Parnell took a deep breath. “What was the question?”

“Tell us how you claimed power,” Ms. Lancaster said.

He hesitated. “I...” Mr. Vance’s scrutiny squeezed him through the Collective.

“In your own words, Mr. Parnell. Not your lawyer’s.”

His experience testifying as a cop in trials had taught him to volunteer the minimum. This usually protected the prosecutor’s case, but today he’d become the defendant. “I stepped on the church threshold. That caused it to happen.”

“Admirably succinct, Mr. Parnell.” Ms. Lancaster gave a wry smile. “Is that all?”

“Let me prove myself,” he said as Navarro’s breath caught. “I’ll hunt down Hidalgo.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not wasting you on that. Sit down, Mr. Parnell. Mr. Chavez?”

Parnell sank to his seat. Chavez didn’t move. He stared at Ms. Lancaster as if hypnotized.

“Mr. Chavez, are you ready to testify?”

He spoke with a dry catch to his voice. “Do I have a choice?”

“Even your life-and-death choices are yours alone, Mr. Chavez.”

His Mexican accent grew pronounced. “Does the Cadre have *any* interest in th—”

“In what?” Ms. Lancaster asked. “Information on the murders, theft, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other crimes you performed for the enslavers?”

Chavez swallowed once. “Yes.” He admitted his crimes and gave her no honorific, and Parnell felt a twinge of admiration. He had expected lies, defiance, or even groveling.

“Not today,” Ms. Lancaster said. “Your in-depth knowledge of the enslavers’ ongoing criminal activities, while potentially useful, dwindles to insignificance when compared to your status as an angel-demon hybrid. We will explore both subjects extensively in the near future. However, today I have some basic questions for you.”

After a frozen instant, Chavez said, “Go ahead.”

“Why did you enter San Felipe de Neri Church?”

“Because I wanted the power. So I could kill Hidalgo.”

“Why did you not suffer the consequences of entering a consecrated church?”

“There are no consequences for us.” Chavez added in a low voice, “Los Elegidos.”

“Los Elegidos de Dios?” Ms. Lancaster asked.

“Yes,” Chavez admitted, his gaze dropping to the tabletop.

“Why do Los Elegidos suffer no consequences?”

“I don’t know.” His answer rang true in the Collective.

“You are half demon. Why were you not harmed?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Mr. Parnell protect you?”

"I don't know."

"Are you immune to objects of faith?" Ms. Lancaster hadn't blinked once.

"Yes." His gaze lifted to her face. "But I don't know why."

"I wonder if you have free will to choose." She stared at Chavez as though he were a rare species of insect on a microscope slide. Parnell's heart seemed to jump. Maybe any of them could choose whether to walk in the light or the darkness. "What do you think, Mr. Chavez?"

He went still beside Parnell. "I don't know."

"Surely you've heard of the war in heaven. One-third of the heavenly host, including the Cadre, followed the dragon, and one-third did not."

"Is that a question?" Chavez said.

Ms. Lancaster snapped her gum. "Into which third do you fall, Mr. Chavez?"

"We're the same," he said. "Los Elegidos and the Cadre."

"No," Ms. Lancaster said. "An oversimplification."

Sweat glittered in Chavez's hairline. "That's how I see it."

In response, Ms. Lancaster flicked open the jewelry bag and tossed its contents, and Parnell felt a flash of suffocating horror as something dark and segmented flew past his face. Chavez caught it on instinct, like a baseball player, and his body went rigid, his fist opened, and the thing trickled between his feet.

It was a Roman Catholic rosary made of black onyx beads that terminated in a silver crucifix, and the Archbishop of Santa Fe had probably blessed it. Chavez kicked the beads past Mr. Vance, and the skin on Mr. Vance's face gave a shuddering ripple like horseflesh crawling under an onslaught of flies.

Ms. Lancaster smoothed out the jewelry bag. "Your hand, Mr. Chavez."

Chavez closed his fist, and power drawn from the Collective slammed over him like a jar trapping a bug. The seamless weave of energy came from Ms. Trujillo, Mr. Reyes, and Mr. Vance. The keeper of Reno leaped up and grabbed Chavez by the back of the neck, then dragged him to his knees in front of Ms. Lancaster. Chavez

growled a muffled curse as Mr. Vance forced his hand open on the table to show that no blisters marred his palm.

Ms. Lancaster gave a short nod. "Return him to his seat."

Mr. Vance obeyed with such enthusiasm that Parnell had to catch the chair to prevent Chavez from toppling. The Collective receded like a silk scarf snapped into a magician's sleeve, and Chavez swayed, gripping the metal seat with both hands as the muscles stood out in his arms. His stare jumped from face to face as the higher-ups studied him.

"You're not of the Cadre," Ms. Lancaster said. "I remember us all. I knew Mr. Parnell and Mr. Navarro before they had those names. You were not at Trinity Site. You will never truly be one of us."

"I wish to serve the Cadre," Chavez forced out.

"Mr. Parnell," Ms. Lancaster said. "Mr. Navarro. Will you give us a moment?"

They stared at her, and Parnell realized she'd just dismissed them. He swallowed hard. "Mr. Chavez is under my protection." Navarro gave a tiny flinch, but Parnell kept his gaze on Ms. Lancaster.

Her pale eyes caught the light. "He'll be fine. You have my word. Now, get out."

Parnell and Navarro hurried to the hall, and the door swung shut behind them, cutting off Mr. Vance's ceaseless scan. Navarro gripped Parnell's shoulder and pinned him against the wall. "What are you doing?" His eyes held a hard glint, his face expressionless.

"What?" Parnell shook off his hand.

Navarro stood his ground, leaning in close. "You *volunteered* to hunt down Hidalgo?"

Parnell couldn't think as he breathed in the faint trace of Navarro's expensive cologne rising off hot skin. His cock swelled, and his palms were tingling, flattened back against the wall. "I had to prove myself."

“To Chavez?”

“To the Cadre.”

Navarro watched him with cold-eyed restraint, and Parnell swallowed, unable to speak. The Collective revealed no trace of Navarro’s emotions, but it didn’t surprise Parnell that his new power would quench whatever attraction Navarro might have felt for him. Even so, he grieved for what might have been with his friend, rival, and lover. Navarro had beaten him with a belt and taken a bullet for him. *To love is to know Me.*

Navarro leaned close to whisper in his ear like an attorney conferring with his client, but the warm caress of his breath sent an erotic charge through Parnell. “The other night? I lied when I said I wasn’t emotionally involved.”

To have him admit it flattened Parnell’s defenses. He couldn’t help a fleeting smile even while he told himself he had to let Navarro go. “Yeah, I know, buddy.”

Navarro went still. “Without the Collective? How?”

Parnell flushed hot, not wanting to gloat, not with Navarro. They stood so close together that if he turned his head, their lips would meet. He swayed toward Navarro on instinct, craving the scent and warmth of him, and it felt like falling. He tried to pull himself together. “You were so wound up—”

“I never get wound up.”

“Okay, so *involved* that you were easy to read even without the Collective.”

Navarro hesitated, then said low in his ear, “The higher-ups won’t have you killed.”

“They got a target painted on me. I took power without permission.”

“I know an acquittal coming when I see it. They’ll make you stay here.”

A warning sounded in Parnell’s mind. “You need to keep your distance. Don’t establish a tie to me. Even if they let me live, you’ll lose everything if you try to stand with me.” Parnell put his hand on Navarro’s chest, not quite pushing him back as he stroked the blue silk tie. “Are you listening to me?”

“Don’t try to protect me.” Anger flared in Navarro’s eyes. “You need *my* protection.”

Parnell’s fear increased tenfold as he imagined Navarro trying to protect him. Two demons standing together against the Cadre meant insurrection. The Cadre would destroy Navarro to make an example of him and force Parnell to witness his execution.

“Stay in Vegas.” His voice sounded strained and unrecognizable as he lost all pride and started begging. “Wait. See what happens. Be my friend in high places. If you openly link yourself with me, you’ll end up sharing my sentence or worse, and it won’t help either one of us. You’ll lose your status, your safety, and your friends.” He played his last card. “Your *career*. The Cadre won’t let you practice law. If you’re lucky, they’ll retire you to full-time murder, fighting the enslavers out here on the frontier.”

“But I’ll have you.” Navarro stared at him, dark eyes hot.

That look sliced into Parnell’s heart, and he tried to breathe through the pain. He hated himself for wanting to keep Navarro at the same time that he endangered him. “I’m a selfish bastard who doesn’t deserve you.”

“Maybe.” Navarro leaned close, his lips brushing Parnell’s ear. “You have me anyway.”

In an agony of desperation, Parnell choked out the name Navarro wanted him to use. “Julio.” His mouth dried up as Navarro stopped breathing, his entire body taut with listening. “Julio, promise me. Wait and see how this verdict goes before you decide anything.”

Navarro licked his lips as his control slipped. Fear and longing streamed from him into the Collective. He forged on in a tight whisper. “You should know that I love you. I have for a long time. Please, Jaye. I want a place in your life.”

Blood drained from Parnell’s face, leaving him dizzy. He put his fingertips to Navarro’s mouth in a foolish attempt to hold back the words, and Navarro seized

his fingers, kissed them—and of course, the conference room door opened. Parnell pulled his hand free.

Ms. Lancaster eyed them with no surprise. “Gentlemen? We’ve reached a workable solution. Mr. Parnell? We’ve decided to move reinforcements into Albuquerque to back you in your new endeavor.” His new endeavor? She made him sound like a venture capitalist.

They weren’t going to execute him. Parnell put one hand on the wall for balance, struggling to keep his expression respectfully blank. Stress hormones pumped into his system, making his knees shake, and sweat ran down his back. He glanced at Navarro, whose dark eyes glittered with repressed emotion, and it almost wrecked his shaky composure as Navarro started to smile.

Parnell forced his gaze to Ms. Lancaster. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “Step inside, Mr. Navarro. Mr. Parnell? Join me for a soda.”

Navarro gave Parnell an intense stare, full of passion, and Parnell experienced the force of that look like a brand across his heart. Navarro turned and went into the conference room. Parnell struggled to gather his thoughts as he fell into step with Ms. Lancaster, who stood no taller than his shoulder. The cheap rayon lining of her suit rustled with each of her strides.

They reached the ice machine, and alongside it hummed a soft drink dispenser. He reached for his wallet, but she pulled a handful of quarters from her skirt pocket.

“I got it.” She fed quarters into the vending machine and smacked the diet soda button twice. With an ironic smile, she handed him a can and popped hers open. “Mr. Parnell, what were you thinking in there?”

“Ma’am?”

“When your aura flared white and filled the room.”

He felt like a tiny desert creature as a shadow passes between it and the sun. Ms. Lancaster pinned him with a level stare, raising her chin a fraction, perhaps

trying to minimize their height difference, but he knew she could stop his heart with a thought.

“Some lines from the Bhagavad Gita.”

The Collective would reveal a lie, so he had to tell the truth, but he hoped she wouldn't attach any significance to what he said. After all, Oppenheimer had studied the Bhagavad Gita, which had made half the Cadre curious enough to read it once.

“Which lines?”

His fear obliterated his memory of chapter and verse. “Something Sri Krishna—”

“You call him Sri,” Ms. Lancaster said. “*Lord*. Lord Krishna.”

Parnell stared at the soda in his sweating hand. He couldn't move.

“Are you sure you know your allegiance?”

“To the Cadre.” He put his full conviction into it. “Now. Forever. World without end.”

“World without end,” she said. He felt the shadow of death lift away.

The grainy light from the soft drink machine picked out the fine lines around her eyes. She would fit into one of those desert towns under an endless sky at a Sunday picnic, eating fried chicken. Parnell imagined grease shining on her chiseled, freckled features and sunlight reflecting off her pale eyes. He opened his soda and swallowed half of it in one gulp.

“I'm leaving Mr. Chavez here with you,” she said. “You're both to keep a low profile.”

“I'm to...represent us here?”

“More than that, Mr. Parnell. You're to maintain order.”

A heavy coldness coiled within his gut. That would mean more murders for the Cadre.

“Remember last fall in Vegas?” she asked. “The guy killing hookers?”

The news reports came to his mind as if it had happened yesterday. The Las Vegas Police Department had found human remains on Yucca Mountain that turned out to be the killer's. Something had torn the man into pieces so small the police had needed to use his dental records to identify him. Parnell had suspected the Cadre, but he'd had no idea that Ms. Lancaster might have destroyed the killer with her own hands.

"I gave the cops two weeks to find him," Ms. Lancaster said. "I could wait no longer."

"Order...through more killing."

"You must defend your city. Not just against the enslavers, because some humans are just as bad. Crimes of passion are too common and not your purview. Leave them to the cops. *However*. You run across a predator? A criminal born without a conscience?"

Ms. Lancaster paused to let him supply the correct response. He couldn't get enough moisture in his mouth to speak, so she clarified it for him. "You punch his ticket."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"I don't delegate executions. Neither will you. Can you do what's necessary?"

He gave a slow nod. It meant survival for him, Navarro, and Chavez.

"I thought so. I'm aware of your history as a cop and a prosecutor."

Apparently he had enough potential not to kill. "Thank you," he whispered.

In that moment, he longed to share with her his questions about their divine purpose. He sensed that Ms. Lancaster might be the only other demon in the Cadre to wonder about such things, but his fear prevented him from raising such a dangerous topic. Maybe each individual had to struggle with the ambiguity in secret. It would remain a burden—or a nihilistic excuse for one's actions—for everyone in the Cadre not to know why he or she was allowed to escape from hell.

Perhaps each of them could earn redemption, but Parnell would never know until he died.

“Don’t thank me,” Ms. Lancaster said. “*He* let us out.”

Through the Collective, they shared a moment of wordless gratitude toward the father of the atomic bomb, physicist, and inadvertent liberator of the Cadre. More than forty years ago, Oppenheimer’s body had turned to ash, and his soul had gone somewhere else—though not, Parnell hoped, to hell. He would never stray far from their thoughts.

He looked back at the conference room, through the open doors where Chavez sat alone with his head bowed, pouring the rosary from hand to hand. Chavez looked drained from holding his emotions locked below the Collective, which wouldn’t be easy for someone of minimal psychic talent. Mr. Vance stood about eight feet away, leaning against the wall with arms folded, watching Chavez like a prison warden.

Navarro stood across the room, jaw clenched, listening to Ms. Trujillo and Mr. Sanchez, who appeared to be talking at him without pausing to breathe. He glanced up, and his gaze sent a sexual charge simmering through Parnell like electricity.

“Go see to your associates,” Ms. Lancaster said. “I will be in touch.”

Chapter Eight

The higher-ups left the conference room as Navarro drew Parnell against the wall, out of their way, and only Mr. Sanchez glanced back, raking his gaze over them from head to toe like a greasy caress, his tongue caught in his teeth. He strolled away, chuckling under his breath as Parnell repressed a shiver of revulsion.

“We need to talk,” Navarro said. “I want to stay here with you.”

Parnell looked at him and couldn’t help staring at the golden haze of light that appeared around Navarro’s head and then faded away. Had he started to see auras now? His eyes widened in shock, but he could no longer see the halo. Obviously his new powers were manifesting. Only the higher-ups could see a person’s energy pattern. As a midlevel demon, he used to be able to sense such things only through the Collective.

“Jaye?” Navarro’s uncertain expression captured his attention. “Do you even want me?”

Parnell’s heart filled to brimming with emotion. He nodded, unable to speak.

“Really?” Navarro gave him a searching look.

He blurted, “Would you want a lover who has more power than you?”

An uneasy expression crossed Navarro’s face. “You’re going to need my advice.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“It won’t be easy.” Navarro pulled him close, claspings the back of Parnell’s neck. “I think you’ll make it worth the effort.” He kissed Parnell under the ear. “Take Chavez to the Andaluz Hotel. It’s only a block away. Give him a thrill and let him drive.” He pressed the key to the Porsche into Parnell’s hand. “Ms. Trujillo says

it's a precaution in case the enslavers have this place identified. We'll have Cadre backup arriving over there to meet us."

"They're sending us an army?" Parnell asked.

"More like a temporary entourage. Go now." Navarro stroked his face, and Parnell's heart expanded in sudden joy. "Be careful."

"And you?" He wanted to put his mouth on Navarro's throat and inhale his scent.

"I'll take the higher-ups to the airport." Navarro sounded tired. "I've booked a limo. That'll make them happy." He gave Parnell a kiss that felt self-conscious and possessive, and Parnell remembered Chavez watching them. Navarro backed away, keeping his gaze on Parnell, and departed.

Parnell turned to Chavez, who slouched in his seat, and nodded at the rosary. "Put that away."

Chavez slid the rosary into his pocket as greenish blue light flickered and disappeared around his head. Parnell stared, his stride faltering, and tossed the Porsche key to Chavez. A smeary white contrail marked its arc through space. Had he transferred some of his aura? Parnell examined his hands but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Chavez caught the key. "Getting tired of people tossing stuff at me, vato."

"But you get to drive," Parnell said. "Isn't that what you want?"

"I need to get my gun from the room safe." Chavez stood, rolling his shoulders.

"Nav—" Parnell caught himself before using Navarro's surname. Only ten minutes ago, he had stood outside the conference room and recognized Navarro as his lover. Navarro, who had taken a bullet for him and defended him in front of the five most powerful demons in the Cadre. He hadn't expected to unite with Navarro in the hallway in that moment of frantic, whispered negotiation, but he had. He would call him Julio from now on. "Julio will bring our things later."

"I carried that gun 440 kilometers, and I will *not* go unarmed—"

“You will if I say so.” Parnell leaned in, using his height to drive home the command.

“What am I?” Chavez’s eyes flashed. “Your prisoner of war?”

His aura appeared, contracted to a greenish black line along his skin. It looked solid, as if someone had smeared avocado rind on him, and then it faded as Parnell stared.

“Look at you,” Parnell blurted, trying to catch up. “You haven’t slept since—”

“Since you fucked me,” Chavez said. “In more ways than one, vato.”

Parnell tried to ignore his guilt. “Okay, so you’ve had...what? Two hours’ sleep?”

“And your point?”

“Your control is—”

“Yeah, this is all about control.”

“*Don’t interrupt me again,*” Parnell said.

Chavez shut his mouth, watching him with cold, dead eyes, and Parnell felt a premonition of exhausted dread at the thought of having to be in charge of people like Chavez, who would fight him every step of the way. He didn’t want to make decisions for anyone but himself—not for Chavez and not for Navarro, who loved power and would have had no trouble embracing a leadership role.

“I won’t risk you shooting one of us on instinct,” Parnell said. “Los Elegidos and the Cadre are *not* the same. We feel different through the Collective, and you’ve been trained to kill us.”

Chavez gave a curt nod. “Fine.” His flinty eyes and tight mouth said otherwise.

They went down to the parking lot as the setting sun slanted over the pavement. Parnell sent his awareness into the ground, gaining a jumbled impression of human energy everywhere. Hidalgo still had two humans to do his bidding. Parnell set a fast pace across the parking lot, his throw-down piece drawn and shielded inside his suit jacket.

They reached the Porsche, and Chavez dropped into the driver's seat then revved up the engine, tilting his head to listen. Parnell indulged Chavez's fascination with the car for as long as he dared while scanning for danger. "Get us out of here," he said.

Chavez pulled out on Tijeras Avenue, and the tiny fob with Oppenheimer's photo swayed from the rearview mirror as they slowed in rush-hour traffic. "Wish we were in the open," he said. "I'd see how fast this beauty goes."

As they reached the 2nd Street traffic light, Parnell shrugged. "He'd probably let you."

"Really? Your boyfriend? Before or after you and him use me as a sex toy?"

Parnell laughed. "Bobby, c'mon. We're not quite that bad."

"How would *he* feel about that little nickname? I think your boyfriend would come after me. Try to cut off my balls." Chavez made a dramatic slicing gesture. "He thinks you can do no wrong."

Parnell fell silent, unsettled by the insight. How could he be so stupid? After applying the most impersonal epithets to Navarro for *years*, he couldn't expect to get away with calling Chavez by an affectionate nickname. It would only hurt Navarro and cause trouble for Chavez.

When they stopped at Copper Avenue in front of the hotel, Chavez grudgingly surrendered the Porsche to valet parking, and they walked inside the lobby, where Parnell recognized five demons amid the humans. He didn't know them personally, but their hot energy sizzled in the Collective. He tried and failed to see their auras, which appeared to be an ability that hadn't yet stabilized within him.

Each demon gave Parnell a curt nod, as if undecided whether he merited any deference. He didn't know how to respond, so he kept his expression cold and reserved and led Chavez to the reservations desk. It came as a relief to reach their rooms on the top floor five minutes later.

He locked the door, checked the locks to the connecting suite, and returned to shut the curtains on a spectacular view of the Sandia Crest, which glowed pink from

the reflected sunset. He disliked the grudging servility of his Cadre backup, and he felt especially unsettled that he didn't recognize any of them. He would have preferred familiar faces from Vegas.

"The other room is for you," he said.

Chavez shrugged. "You all right?"

"Yeah." Parnell tried to concentrate past the weight of thousands of souls dragging at him as the population of Albuquerque murmured at the edges of his consciousness. He pulled his shirt from his waistband, unbuttoned it past his undershirt, and got one cuff rolled up on his forearm before he became aware of Chavez's flinty stare.

"You got fucking on your mind," Chavez said.

"Aside from you constantly bringing it up?" Parnell rolled up his other cuff. "No."

"I know how this works. I just don't know if you'll let *him* take it out on me afterward."

"Get some sleep." Parnell sat on the bed. "We can order in dinner when Julio gets here. Don't worry. He and I aren't going to do anything unless you want us to."

He meant to needle Chavez, but instead the words made *him* feel self-conscious as he remembered their quick fuck on San Roberto Day. Heat flooded his face as he realized how much he wanted Chavez, facedown and naked underneath him, hot from the shower as he had been before.

Chavez's jaw hardened. "You got one huge goddamn ego. You and him both."

He went into the next room and shut the connecting door between them. The lock clicked into place, loud in the stillness. Parnell shook his head at his clumsiness, rubbing his palms over his hot face as if he could cool himself down.

How could he keep Navarro and Chavez happy? He could start by keeping his mouth shut around Chavez, who obviously would rather take the aggressive role and pursue his lovers than be pursued. He slid off his shoes and socks and fell into

an uneasy doze, smothered by countless human souls piercing his awareness like pinpricks.

Maybe an hour passed as he drifted in and out of sleep, wondering when Navarro would arrive. He sensed Chavez flinch awake in the next room. The lock turned, the door swung open between their rooms, and Chavez came to stand at the foot of the bed. Parnell lay transfixed as he saw Chavez's aura flaring like a blue-green pillar of flame behind his closed eyelids.

"You awake?" Chavez asked. "If we're going to do this, let's do it." He put his knee on the mattress, which dipped as his weight settled astride Parnell's hips. "You and me, vato."

Parnell snapped into full awareness, grabbed a fistful of Chavez's shirt, and heaved him off the bed. Chavez hit the floor and rolled, then came up in a crouch near the table, his brown eyes wide. Parnell couldn't see his aura now, but Chavez looked shocked, his embarrassment shading into anger.

"We don't ever do something behind Julio's back," Parnell said.

"Okay. If you say so." Chavez sat at the table, withdrawing his gaze.

Parnell's wristwatch read 1800, which meant that Navarro would arrive soon, and he didn't want to sit on the bed looking guilty. He pulled two bottles of beer from the minibar and turned to hand one to Chavez.

Chavez watched him with smoldering eyes through a greenish blue aura that looked like a translucent veil of delicate reptilian scales. The sight and its clarity and detail came as such a surprise that Parnell dropped the bottle of beer, which clunked to the table and rolled off the edge. Chavez caught it with a look of puzzled impatience as Parnell fumbled to a seat at the table, keeping his gaze on the aura. It faded from view, but it had stuck around for almost one minute that time.

"You gonna tell your boyfriend?" Chavez gave a resentful curl of his lip.

"Look, do you even want...us?" Parnell asked. He'd almost said "me," but it seemed excessively personal. He sipped his beer, which tasted like sour ice water.

Chavez's eyes went cold. "Not a good idea to say you want it. Even if you do."

"You mean fucking?" Parnell asked. "Or fucking with men?"

"Men," Chavez said. "Because of *La Eme*, I guess."

The mention of the Mexican Mafia triggered Parnell's instinctive antipathy from his time as a cop. As if the enslavers weren't already bad enough, they'd taken traditions from *La Eme*, including the antigay taboo. He nodded, trying not to feel too much sympathy for Chavez. "The Cadre doesn't care," he said. "You can fuck whoever you want, but *I* say you'd better not try to divide me and Julio."

"I'm stuck here with both of you," Chavez blurted. "So what's my place?"

Parnell tried to force down his sudden awareness of Chavez's beauty. "I need your loyalty if we have to fight. That's all. You can either take lovers or be celibate, and we'll honor whatever you want." Because this isn't El Paso, he thought, and his stomach tightened at the thought of Mr. Sanchez. "But if you ever want one of us, you'll take both of us. We won't be divided."

Chavez's eyes widened. He looked wary but intrigued. "You want a threesome?"

Parnell shrugged. "That's up to you."

Through the Collective, he became aware of Navarro approaching down the hall. Chavez's expression closed down as Navarro clicked his key card through the lock, strolled inside, and set his luggage on the bed as the door swung shut and locked. Parnell couldn't help smiling at the realization that somewhere in that overnight bag lay his battered copy of the Bhagavad Gita.

"What? You two are drinking already?" Navarro sounded amused.

"We've earned it," Parnell said. "Any parting advice from the higher-ups?"

"Try not to get yourself killed."

"You're kidding."

"Yeah, I am." Navarro stripped off his suit jacket and tie and hung them in the closet. "I took them to the airport and saw them to the checkpoint. Let's not get

ahead of ourselves, worrying. We'll eat dinner, sleep tonight, and sort out everything tomorrow. Ms. Lancaster said she'd be in touch."

Chavez sat still, tracking Navarro in his peripheral vision. He looked alert but not afraid, and Parnell guessed that not much could shake Chavez's tough attitude. Navarro returned to sit on the foot of the bed.

"Something's not right," Parnell said. "It isn't like the Cadre to leave me unsupervised."

"I agree. What do you think?" Navarro glanced at Chavez. "Give us something, amigo. We all have to earn our keep."

"I thought I'd be earning it some other way." Chavez put a cold edge on the words.

Parnell lost his patience. "He's obsessed with fucking."

Navarro laughed. "And you're not?"

Chavez recaptured Navarro's attention with a challenging stare. The two locked gazes, and just when the tension between them approached critical mass, Chavez added a scornful smile. "All right, this is my take on it. If your *boyfriend*—his gaze raked over Parnell—"can't work out the keeper thing on his own, he isn't worth the leader's time. He'd better sink or swim."

"Is that how *los jefes* do it where you come from?" Navarro asked.

Chavez shrugged as if that should be obvious. He picked at his beer label. He appeared to be angry, but the hot scent of his arousal started to fill the room. Parnell's heartbeat quickened as he wondered what had triggered Chavez's excitement. Navarro's good looks? The promise of danger?

"We're not Los Elegidos." Navarro ran his gaze over Chavez, deliberate and slow.

A deep flush climbed Chavez's face as his jaw tightened. "You're acting like them."

Parnell said, "I thought they wouldn't let you fuck."

Chavez gave him a furious stare. “Do you *mind*?” He stabbed a glance at Navarro. “They used me. They made it a punishment.”

Parnell saw a brief stillness in Navarro’s eyes, recognizing it as repressed rage toward Hidalgo. But it wasn’t Navarro’s style to treat anyone like a victim.

“We’re not like that.” Navarro told Chavez. “Think of sex as part of our recruitment package.” Chavez gave a startled laugh, and Navarro looked pleased—almost smug—at slipping past his defenses. “On behalf of the Cadre, we owe you at least one good fuck.”

“We won’t deny you pleasure,” Parnell said. “You can fuck whenever you want.”

Chavez’s eyes went black, the pupils dilating. “Oh? Like now?”

“If you’d like,” Navarro said. “How did that work with Los Elegidos, anyway? Did they forbid everything? Even, you know...” He pumped his fist in a sensuous glide, as if jerking off.

“What do you think?” Chavez’s tongue touched his lips. He’d gone rigid in his seat, his forearm angled in a futile attempt to hide the hard-on outlined against his jeans. “Yes. Even that.”

Parnell stirred in his seat to capture Chavez’s attention. Like a hot weight, Chavez’s gaze fell upon him and dragged across his chest to settle on his erection, which pushed against Parnell’s trousers. Chavez stared openly, as if he were starving, so Parnell spread his legs to invite his gaze or even his touch. Navarro drew in a soft, quick breath. The Collective vibrated with everyone’s lust shifting into alignment.

“Come here, amigo,” Navarro said to Chavez. “Sit beside me.”

Chavez started to tremble, but Parnell took it as excitement, because he hadn’t yet seen anyone, with the possible exception of Ms. Lancaster, who had managed to intimidate Chavez. Of course, Chavez had to put on an attitude. Without breaking eye contact with Navarro, he drained his beer, taking his time, and the muscles in

his throat moved as he swallowed. He set aside the empty bottle and went to sit beside Navarro.

“May I call you Roberto?” Navarro asked.

Chavez’s lip curled as his gaze grew hot. “You may not.”

“No problem.” Navarro gave him a slow, amused smile. “I want to suck you off. With or without your cooperation.”

Chavez’s eyes widened. He froze as if uncertain whether to laugh or fight. His gaze lifted to Parnell in shock. Going on instinct, Parnell gave him a big smile, and Chavez blurted, “What about you?”

Parnell assumed a grave expression. “I’d advise you to cooperate.”

Chavez exhaled in exasperated disbelief. “But what about *you*?”

“Your call.” Parnell’s breathing quickened. “But I want to watch.”

“He wants to watch me suck you off,” Navarro told Chavez. “Look at me.” At his soft command, Chavez glanced around. “See something you like?” Navarro let his gaze drift down across his own body, drawing Chavez’s undivided attention. “Yeah.” He drew out the word in a lascivious sigh, and Chavez gave a tight swallow. “I know you do.”

“You like to tease.” Chavez flushed. His neck went rigid, his stare locked on the outline of Navarro’s erection.

“Maybe. But not right now.” Navarro’s amusement vanished. His voice dropped, low and hungry. “You want me to beg? I can smell how turned on you are. You’re making Jaye crazy with lust. I can feel it and smell him. You want to give us what we need?”

Chavez’s lips parted. He breathed tight and shallow. “Like what?”

“Take off your clothes, amigo.”

“You first.” Chavez took a deep breath. “Let me see you.”

Navarro rose to his full height and started unbuttoning his shirt. He kept his gaze downcast, allowing Parnell and Chavez to ogle him without feeling self-

conscious. A small smile curved his lips, revealing how much he enjoyed their stares, not to mention their lust pulsing through the Collective in slow, dense waves. Chavez watched with heavy-lidded eyes as Navarro unbuckled his belt, then slid trousers and briefs down his lean, muscled thighs. He tossed aside his clothes and knelt on the carpet at Chavez's feet.

Parnell tried not to let his breathing grow audible as he adjusted his erection. His skin felt paper-thin, about to ignite. Navarro looked like a pornographic fantasy. He settled the firm globes of his ass back on his heels, his knees spread and his cock jutting from the dense thicket of his pubic hair, its broad tip glistening. The bandage taped over his gunshot wound glowed white against the darker cream of his shoulder. Navarro caressed the bulge beneath Chavez's zipper, provoking a tight gasp.

That opened the floodgates. Chavez yanked open his jeans, raised his hips, and shoved his jeans and briefs down as he toed off his shoes and socks. He let out a ragged breath as Navarro helped, pulling everything away and leaving Chavez bare below the waist. Chavez's erection rose, and his abs flexed as he curled up enough to yank off his polo shirt. He sprawled across the bedspread next to Navarro's overnight bag, his skin golden in the lamplight, his nipples tight.

"Come here." His voice shook, thick with lust. "You and you."

Parnell stripped in maybe five seconds and climbed on the bed. A big smile spread across his face, and he couldn't keep his exhilaration from spiking through the Collective. Watching would have been good enough, but he hadn't expected Chavez to include him.

"It's not that big a deal." Chavez looked self-conscious, but his words ceased to matter as he darted glances like tiny flames over Parnell's chest and full hard-on, and his pleasure and excitement increased, flooding the Collective.

"Yes, it is." Parnell's chest tightened. It sank in how much he wanted Chavez to desire him. He knelt behind Chavez and guided him back so Chavez reclined against him, eyelids sliding half-shut.

Chavez looked like a fallen warrior draped over Parnell's lap. His powerful shoulders and upper back lay against Parnell's stomach. Sweat shone on his chest and ran down the deep groove of his spine. Parnell adjusted his throbbing cock, trapped between his thighs and the slick press of Chavez's back muscles.

Navarro looked up at Parnell with an expression of such carnal avarice that the air seemed to ignite between them. His dark eyes grew hooded, the long lashes sweeping down, and he wrapped his hand around the base of Chavez's cock then sucked the flushed crown between his lips. Chavez gasped, and his back drew into a tight arch across Parnell's lap as he squeezed his eyes shut.

His squirming created a damp friction that soon had Parnell trembling and panting, and the sight of Chavez with Navarro struck him as unbearably erotic. Chavez's body looked damp and flushed with pleasure, his head thrown back against Parnell's stomach, eyes closed and teeth clenched shut. His shaft, gripped at the base by Navarro's strong fingers, slid in and out, glistening between Navarro's swollen lips. It highlighted Navarro's masculine beauty—the beard shadow darkening his jaw, the lush lashes lying along strong cheekbones above cheeks hollowed from sucking.

Chavez tried to keep his cool, but Navarro had him whimpering in his throat as his hips rocked up to meet Navarro's mouth and pressed back against Parnell's aching cock. Parnell shifted underneath Chavez, not wanting to climax too soon. Navarro did something that made Chavez surge up with a near scream as Parnell wrapped his arms around Chavez's shoulders. He could guess what Navarro had done—a tongue probing the slit in his cockhead made him react like that every time.

"Oh God, oh God, feels good." Chavez moaned and thrust his fingers through Navarro's hair, stopping him. "No more! Too much. Come up here with us."

Navarro raised his head, his eyes gleaming with pleasure. He climbed to the bed, and his cock hung heavy and engorged, swaying with his motion, its crown glistening with fluid. Parnell's mouth went dry with lust as they lay down together,

keeping Chavez between them, and Chavez locked his left hand over Navarro's wrist and rolled to face him. Obviously he didn't trust Navarro even though he wanted him, and Parnell wondered if Chavez shared his tendency to get an erotic charge from danger.

"You like what you see?" Navarro asked Chavez with a wicked smile.

"You're...uh..." Chavez shivered as Parnell stroked his hip from behind. Unexpectedly he dropped his defenses and whispered, "You're way out of my league. Both of you."

"Is that what you think?" Navarro said. "You can't see how good you look right now."

He pulled the bottle of lube from his overnight bag, slicked up his hand, and lay facing Chavez. Then he gripped both of their erections. Parnell felt a surge of affectionate amusement and managed to force it beneath the Collective. Navarro, who could be predictable, probably wanted to compare cock sizes. Nothing like having the biggest cock to make a guy like Navarro gloat.

Chavez didn't seem to notice, and his breathing grew heavy as Navarro stroked them together. That left Parnell to nudge his slightly-bigger-than-average shaft into the damp crevice between Chavez's buttocks. To his gratified surprise, Chavez's excitement spiked within the Collective. Chavez gave a wrenching shudder and pressed back against him.

"Do it," he said in Spanish, his voice shaking. "Please."

His hips jerked as he tried to force himself back on Parnell with no lube, and Parnell caught his hips, restraining him. Navarro watched, his dark eyes incandescent with lust. He handed Parnell the bottle of lube, and Parnell fumbled the cool slickness into his hand, then slathered it over his cock. He planned to open Chavez with his fingers, but Chavez put his hand back and rolled his hips as he guided in the tip of Parnell's cock.

“Ohhhh,” Parnell burst out. Sudden emotion overwhelmed him—lust, protectiveness, guilt, and deep tenderness—and he forced it beneath the Collective, desperate not to hurt Navarro.

Chavez’s breathing grew rough as he worked himself back, taking Parnell in slow increments, and the heat and pressure made Parnell gasp. He pressed his face into the hot angle between Chavez’s shoulder and neck. Their joining felt tight enough to hurt them both if he started moving. Trembling, he tried to hold still and wait for Chavez to adjust to him.

“That’s good,” Chavez said in Spanish. “So good.”

Navarro and Chavez moved at the same time, their hands colliding as they pressed their erections together. Navarro’s larger hand wrapped around both cocks, and he started jerking them off with slow, smooth strokes. Chavez gave a tight moan. The friction from his squirming made Parnell hiss in pleasure. He gripped Chavez’s hips and timed his thrusts to match the rhythm set by Chavez and Navarro. The room filled with the heat from their bodies, and sweat beaded on their skin.

“Join us.” Navarro’s voice came tight and low, pitched below his heavy breathing.

He pressed his mouth to Chavez’s jaw, then sucked and bit the skin. Chavez turned his face away, as if afraid he might get kissed against his will, but arched his body, pressing into Navarro’s hands. He pushed his knee between Navarro’s thighs, their legs tangling together as Chavez panted, trying to find a position from which to thrust back on Parnell. He slid his hands over Navarro’s chest, exploring the taut muscles covered with fine, dark hair.

“Join us,” Navarro repeated in Spanish.

Chavez groaned as Parnell sank all the way inside him, and he said in Spanish, “I’m yours.”

Behind Parnell’s closed eyelids, their auras merged through him into a white blaze, and he knew the three of them belonged together. His rational mind told him

it meant no more than every demon's slavish desire for unity, but his intuition knew better as he gripped Chavez's hips and shuddered with pleasure. Each pairing he could imagine—him and Chavez, Chavez and Navarro, him and Navarro—would lead to volatile power struggles, but the three of them could survive together, finding balance and peace.

Chavez clenched around Parnell's cock in breathless silence, his sweaty hands sliding over Navarro's hips as he came in a hot rush over Navarro's chest and stomach. Distracted, Parnell gasped as his climax swept over him, his back arching as he tried to fight the loss of control. Navarro groaned as he came, spurting over his and Chavez's hands as aftershocks coursed through him. Parnell clung to Chavez, and Navarro wrapped his arms around them both. The tension drained from them, sweat cooling on their bodies, as they lay tangled together. They lay still as faraway noises filtered to them from elsewhere in the hotel.

Chavez slid out from under Parnell's arm. "Let me go."

"What?" Parnell dragged his eyes open. "Wait."

Chavez clambered over Navarro's loose-limbed form, careful not to touch him, and rolled off the bed. Light and shadow played over his chest and legs as he snatched up his crumpled jeans and shirt. He held his clothes pressed in front of him, his eyes haunted as he backed toward the connecting door that led to the other room. Parnell realized that in just one hour, he and Navarro had overturned a lifetime of Chavez's hiding his desires.

He almost called him Bobby. Instead he blurted, "Stay. Please."

Chavez gave him a desperate look. "I need five fucking minutes away from both of you." He disappeared into the next room, and the door swung half-closed as he kicked it.

Chapter Nine

Five minutes didn't seem like too much to ask, and Parnell tried to force down his dismay. He glanced at Navarro, who sprawled naked across the bed, eyes shut, looking drowsy and dazed with pleasure.

"Julio," Parnell said. The dark eyes opened slightly, glinting through long lashes. "You okay with this? You, me, and him?"

"For you, anything," Navarro said.

The tenderness in his gaze opened up Parnell's heart like a knife—too much, too fast. Parnell struggled with his fear of the deep connection Navarro wanted. He could give it, but it wouldn't be easy, and he needed time. His gaze darted across the rumpled sheets, the carpet, and returned to Navarro's face.

He rose to his knees and settled astride Navarro, then leaned down to kiss him as pleasure flared in Navarro's eyes. Their lips glided together as Navarro stroked his face. Parnell's eyes slid closed, and he rocked with the motion of Navarro stretching out beneath him.

"Sweetheart," Navarro whispered against his lips.

"Don't call me that." Parnell cut him off with another kiss, sucking on Navarro's lips. His tongue delved into Navarro's mouth with soft, darting strokes.

The room phone rang. Parnell eased back from Navarro, and they exchanged an uneasy glance. He picked up the receiver, silence stretched, and a man said in Mexican-accented Spanish, "I want to talk with the keeper."

Parnell's awareness sharpened to full alert. He had never heard Hidalgo speak before, though he remembered the enslaver screaming and charging out of the

bathroom at that motel on Central. He had shot Hidalgo in the back, and he'd tried to kill him again at the church. He knew what Hidalgo felt like in the Collective.

He punched the speaker button so Navarro could hear and said, "Speaking."

Navarro sat up, watching as Parnell mouthed, *Hidalgo*. His eyes grew cold and focused.

Hidalgo's Spanish words filled the room. "I want to negotiate terms."

"Don't waste my time," Parnell said in English, repressing the urge to snort with nervous laughter. He couldn't afford to lose a power struggle with Hidalgo, even one as petty as which language they chose to speak.

"I have information."

"You have nothing."

The connecting door swung open as Chavez edged into their room, fully dressed in his jeans and white polo shirt. Sweat dampened the roots of his hair as he stared at the phone.

"I'll give you my findings from my research in Juarez," Hidalgo said in Spanish. Obviously he regarded his murder spree as his *research*. "I'll give you Roberto's secrets, things *he* doesn't even know." Chavez went pale, his eyes flinty with rage. Hidalgo continued, "I want the same deal you people gave him. I—"

"Speak English," Parnell cut in. "You're not in control here. I am."

Hidalgo gave a tiny, sharp pause. "Okay. As a gesture of goodwill, I do as you ask."

Navarro rose from the bed and slid his black suit from his garment bag. He began to dress, the lines of his body taut with fatigue. From long practice, he knotted his new gray-blue silk tie, not bothering with a mirror. Parnell retrieved his gray suit from where he'd tossed it on the floor and brushed at its wrinkles as he donned it.

"You're asking the Cadre for sanctuary?" He went to the mirror to knot his tie. Burgundy silk, it looked crumpled, maybe from him trampling it during his rush to the bed. "You, the keeper of Juarez?"

"Yes." Hidalgo's voice burst from the speaker. "I have nothing left to lose. I failed to capture Roberto. I failed to sneak into New Mexico without the Cadre finding out. I failed to stop you from taking power, and I failed to kill you. I couldn't even stop *you* from shooting my worthless servants. I can't return to Juarez. My superiors will make an example of me."

Every word rang true in the Collective, and Parnell could almost smell the enslaver's desperation. He looked at Chavez, who shook his head as if at a loss. Parnell said, "How can you live apart from your city?"

An oily smugness crept into Hidalgo's tone. "I can teach you—"

"You're lying." Parnell returned to sit on the bed, facing the phone. "You have no idea how you'll manage." Hidalgo's rage flooded the Collective, and Parnell added, "This is your first lie, Hidalgo. You don't get another one."

Navarro and Chavez sat at the table, their attention locked on the phone as a heavy silence followed his words. Parnell wondered if Hidalgo expected to settle in El Paso and sneak to Juarez for a periodic recharge. The enslavers wouldn't be able to appoint a new keeper until Hidalgo died. They would either hunt him down or try to buy him back from the Cadre.

"Okay," Hidalgo said. "I don't know how I'll manage, but I'm dead if I try to return."

"Aren't you going to heaven?" Parnell put a sneering edge on the words.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'd like to put off finding out. You understand, Mr. Parnell?"

"You don't get to use my name."

"My apologies." Hidalgo's voice turned silky. "Roberto? I know you're there, Roberto."

The blood drained from Chavez's face. He straightened in his chair, his eyes hot.

"You've been fucking," Hidalgo said. "Making yourself indispensable?"

"Time's up, Hidalgo." Parnell reached for the disconnect button.

"I'll give you Mr. Sanchez!" Hidalgo shouted.

Navarro glanced up in shock, and Parnell's gaze locked with his. They stared at each other, united in their overwhelming desire to destroy Mr. Sanchez. The Collective revealed that Hidalgo spoke the truth, which meant that somehow he had the dirt on the keeper of El Paso.

"He speaks of you," Hidalgo said. "He wants you. He has plans for you—"

"You're losing me, sport." Parnell reached to disconnect, and Navarro waved him back.

Hidalgo spoke faster. "For years, he's worked with me against the Cadre."

"Really? That's hearsay. I want evidence."

"I'll give it to you. Don't you want to bury him before he takes you down?"

"Keep talking."

Hidalgo's voice grew hypnotic. "I can feel how much you and your lover hate him."

"You shot my lover," Parnell burst out. "*You*. You think I can forget *that*?"

Hang up! Chavez mouthed.

Navarro whispered, "Don't let Hidalgo play you."

"Mr. Sanchez is your target," Hidalgo said. "Turn your wrath on him. Destroy him."

Parnell went cold with the realization that Hidalgo had succeeded in triggering his emotions. "Don't try to manipulate me, Hidalgo. Where are you?"

"Someplace safe."

“Oh, like a church?” Parnell said. “That’s not off-limits to me anymore. Not in *my* city. You want to meet? Call back in ten minutes and state your terms.” He punched the disconnect button, and silence flooded the room.

“Don’t do it,” Chavez said. “Don’t meet him.”

Navarro said, “He’s telling the truth about Mr. Sanchez betraying the Cadre.”

“Yeah, I know, but I don’t understand,” Parnell said. “Mr. Sanchez could never deceive Ms. Lancaster. How could he hold something like that beneath the Collective? He couldn’t.”

“Let’s find out,” Navarro said. “He’s en route to El Paso. We have Cadre backup. Hidalgo has no enslavers to help him—you heard him. His superiors sent him here on his own to clean up his mistakes. We’ll just have to deal with him and his two humans.”

“I agree,” Parnell said. “Roberto?”

“Don’t do it. He’s up to something,” Chavez said. “You want Mr. Sanchez that bad?”

“Minimal risk,” Navarro shrugged. “Big potential payoff.”

“*Listen* to me,” Chavez said. “Don’t let Hidalgo trick you. You don’t know Hidalgo as I do. Neither of you could have survived in Juarez under him.”

“Oh really?” Parnell locked gazes with Chavez as anger started to uncoil within him. Color rose in Chavez’s face, but he did not look away. “You think Julio and I haven’t had decades of experience managing our own higher-ups? *Humbling* ourselves? Weighing our every word and action?”

“It couldn’t have been as bad as Juarez.” Chavez’s eyes narrowed. “*You*. You’re too high-strung and wrathful. And *him*.” His gaze stabbed at Navarro. “He’s too proud and greedy. Hidalgo would’ve provoked you, drawn a reaction, and wiped you out.”

Parnell sat still, anger boiling over him in a hot wave. The words lodged in his gut, making him seethe, but his intuition told him Chavez had their number. High-

strung? He wanted to lash out and knock that look of certainty off Chavez's face. At the same time, he realized that he would never again underestimate Chavez.

"If I can transcend my *greed* for a moment," Navarro said, "I'll point out that we still need to make a decision."

"We're going to meet him." Parnell leaned forward, raking Chavez with a cold stare. "Give me everything you have."

Chavez's jaw flexed, and he looked stubborn. "What do you mean?"

"I want no surprises when I meet Hidalgo. Tell me what he did in Juarez."

"You think he tells me anything?" Chavez asked.

"You saw things. C'mon, Roberto. What about those secrets of yours?"

"I have no secrets!"

"You said your father was named Roberto," Parnell said. "Start with him."

"My foster parents told me that," Chavez said. "I don't remember my real parents."

Navarro gave him a fascinated stare. "I suppose as a hybrid you would have had parents. You would have been born just like a human. We were never born. We came into the world as we are now."

"We don't reproduce, and neither do the enslavers, or so I thought," Parnell said. Coldness sank through him as he pictured the Cadre outnumbered in twenty more years. "You ever see any other children with the enslavers?"

Chavez slumped in weariness and lowered his face into his hands as Navarro leaned closer, smoothing his tie and waiting for answers. Something about the two of them together looked familiar. Parnell realized that they resembled every prison-bound client with attached lawyer that he had ever seen.

"I grew up with foster parents," Chavez said. "Los Elegidos brought me in when I turned eighteen, and I'm twenty-three now. I never saw any other children, and everybody else looks in their thirties. I thought we were all human until I

realized that other humans don't sense the Collective. You satisfied? Because I didn't dare ask questions."

"What about the murders in Juarez and El Paso?" Parnell asked. "You saw things."

Chavez shrugged. "Hidalgo tried to crossbreed humans and angels."

"Impossible," Parnell said. "Humans are too different from angels and demons."

"No demon-human match has ever produced children," Navarro said, eyes downcast.

Parnell glanced away, wondering if Navarro spoke from experience. It made him uncomfortable to think of Navarro's marriage, which lay unspoken between them like a painful secret. Had Navarro wanted children? He would have to ask about Navarro's past someday soon. He wanted to know everything about Navarro. Now he forced his thoughts back to Hidalgo's plan. "I assume it would be the same with an angel-human match. So Hidalgo tried to breed angels and demons and got results because of our similarities. How many hybrids did he produce?"

"I think I'm it," Chavez said. "I may be the only one. I never saw any others."

The phone rang, and Parnell put Hidalgo on speaker. "State your terms."

"I have documentation that implicates Mr. Sanchez in my work against the Cadre." Hidalgo sounded frayed. Obviously he hadn't held up well under ten minutes of waiting. "He helped me with the abductions and killings of more than fifty citizens of El Paso and Juarez—"

"Exactly how many did you murder?" Parnell broke in.

"What difference does it make?"

"It *matters* to me," Parnell said. "I want totals from both places."

"Okay. Forty-nine in Juarez and ten in El Paso. Happy?"

"Maybe. When I make someone pay for it."

“Yes, well, Mr. Sanchez is yours if you swear to protect me. I’m not going outside with your city full of demons. You come to me. I’ll surrender only to you.”

“Your two humans?” Parnell asked.

“I’ll turn them over to you. As a gesture of my goodwill.”

“Where are they now? Setting up a sniper’s nest near your location?”

“I have them tied up in the trunk of my car.” Hidalgo’s voice grew oily. “For you.”

The slimy bastard was telling the truth. Parnell shook his head, struggling to detach from his revulsion. “You’re a real fucking stand-up guy, Hidalgo. Why would anyone want to work for you?”

“I don’t need loyalty, just obedience,” Hidalgo said. “Are you coming or not?”

“What about the car? Any bombs or traps?” Parnell walked Hidalgo through five minutes of precise questions, and nowhere did the Collective reveal a lie.

“I’m at the garden at the First Christian Church.” Hidalgo told him the address. “My car...” Anger tightened his voice. “You remember from when you shot me? It’s parked one street over with my men tied up in the trunk. They’re yours.”

“I’m on my way.” Parnell hit the disconnect button.

Chapter Ten

None of them spoke as they took the elevator to street level. At 1900 hours, the sun had set; streetlights cast a chilly glow over the pavement; and snowflakes spiraled down on the dry desert winds. Parnell squinted up at the overcast night sky, not expecting a last blast of winter weather after Easter. As they reached the curb, their Cadre driver arrived in a silver SUV with tinted windows. A nondescript van that looked like a delivery vehicle parked behind it, and Parnell sensed ten more demons within.

The driver of the SUV, whom Parnell didn't recognize, stepped out, leaving the engine running. He looked about Chavez's height, with more muscle bulk, and his gaze flicked over all three of them, lingering long enough to be insulting. Obviously he saw Parnell as a midlevel demon who had got lucky. He opened the door to the back seat for Chavez, who climbed inside without comment. Before following, Navarro gave the man a menacing stare that made him edge away, and Parnell suppressed a grim smile. Navarro had the right idea, because they couldn't afford to take any crap from those assigned to back them up.

The driver shut the door and glanced at Parnell. "Riding up front with me...sir?"

"What's your name, sport?" Parnell knew he wasn't from Vegas.

"Iverson." He smirked. "Call me Bob."

"Where you from, Iverson?"

Iverson failed to answer fast enough, and Parnell knew he had to make an example of him or risk the borderline disrespect of the backup demons turning into outright insubordination. He lashed out, and his palm caught Iverson in the face,

hurling the man against his vehicle, which rocked from the impact. A slap had more speed and less force than a punch, but Parnell almost managed to put him on the ground anyway. Iverson's nostrils flared with rage, but he flattened against the SUV as Chavez and Navarro watched from inside.

"Where, Iverson?"

"El Paso, sir."

"Get in the car." Parnell slid past him into the driver's seat.

He waited for Iverson to sprint around and climb into the passenger seat, and pulled out on 2nd Street as the van containing his surly entourage followed. In the rearview mirror, Navarro gave him a warning look, and Parnell ignored him. He'd attack Iverson again if forced to, but next time through the Collective as a higher-up would do—as he should have done the first time.

The snowflakes melted on the windshield and the wet pavement as he drove. First Christian Church lay five minutes away, locked up and empty at this hour. They found Hidalgo's remaining sedan with its Mexican license plate, keys in the ignition, parked in the deep shadows behind the church.

Parnell stood on the sidewalk with Navarro and Chavez and allowed his eleven demons to check the vehicle for traps, though he knew it wasn't necessary. He wanted to keep them busy and respectful while he tried to breathe and release the nervous excitement that made his stomach cramp and hands shake. Three swarmed under the car with extension mirrors and flashlights while Iverson and the others watched their surroundings.

Parnell stopped one with a hand on his shoulder. "Where you from?"

The midlevel demon kept his gaze downcast. "El Paso, sir."

"All of you?"

"Yes, sir."

Ms. Lancaster had to draw their backup from somewhere so that she and the other higher-ups could depart, and El Paso, at only 267 miles away, was the logical

choice over Vegas. Even so, it made Parnell uneasy to trust Mr. Sanchez's men, especially if they were anything like their master.

Iverson opened the huge trunk and played the flashlight over the two humans bound with duct tape and stuffed inside. Parnell had expected pistoleros inked with full-body tattoos, but these men looked as clean-cut as Chavez did. They squinted past the duct tape that sealed their mouths, their eyes wet with fear, and Parnell closed his sweating hands into fists. What was he supposed to do with them?

"Roberto." He noticed Chavez had gone pale and silent. "You know them?"

"They took homeless people for Hidalgo," Chavez said. "Women. Children."

Parnell slammed the trunk lid shut over the sweating, taut faces. "Kill them."

Iverson motioned to two others, who slid into the car and revved it up. The big sedan glided down the block, its brake lights gleamed red, and it turned out of sight. Parnell locked all emotion below the Collective. He couldn't look to Navarro for advice, and he couldn't afford to show weakness or indecision in front of the El Paso demons.

He turned and walked toward the church as his entourage of nine plus Chavez and Navarro followed. Chavez stayed close, but Navarro dropped back, following last, and his psychic presence vanished as he concealed himself beneath the Collective. Parnell almost faltered in his stride as it happened. He could sense everyone else in the psychic landscape of the Collective that flowed through the back of his mind, but he knew if he looked back, he would see Navarro's body without being able to sense his soul. If Navarro found a hiding place to conceal his body from view, he would be undetectable.

Parnell wished he had the ability to conceal himself so flawlessly, but his small ability wouldn't fool a determined psychic tracker or a higher-up. Few could do it as well as Navarro. The key lay in suppressing one's emotions, which happened to be where Parnell and most demons lacked self-discipline.

Overhead, moonlight filtered through clouds, casting a cold glow over the large, empty parking lot, giving it the grainy appearance of a black-and-white

photo. The snowflakes increased as the wind dropped, whirling down past the main church building that loomed to the east, the steeple stretching overhead.

A short perpendicular wing housed the administrative offices and the Sunday school rooms, and an outdoor walkway passed under an archway that connected the two buildings. Through the archway lay a patio hidden from the street. Through the Collective, Parnell sensed Hidalgo waiting. The enslaver made no effort to hide his presence, which sparked like a faulty electrical connection into the dry air.

Parnell hesitated as his fear caught up with him. He had to go in there and fight a high-ranking angel, the keeper of Juarez. No question that he had an advantage as the keeper of Albuquerque, standing in his own city and armed with the extra power he'd received on Easter, but he had no idea how to use any of it.

Hidalgo would have decades of experience tapping the energy of the Collective to fuel some of the more esoteric psychic talents that Parnell had only heard of—illusion, mass hypnosis, even telekinesis. Someone like Hidalgo could smash him to the ground with a single stream of energy siphoned from the Collective. Hidalgo might be able to do just about anything with enough training and the raw power of the Collective at his disposable.

Iverson and the others moved ahead to search the garden before nodding to Parnell, who drew the big .45 Chavez had carried from Juarez. He hadn't given Chavez any weapons, not even his smaller throw-down piece in exchange, and Chavez gave him a resentful stare, which he ignored.

Soft lights scattered along the eaves lit the enclosed space, which measured around twenty square feet, and shrubs and herbs spilled from concrete planters, releasing their spicy scent as Parnell and Chavez brushed past the trailing leaves. A small fountain gurgled against one wall.

To the east, three wide steps rose to double doors that led into the sanctuary. One swung open, and Hidalgo stood on the threshold with a large padded envelope jammed under his left arm. He held a GLOCK 9mm handgun in his right hand, aimed at the ground, its dark polymer frame absorbing the light.

Parnell swept up the .45 and aimed it at Hidalgo. "Put down your weapon!" he said. To his surprise, all nine demons backed him, drawing their weapons and spreading out past him and Chavez for a clear line of sight at Hidalgo.

"When I'm ready," Hidalgo said. "I want to negotiate terms."

"Drop the gun," Parnell said. "Or I'll put a bullet through your knee."

Hidalgo shifted, melting into the darkness of the sanctuary. On instinct, Parnell and Chavez ducked behind the shelter of a concrete planter, and feet scuffled as the El Paso demons took cover. Parnell breathed in Hidalgo's stench of old blood, sweat, and a bitter trace of antibiotics or other drugs.

Hidalgo's voice drifted from the dark sanctuary. "We're in a deadlock, Mr. Parnell."

"Roberto and I can drag you out of there," Parnell said.

"Try it," Hidalgo said. "Step in here, and I'll empty the clip into you."

Parnell's back tightened as he remembered Hidalgo gunning down Navarro, and his fingers grew slick on his weapon. He couldn't sense Navarro anywhere.

"Mr. Parnell!" Hidalgo said. "Don't settle for the lesser payoff. I'm worth nothing to the Cadre if you kill me. I have more information to share than just my research with Mr. Sanchez." His voice took on a mocking edge. "This envelope contains the documentation I promised you. May I throw it out to you?"

"Do it," Parnell said.

The envelope flew out of the darkness, sailing over Parnell's head, and hit the ground. One of the El Paso demons crawled forward with it, and Parnell scanned the contents, recognizing phone transcripts, receipts, maps, and photographs of the victims. He handed it back. "Give this to Iverson for safekeeping."

"You owe me answers!" Chavez yelled to Hidalgo. "What happened to my parents?"

"I owe you nothing. You're nothing, Roberto." Hidalgo laughed in the darkness. "Not even a good fuck."

A hot flush climbed the back of Chavez's neck as he knelt, rigid and trembling. Parnell forced down a deep surge of anger. Obviously Hidalgo had subjected Chavez to sexual abuse along with other ordeals designed to break him, but it hadn't worked. Parnell recognized shame in the lines of Chavez's body but a cool indifference beneath that. Someone like Hidalgo, for whom Chavez felt nothing, could do no lasting harm.

"Was his father one of us?" Parnell asked.

"What do you think?" Hidalgo laughed. "Roberto was named for his father, and his father named himself for Oppenheimer. Roberto's mother is one of us. It's all in the information I gave you."

"You took my father prisoner?" Chavez asked. "You *killed* him? You sent him to hell?"

"He fulfilled his purpose," Hidalgo said. "He produced *you*."

The hatred in Hidalgo's voice made Parnell go hyperalert. Chavez might feel nothing for his former master beyond an understandable desire to rub him out, but Hidalgo sounded obsessed with Chavez as the personal symbol of his downfall. Whatever happened, Parnell could not let the enslaver get a clear shot at Chavez—or worse, a chance to capture him.

"You're the failed result of my research," Hidalgo said. "You're useless except to prove that angel-demon hybrids get no power from either side. All you have is a minimal ability to sense the Collective." His voice sharpened like an ice pick, driving the words home. "Who knows where your soul will go after your death? I don't think you have one."

Parnell put his free hand on Chavez's arm, which tensed under his hand like a stretched steel cable, and tried to see his aura, but his ability had deserted him for the time being. Even so, he sensed that Chavez wasn't going to lose his temper and charge into the line of fire. Even though Chavez's eyes were dark with pain, he felt rock steady as he knelt on the concrete. Parnell squeezed Chavez's arm in warning as the snowflakes sifted down.

A heavy footfall scraped on pavement, shocking him into a deeper awareness. Hidalgo had drawn a subtle veil of illusion over the Collective, masking someone's approach beneath a facade of stillness.

Parnell spun on his knees toward the massive silhouette that filled the archway, blocking the only exit from the garden. He went rigid in shock as he breathed in the stench—the metallic sweetness that seeped from the pores of the keeper of El Paso. On instinct, he swung the .45 up, sighted on Mr. Sanchez's broad forehead, and started to pull the trigger.

The two keepers tapped the Collective to immobilize him before he could squeeze off the shot. Their two streams of energy smashed together like glass walls slamming into him from opposite sides as Hidalgo and Mr. Sanchez joined forces, freezing him on his knees. Their skill suggested much practice working together. Parnell ripped power from the earth in a panicked surge that flooded the Collective with shock waves, and the El Paso demons cried out in alarm.

"Hold him!" Mr. Sanchez said. "He's strong!"

"But ignorant." Hidalgo's voice drifted from the sanctuary, shaking with strain.

Parnell sensed that the two of them combined could barely hold him, but they knew how to bleed away his power, which he could feel running out of him in rivulets, as if they had punched his mind full of holes. He tried to pull more power from the earth, and this time pain tore through him with such force, he couldn't even scream. He started to black out, feeling as if a thousand volts of electricity sizzled through his body.

"Don't try to draw power again, Mr. Parnell," Hidalgo said. "We've turned you into a conduit. Anything you draw from the city will pass to us, and you'll burn yourself out. Your heart won't survive the strain, and you'll die and go to hell."

Parnell struggled to stay conscious as his body levitated until he hung in the air, caught in the weave of power that imprisoned him like a bug between two microscope slides. His feet hovered a few inches off the ground, and his heart

slowed, struggling to circulate his blood, which sizzled in his ears. Did Navarro hide nearby, lurking beneath the Collective? Parnell felt a burst of panicked love for him and realized he would be willing to sacrifice his life to kill Mr. Sanchez if it meant helping Navarro to escape.

The El Paso demons stared at their master in stunned incomprehension, but Chavez lunged for the pistol that Parnell still gripped, and their training kicked in. Two wrestled Chavez to the ground while a third plucked the pistol from Parnell's fingers. All nine of them made the typical decision to support the most powerful demon present, and when they did it almost simultaneously, shifting their allegiance to Mr. Sanchez, it caused a psychic ripple through the Collective. Hidalgo appeared in the sanctuary doorway but kept a watch on the El Paso demons, probably sensing that they felt no loyalty toward him.

"Jaye Robert Parnell." Mr. Sanchez's gaze slid over Parnell's body like a heavy, groping hand. "I want him alive."

"All right," said Hidalgo. "You can have him, but I want Roberto."

Parnell's eyes watered, and his lungs labored to draw air, but he kept his gaze locked on Mr. Sanchez, who filled the archway. If he got the slightest chance to move, he knew exactly how to spend it. He would—

"Let's hold his mind and release his body," Mr. Sanchez said. "I want to see him fight."

The invisible walls of energy drawn from the Collective fell away. Parnell pushed off the ground as he dropped forward, lunging toward Mr. Sanchez. The El Paso demons charged from both sides, and he tore through them like paper, throwing them from his path. Mr. Sanchez bellowed in wordless excitement as everything slowed, lurching in slow-motion contrast to Parnell.

Never before had he moved so fast nor seen so much all at once. A black streak entered his peripheral vision—a commando knife in its sheath—and he ripped it free from one of the demons, making it an extension of his arm as he sliced open the

shoulder of another. Six of them piled on him, tackling Parnell within about eight feet of Mr. Sanchez, and he knew he'd lost.

Smothering fear closed over him as his ribs creaked beneath the sheer mass of their bodies. Someone grabbed his knife hand, and he tightened his fist with all his strength, but two of his captors stretched his arm across the uneven concrete. His mind shied away from his helplessness as he struggled to breathe, and someone stomped hard on his wrist as if ramming through him into the earth. His vision went bloodred as he experienced the clean snap of radius and ulna. Pain followed like a shock wave, hurling his mind out of his body, and the knife slipped from his nerveless fingers.

He jolted awake inside his body as the El Paso demons hauled him upright, fumbling to grip him by shoulders and hips. They seemed to be trying to avoid touching his broken wrist, and he surged against their uncertain hold with a desperate roar, almost breaking free before one struck him a massive blow across the back of the neck that felt as if it had severed his spine. Parnell spiraled into near-unconsciousness, hanging from their hands, shivering as sweat poured down his face. His cracked ribs lanced his side with pain as he gasped shallow mouthfuls of air, and his broken wrist radiated red agony with every twitch.

"Jaye Robert Parnell." Mr. Sanchez laughed.

Parnell raised his head, losing all hope. The keeper of El Paso stared at Parnell's broken wrist, his eyes moist with eagerness like a dog scenting meat. Mr. Sanchez took one heavy stride through the archway, coming level with a tall column of wisteria trained against the church wall. A lean figure detached from its deep shadow and blocked him, and Parnell almost groaned in uncomprehending relief to have a distraction thrown in Mr. Sanchez's path.

"Don't move," Navarro said.

His voice made Parnell stiffen in recognition. Navarro gripped Mr. Sanchez by the necktie, jamming the .357 Magnum under the massive chin. He matched the keeper of El Paso in height if not bulk. His face had emptied of the emotions he'd

locked beneath the Collective to remain undetected. Parnell flexed against his captors' grip in an agony of fear for Navarro, and he wished he had told him that he loved him. He should have said the words in return. Navarro pivoted behind Mr. Sanchez's bulk, using him as a shield against the El Paso demons in case they tried to shoot.

"I'll send you to hell!" Mr. Sanchez said.

"You first." Navarro's voice shook with rage, and the necktie bit into the back of Mr. Sanchez's neck, the bright line of silk disappearing in the folds of flesh as he twisted it tighter. "You don't threaten him. You don't speak to him. *You don't look at him.*"

"Steady," Mr. Sanchez choked out, addressing the El Paso demons. "Hold your fire."

Up on the church steps, Hidalgo aimed his GLOCK. "I'm taking the shot."

"No!" Mr. Sanchez said. "He's too close to me."

"Run, Hidalgo." Navarro let out a cold, eager laugh. "I'm coming for you next."

Gripped by the El Paso demons, Parnell probed the energy net that imprisoned his mind as he sensed Mr. Sanchez weakening, distracted by fear. The sky opened, pouring snowflakes down in the chilly April night as Parnell gathered everything he had to break free—

A new presence rose within the Collective, freezing everyone in place. *Ms. Lancaster.*

She walked in from the parking lot, edging past the combined bulk of Navarro and Mr. Sanchez. The sight of her broke Parnell's fierce concentration, which he'd poured into staying conscious, and he drifted into a haze of pain. His surrender allowed the auras to crowd his vision once more, and he saw the energy flying from her outstretched hands like glowing silver threads that immobilized Mr. Sanchez and Hidalgo within the Collective.

The Collective vibrated as all nine El Paso demons reacted to Ms. Lancaster's presence and shifted their allegiance to her. Parnell could only imagine how frantic they must be to obey each new demon who showed up with enough power to outrank everyone. They released him so fast that he staggered, and she strode forward, snapping her fingers toward Chavez. "Him too," she told the demons. "Mr. Chavez is under my protection."

Parnell felt as if he'd plunged into ice water and climbed out into a frigid breeze that licked at his cold and battered body. He recognized the same acute stress reaction he always experienced after sustaining injuries for the Cadre. Pain hovered, trying to sink its teeth through his soaring epinephrine levels. Through his numbness, he managed to drag power from the earth in one dizzying surge, but he didn't know how to heal himself. Swaying and shivering, he tried to shape the energy into icy lumps to pack around his wrist and ribs.

Ms. Lancaster put one hand on his ribs and floated the other over his wrist, and she rerouted the energy he had raised. Parnell felt a hot pulse in each area as the breaks in his bones fused back together and the pain vanished. With a small smile, she adjusted the knot in his tie as he stood stunned, sweat covering his body like icy slime. His suit jacket hung loose across his shoulders, the seams ripped from his fight. The demon whose shoulder he'd knifed shuffled forward with a pleading look, and Ms. Lancaster healed him as well.

"Mr. Navarro!" she called over her shoulder. "Step away. I'm holding Mr. Sanchez."

Navarro appeared past Mr. Sanchez, holstering his revolver beneath his suit jacket. He took three running steps and wrapped his arms around Parnell, who caught him by the waist, inhaling his scent of soap on warm skin. In Navarro's hair lingered a faint tinge of wood smoke from the frigid air.

"Jaye," Navarro blurted. "I had to stay hidden until he got close enough to grab."

"I know." Parnell tightened his grip, swallowing hard.

“The hardest thing I ever did was do nothing when those six tackled you—”

“You did the right thing,” Parnell said. “You saved us. You bought us time.”

They eased apart when Chavez flicked them a nervous glance, as if warning them not to draw Ms. Lancaster’s attention. She stood with her hands jammed in the pockets of her trench coat, staring at the enslaver who stood frozen on the steps.

“Hidalgo.” Ms. Lancaster’s eyes narrowed.

Parnell recognized her hidden side—the slayer that had ripped a man to pieces on Yucca Mountain. She pulled out her hand and rotated it palm down, and the silver energy strands surged, slamming Hidalgo facedown across the steps. The enslaver groveled, gasping for breath as she used her power to grind him against the concrete.

Chavez tensed alongside Parnell, his gaze fixed upon Hidalgo. With his free hand, Parnell gripped Chavez’s arm, where a thin sheen of sweat lay over the hard biceps. “Hidalgo belongs to her,” he whispered. “Don’t try anything.”

“*I’m* the one who should kill him,” Chavez said.

Parnell tightened his grip. “Don’t interfere, or I won’t be able to protect you.”

Ms. Lancaster crossed to Hidalgo, plucked the GLOCK from his loose grip, and slid it inside her trench coat. She leaned down and swung her fist over Hidalgo’s head, and the enslaver’s aura shifted into view, looking like black sludge as she ripped it away from his head. Hidalgo’s scream climbed into the ultrasonic range.

Chavez went rigid with shock, mouthing the words, *Holy Mary, Mother of God*.

Navarro whispered in Parnell’s ear, “What do you see?”

Parnell forced the words through dry lips. “You don’t want to know.”

Hidalgo writhed as Ms. Lancaster wound her hand in his aura, wrapping it up like a cobweb on a broom, and the tarry substance turned to something resembling burning sugar, dripping off her hands and sizzling into charred bits. Navarro and Chavez stared at Hidalgo lying splayed across the concrete, his chest jerking with his shallow breaths, as Ms. Lancaster beckoned to the El Paso demons.

“Take Hidalgo,” she told them. “Send him on to Vegas.”

Four gathered Hidalgo with exquisite care and bore him away, shielded by their coats from the cold breeze. Ms. Lancaster strode to Mr. Sanchez, who stood immobilized like a chunk of granite. Parnell stared at his muddy, reddish brown aura crosshatched with silver strands that looked like a confining web of energy. The garden floodlights picked out the lines of strain on Mr. Sanchez’s face, but otherwise he stood transfixed and oblivious.

“You three have questions,” Ms. Lancaster said.

“The keeper of El Paso betrayed the Cadre,” Navarro burst out. “Let me kill him.”

“No. He’s been undercover.” Her gaze shifted to Parnell. “You were a cop. You explain.”

“Wait, *how?*” Chavez blurted. “Hidalgo would know. He had only to question Mr. Sanchez. Even *I* can identify a lie through the Collective.”

Navarro spoke slowly, figuring it out. “Not if Mr. Sanchez believed everything he said.”

“She fucked with his mind,” Parnell told Chavez, unable to soften the harsh edge in his voice. “I can see it in his aura. She made him a sleeper agent. He really believed he wanted to work with the enslavers, so he *was* telling the truth in the Collective.”

Ms. Lancaster’s pale eyes narrowed. “Mr. Parnell, don’t presume to judge me. Mr. Sanchez agreed to the mission. He carried it out for one year. Each night as he slept, I retrieved what he saw that day—information the Cadre needed.”

Fear made Parnell speechless as he realized Ms. Lancaster had the power to reach through the Collective from Las Vegas to *El Paso* and into someone’s mind—something he wouldn’t have thought possible.

“Was it worth the human lives?” he asked. “Forty-nine in Juarez and ten in El Paso?”

“*Jaye*,” Navarro breathed.

Ms. Lancaster pinned Parnell with her cold gaze. “It was for the greater good.”

Parnell stood transfixed with horror. Like a drowning man, he looked to Navarro, but his lover only watched him with the hyperalert expression of an attorney poised to interrupt his client. Did Navarro not hear what Ms. Lancaster had admitted? She had given a sadist like Mr. Sanchez free rein to prey upon his city. She had *helped him* so that the Cadre could access Hidalgo’s unsuccessful plans to breed an army of hybrids. They were beyond redemption, the Cadre, the enslavers—all of them.

“Do you have a problem with it, Mr. Parnell?” Ms. Lancaster asked.

He struggled hard, managing to force his emotions beneath the Collective. “No, ma’am.”

She eyed him, and the silence seemed to stretch forever. “All right. Do you see the silver mesh within his aura?” She nodded toward Mr. Sanchez as if he were a science experiment. “That’s a containment field that I constructed within the Collective. I used it to alter his mind. Watch me restore him. You may need to do this someday, Mr. Parnell.”

Never, he thought. It took all his self-control not to say it.

Ms. Lancaster touched the broad forehead of the keeper of El Paso, and her hand sank into his muddy reddish aura as the silver mesh flared once and faded out. Mr. Sanchez blinked as she withdrew, his eyes focused, and he stared at Parnell. “You.”

Parnell’s hands turned to ice. Ms. Lancaster said, “He’s not for you, Mr. Sanchez.”

The keeper of El Paso slid his tongue out and moistened his lips. “Is the job done?”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re coming to the airport with me and your men.”

“I need to get back to El Paso.” He sighed like a child. “I want to go home.”

“Do you remember anything?” Ms. Lancaster asked.

“Everything,” Mr. Sanchez said. He pondered. “Will I face charges?”

“No,” Ms. Lancaster said, and Parnell squeezed his eyes shut in anguish.

“Okay, fine.” Mr. Sanchez nodded. Navarro’s hand closed hard on Parnell’s arm.

“You must obey the laws now,” Ms. Lancaster said. “Or I will punish you.”

“I’ll obey.” Mr. Sanchez shrugged. “But it’s like a dream.” His heavy gaze lifted to Navarro. “I remember you sticking a gun in my face.” He gave a tiny smile. “I forgive you.”

Navarro responded with a flat stare that only hinted at the inexhaustible reserves of his patience. He would make a relentless enemy, waiting for his chances over the years to work destruction upon the keeper of El Paso. Parnell shivered, realizing that Navarro might make his own considerable ability to hold grudges look frivolous by comparison.

Ms. Lancaster beckoned to the El Paso men. “One of you, help me with Mr. Sanchez. Everyone else, accompany Mr. Parnell back to the hotel.” She pressed a business card into Parnell’s cold palm. “This is my private number in Vegas. I want you to call at 0700 hours tomorrow morning. We’ll set up a schedule for your training.”

“I get training?” Parnell blurted. It sounded disrespectful, and he bit his lip.

“Don’t try my patience, Mr. Parnell.” She gave him a look that made his mouth go dry. “You may have thought you were on your own tonight, but you were under my supervision, and that’s where you will remain.” Her eyes narrowed. “I knew Mr. Sanchez would stay behind, but I thought it best to tell you nothing. I wanted to see if you would take the initiative to address the situation.”

Parnell slid her card into his pocket as his frayed survival instincts reminded him that he needed to look submissive. He dropped his gaze to her white sneakers, which still looked fresh out of the box. He had almost shot Mr. Sanchez. He, whose

reflexes and vision were so keen that he'd had to hold back as a cop so as not to draw attention from his human superiors. Could she have stopped him from putting a bullet between Mr. Sanchez's eyes? If not, would she have punished him or chalked it up as acceptable loss?

"Get some sleep, Mr. Parnell." She glanced at Navarro and Chavez. "And whatever else you require."

They left the church garden as a straggling group, having ensured that they left no traces behind, though they could do nothing about the lock Hidalgo had smashed open on the church doors in typical enslaver fashion. A futuristic black automobile awaited Ms. Lancaster's group in the parking lot, and she departed for I-25 and the airport. It looked as if the four El Paso men who had carried away Hidalgo had already left in another vehicle.

Parnell tossed the keys to Iverson, whom he hoped wasn't the one who had stomped on his wrist. Iverson gave him a respectful nod and led the remaining three El Paso demons to the street behind the church where they had parked the white delivery van and the SUV. Chavez followed, and Navarro and Parnell came last.

"Jaye?" Navarro draped his arm around Parnell's shoulders. "You all right?"

Parnell gave a tired nod. Ms. Lancaster had healed his wounds, but he remained in a state of emotional shock. His mind flashed on horrific images of the El Paso demon's shoulder spurting blood under his knife, Mr. Sanchez staring hungrily at his broken wrist, and Ms. Lancaster ripping up Hidalgo's burning aura. He needed sleep, time, and distance.

Chavez walked a few steps ahead, drawing Parnell's gaze to his ass, which filled out the tight jeans. Navarro gave an amused snort, causing Chavez to glance back and catch them both ogling him. He gave them an impatient look, as if wondering why anyone would stare at his ass.

"Those El Paso guys?" he said. "It took six to bring you down."

"So?" Parnell flushed, embarrassed to be caught staring.

“So it took *six*. I’m impressed.” He dropped back to walk on Navarro’s other side, and his fingers skimmed the front pocket of his jeans where he carried the rosary. “At the hearing? Ms. Lancaster implied that I might have free will...” He trailed off, but Parnell knew what he must be thinking. Free will to determine by his actions whether he would receive redemption or damnation.

“It’s possible,” Navarro said. “I think you may also have more power than Hidalgo thought.”

“We’ll look into it,” Parnell said.

Parnell got in the back seat of the SUV with Navarro, and Chavez sat up front beside Iverson as he began to retrace their route toward the Andaluz Hotel. Parnell looked at Navarro and realized it had only been four days since they left Vegas. The Bible had left a line of flaking skin on Navarro’s cheekbone, and his right eye still looked swollen, the bruises faded to greenish yellow where Chavez had hit him with the .45 pistol. It made Navarro look dangerous despite his expensive suit.

Navarro loosened Parnell’s grip on the seat between them, lifted Parnell’s hand to his lips, and kissed his palm. Warm breath and a trace of stubble grazed Parnell’s skin, making him shiver. Navarro’s lips parted around Parnell’s index finger, drawing it into the wet heat of his mouth as he slanted his gaze toward Parnell. Every nerve in Parnell’s body lit at the sensation, the promise in Navarro’s eyes, and the strength of his presence through the Collective. The tires whispered over the pavement as his city crackled with power that would be his to explore, not that he cared now. Right now, Parnell had everything he needed.

THE END

Val Kovalin

I'm Val Kovalin, reviewer and writer of m/m gay romance fiction. Unlike 99.9% of all authors, I wasn't born writing, but started in 2007, first with reviews and blogging, and then with fiction. As a reader, I like to laugh, and I like strong plots and complicated characters, so I hope to be able to offer you the same in my own fiction. I want to thank Sandra at Loose Id for being the first editor to publish me.

I'm the M/M Gay Romance columnist for Wildfire, the free weekly newsletter published by All Romance Ebooks and sent to several thousand subscribers (<http://www.allromanceebooks.com/newsletters.html>), and I'm a contributor at Reviews by Jessewave (<http://www.reviewsbyjessewave.com>).

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