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Darkness Devours: A Dark Angels Novel

By Keri Arthur



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New York Times bestselling author Keri Arthur has been hailed for her “smart, sexy”* urban fantasy novels. Now, she continues her Dark Angels series set in the realm of danger and desire known as the Guardian World...

Half-werewolf, half-Aedh Risa Jones can enter the realm between life and death, and she can see the Reapers who collect the souls of the dead. Now, she is using her gifts—and the investigative know-how of a man who broke her heart—to find a cabal searching for the power to control time, reality, and fate. And this is besides her work for the Vampire Council, half of whom want her dead.

But for now the Council needs her alive. Someone is killing blood-whore addicted vampires, and Risa must find the guilty party. If she succeeds, she may finally convince the council to lift the execution order on her life. But before she succeeds, she must first survive...



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Editorial Review

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Chapter One

We do what we have to do—we track these people down by whatever means necessary.

The words weren't mine, but they ran through my brain nevertheless, going around and around, chased by echoes of pain and heartbreak as I stood on the footpath and stared up at the multistory building in Southbank.

I'd never been inside but I'd driven past it many a time. And, more than once, I'd stopped here at the curbside, sharing a lingering kiss, reluctant to let what we'd experienced the night before come to an end.

I'd been so in love. Stupidly, foolishly in love. And it had all been a lie. Not on my part, but his.

Jak Talbott—the werewolf I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with—had wanted nothing more than a good story. And he'd got that, mixing lies with reality so deftly it was hard to pick them apart. Mom had sued both him and the paper over the story, but in the end had settled out of court rather than have her name—and possibly mine—dragged endlessly through the gossip mags while the court case was ongoing. But mud tends to stick, even if it isn't true, and she lost several lucrative TV spots because of it. Not that *that* had particularly worried her. She'd been more concerned about the effect of Jak's actions on me.

And my reaction had been fairly intense. Even now, two years later, I avoided anything resembling a deep or lasting relationship, preferring the fun but emotionally sterile liaison with my Aedh lover, Lucian.

Meeting Jak Talbott again was the last thing I ever wanted to do.

I crossed my arms and rubbed them lightly. The midday sun held plenty of warmth, but it didn't chase the chill away from my flesh.

We do what we have to do—we track these people down by whatever means necessary.

Fine words, but did I have the courage to actually follow them through? After standing here in front of this building for the last five minutes, I wasn't so sure that I did.

I glanced at my watch and saw it was a few minutes past twelve. If I was going to run, I'd better do it now . . .

Awareness tingled across my senses and I looked up the steps to the building's entrance—straight into the intense black gaze of Jak Talbott.

I can't do this, I thought, as all the old pain and hurt rose, threatening to drown me all over again. *I just can't*.

But even as that thought crossed my mind, the inherently stubborn part of my nature rose, as well. I straightened my spine. Clenched my fists. I could do this. I *needed* to do this. Not only for the sake of my heart and any future relationships I might have, but also because saving the world from the hordes of hell might well depend on what happened here with Jak.

I watched him walk toward me, his strides long and lithe, graceful in an almost feline sort of way. He wasn't a classically handsome man, but his rough-hewn features were easy on the eyes and his body was well toned without being too muscular. His hair, like his skin, was a rich black, although these days there seemed to be a fair amount of silver glinting through the shaggy thickness of it.

He stopped several feet in front of me, his gaze briefly skimming me before resting on the fists clenched by my side.

"I hope you're not going to aim those at me, Risa."

"You've already had one good story out of my family," I said, amazed that my voice actually sounded civil. "I'm not about to give you another one."

"Really?" The black depths of his eyes were wary, watchful. "Then what do you want?"

"Coffee." Although, in all honesty, several large bottles of alcohol—the stronger, the better—would probably have been more suitable right then. I might have the constitution of a werewolf, which meant it was damnably hard for me to get drunk, but several bottles would at least soften the haunting sense of loss.

Jak raised an eyebrow, but waved a hand toward the small café not far up the road. "They make fairly good coffee."

"Then let's go."

I strode forward, the heels of my sandals clicking on the concrete, a tattoo of sound as fast as my heart. He walked beside me, his familiar woodsmoke scent washing over me, raising memories of lazy evenings spent in front of the old log fire in his house, our bodies entwined . . .

Damn it, he used you, I reminded myself fiercely. Remember that, and only that.

The automatic fly-screen door swished open as we neared the café. Inside was shadowed, the air a mix of rich coffee, fried food, and sweaty humanity. The air-conditioning obviously wasn't doing a great job at this end of the room.

I wove through the tables, heading for one near the back, close to the overhead vent. The rush of cold air had goose bumps racing across my bare arms, but at least it was free of the more unpleasant smells in the space.

"So," Jak said, pulling out a chair and sitting down opposite me, "what is this all about?"

Instead of immediately answering, I asked, "What would you like to drink?"

His smile held a wry edge. "Forgotten already?"

"It's been a few years, Jak. People and tastes change." And I wish *my* tastes had changed. Wished I could honestly say I no longer found him so damnably attractive.

"I haven't changed. Not when it comes to coffee, anyway."

Meaning he'd changed in other ways? Somehow I doubted it. I punched in an order of coffee and cake for us both and swiped my credit card through the slot to pay for it. Then I faced him again. "I want a favor."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I would have thought I'd be the last person on earth you'd

ask a favor of.”

“You are,” I snapped, then mentally clawed back the escaping anger. “But you’re the only reporter I know, and you happen to specialize in paranormal and occult news and investigations.”

“I do.” He studied me for several minutes, his gaze still wary. As if *he’d* been the injured party in the whole sordid mess. “And what do I get in return for granting this favor?”

“A story that could blow anything else you’ve written out of the water.”

Excitement flared briefly in his dark eyes before he managed to control it. But I’d expected nothing less. For a man like Jak, the story was all.

“Does this favor involve doing anything illegal?”

“I doubt it.” I paused, but couldn’t help adding, “Although we both know that wouldn’t exactly faze you.”

Amusement teased his lips and an ache stuttered through my heart. *Not over him*. Not by a long shot. Or rather, not over the memory of what we’d once shared. Even the hurt of his deception couldn’t erase all that had once been good. And that sucked.

“You and I both know the childhood your mother presented to the world was a lie,” he said evenly. “I had sworn statements that proved it, and your mother never did refute them.”

I gave him a somewhat bitter smile. “The people who mattered knew the truth about my mother’s past. No one else needed to. Not then, not now.”

“What about the public she was defrauding?”

A waitress approached with our coffees and cakes. I gave her a smile of thanks and waited until she left before saying, “My mother’s psychic powers were real, and they helped a lot of people. Shame you didn’t do a story about *that* rather than besmirching her name.”

He reached for his coffee. “I don’t do good-news stories. I prefer the dark and dirty underbelly of things.”

“Which is exactly why I’m here.” I wrapped my hands around my coffee and hoped like hell I was making the right decision to confide in him. But even if I wasn’t, I still had to chance it. It wasn’t like I had a whole lot of options right now. “How much do you know about witchcraft and ley lines?”

He frowned. “I know some people think the lines and their intersections resonate with a special psychic or mystical energy, but the jury is out as to whether there’s any truth to it.”

“What if I told you they’re not only more powerful than you could ever imagine, but there’s a major ley-line intersection here in Melbourne.”

“I’d have to say, so?”

“So, a consortium has used extreme force in an effort to gain control of the area around that intersection.”

His gaze searched mine for a moment. “Why say ‘has used’ rather than ‘is using.’ No one is interested in old news.”

“It’s not old news if only two of the three men have been captured. The Directorate are pushing resources behind the hunt for the third man, but so far they have been unable to locate him. The man is a ghost, existing only on paper.”

Of course, the Directorate—or Directorate of Other Races, as they were officially known—also had bigger problems on their hands. They were, after all, responsible for going after all non-humans who crossed the line and killed.

He studied me for a moment, one finger tapping the table lightly. A sure sign I’d snagged his interest. “For the Directorate to be pushing all resources behind such a hunt, these men had to have done something pretty bad.”

“They raised a soul stealer and set it after the relatives or friends of anyone who wouldn’t sell them the properties that surrounded the intersection. One of those who died was a little girl.” A little girl whose soul would never move on, never be reborn. Hers was a life lost to the world forever.

“You always were a sucker when it came to children.” His voice hinted at the warmth of old. “Is that what this is about? Revenge for a little girl?”

“Both the thing responsible for the little girl’s death and the witch who raised it have been dealt with.” And both of them were dead, sent to the fiery realms of hell itself—although who actually knew if hell *was* fiery. “*This* is about finding the third member of that consortium.”

He sipped his coffee for several moments, his expression giving little away. But I knew from past experience that behind the neutral expression there was a clever mind going at full tilt, chewing over information, working out possible angles. “Why does this consortium controlling the intersection worry you so much? You’re not a witch. You aren’t even as psychically powerful as your mother.”

“I have different gifts than my mom had, but that doesn’t make them any less powerful.” Although admittedly, being able to walk the gray fields—the unseen lands that divide this world from the next—talk to souls, and see the reapers who guided the souls on to the next life weren’t exactly the most usable psychic gifts in a normal, everyday life. But my life of late was as far from normal and everyday as you could get.

And those were far from the *only* gifts I had.

Jak raised an eyebrow. “Meaning you can use the ley lines?”

“I can’t even see them.”

“So why is it so important to you that the consortium be stopped?”

I picked up a spoon and scooped up some chocolate cake. It was a little dry, but I needed the sugary energy right then. The air-conditioning might be blasting every other scent away, but it didn’t seem to be doing a whole lot to erase his. And every intake of breath had the past stirring within me.

“These people attacked friends of mine. I want to find them.”

His gaze scanned mine again and a smile tugged at his lips. “The truth, but not the whole truth.”

I acknowledged that with a slight nod. “But the whole truth is a little out there.”

“I’m a reporter who investigates all things paranormal and occult, remember?” Sarcasm edged his voice.

“You’d be surprised at just how ‘out there’ I’m willing to go.”

I was betting even *he* wouldn’t believe the real truth—that the intersection might well be tied up in a desperate scramble by at least four different parties to find the keys that would unlock the portals of heaven and hell. That one of those keys not only had been recently found, but had been used to open the first of the portals that protected our world from the hordes of hell.

I’d held that key in my hand. Held it, and lost it.

I didn’t want that to happen with the next two keys, and that meant finding out as much as we could about *all* the players involved in this race. Which meant digging up as much information about John Nadler—the consortium’s elusive third man—as we could get.

But computers could go only so far. Sometimes the only way to find out anything useful was to hit the streets. But the sort of people who would hold the information we needed weren’t likely to talk to someone like me, even if I could find them. They would talk to Jak, though. They always had. He had a talent for putting you at ease.

Or at least he did when he wasn’t sitting opposite the woman whose heart he’d shattered.

“An intersection as powerful as this one,” I said, “can be used to manipulate time, reality, or fate. If someone succeeds in controlling such an intersection, he could wreak havoc on the very fabric of our world.”

He briefly looked surprised. “The intersection is really that powerful?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I guess finding the third man is something of a priority.” He leaned forward a little. “But why are you involved? And why come to me? Why not just leave it all to the Directorate? It seems to be more their line of business than yours or mine.”

“I’d leave it to the Directorate if I could, but that’s not an option.”

“Leading me to the next obvious question—why not?”

“Because I’m being blackmailed into the hunt.” Which was the truth—it just didn’t actually apply to the intersection.

Amusement flirted briefly with his mouth and something deep inside me twisted. It was a stupid and illogical response, and it made me want to scream at my inability to just forget what might have been.

“Did someone dig up some more dirty laundry on you or your family?” he said.

His article had been more than dirty laundry—he’d accused her of lying about her past. Which she *had*, but not for the reasons he’d suggested. There were no nefarious crimes or shady dealings, just her creation in a madman’s laboratory—a fact that she kept well guarded, and for good reason. Her extraordinary abilities had caused many to treat her as a freak—it would have been far worse if they’d learned the true nature of her birth. “No, they didn’t. They’re threatening my friends.”

That the man behind the threats was both an Aedh—who were creatures of light and shadows, an energy so fierce that their mere presence burned the very air around them—and my father was something I wasn’t about to explain.

Jak frowned. "If that's the case, involving the Directorate seems even more logical."

"They *are* involved, but their investigation is going nowhere and they can't protect my friends forever." They weren't even trying, in fact, simply because they didn't know about the threats. There was no point in telling them when they could never, ever protect us from the force that was my father.

"So why do you think I'll succeed where the Directorate are failing?" Jak asked.

"Because you not only have a knack for getting people to talk to you, but you seem able to uncover those who would rather remain hidden."

The half smile appeared again. "That was almost a compliment."

"It's the truth," I said flatly. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"Huh." He finished his coffee, then leaned back in his chair again. "How do you expect me to find someone the Directorate—with all its resources—cannot? They have some of the strongest telepaths in Melbourne in their employ. What could I get that they can't?"

"They're tackling the situation from a criminal angle. I have people tackling it from a computer angle. What we need is someone on the street." I paused, and my smile held only the slightest trace of bitterness. "And we both know just how much you love digging the dirt in the street."

"You should do that more often," he said. "It suits you."

I stared at him for a heartbeat, totally confused. "Do what?"

"Smile."

Something twisted inside again. Old pain, old love, churning together, one fighting the other. *Bastard*, I thought. It was hard enough fighting the memories without him muddying the water by throwing compliments.

"I may want your help, Jak, but I don't want anything else from you. I don't like the way you treat your lovers."

He shrugged. "It was only a comment, not a flirtation."

"Well, keep such comments to yourself. I don't need them. I just need your help."

"Which I can't give if I don't actually have a starting point—other than the name of a man no one can find."

I reached into my purse and pulled out my phone. "You still have the same number?" When he nodded, I attached a file and sent it to him. His phone beeped from the depths of his pockets. "That's all the information we have, on both the consortium and the three men."

"What about the people they were threatening?"

"Also there." I hesitated. "If you talk to Fay and Steven Kingston—the parents of the little girl—don't mention the soul stealer. They don't know the truth about their daughter's death. They don't know that the threats and Hanna's death are connected."

“Really?”

His gaze seemed to intensify, as if he were trying to get inside my head. Which he had no chance of doing, thanks to the super-strong nano microcells that had been inserted into my earlobe and heel. Nanowires—the predecessor of the microcells—were powered by body heat, but for the wires to be active, both ends had to be connected so that a circuit was formed. Microcells were also powered by body heat, but they were contradictory forces that didn’t need a physical connection. Once fully activated, the push-pull of their interaction provided a shield that was ten times stronger than any wire yet created.

With them in place, no one was getting inside my head. Well, *almost* no one. The reaper who’d been assigned by the powers above him—powers he refused to name—to follow me around seemed to have no problem accessing my thoughts, and neither did Lucian—although at least Lucian was hit-and-miss.

The one test the microcells hadn’t yet passed was Madeline Hunter, who was not only one of the strongest vampire telepaths around and the woman in charge of the Directorate, but also—technically—my boss. Which wasn’t a situation I was happy about, but then, that’s what I got for agreeing to work for the high vampire council.

Of course, working for them and actually *helping* them find the keys—which they wanted not only so they could maintain power, but also so they could use hell itself as some sort of prison—were two entirely different things. But it was a precarious balancing act, simply because half of the high council thought it would be better to kill me than use me. All that stood between me and them was Hunter herself. Which meant that, like it or not, I would do what I had to do to keep her happy.

Jak blinked, suggesting that he’d given up attempting to squirrel into my thoughts. “So why didn’t you tell them the truth about their daughter’s death?”

“It was bad enough that their little girl died. They didn’t need to know that it wasn’t just her flesh that had passed.” I eyed him warily. “And if you tell them, I shall beat you to a pulp.”

He laughed softly. The sound shivered down my spine, warm and tingly. “You’ve gotten a little aggressive since we parted. Hope it’s not my fault.”

I snorted. “Don’t give yourself any credit, Jak. I’ve had far worse traumas in my life than you using me to get a story on my mother.”

And given that she’d been torn apart by an unknown assailant, that was the understatement of the year, to say the least.

Jak didn’t say the obvious—*Sorry about your mother’s death*—and I was glad. I might just have given in to the temptation to hit him if he had.

“So, I track down any and all information about this consortium and the man no one else can find—then what?”

“You give me progress reports, and you let me see everything you have before you print said story.”

“Since this story looms so large on the Directorate’s radar, will I actually be allowed to print it?”

“They can’t stop it if they don’t know about it,” I said. “All you need to do is keep your head down.”

“Yeah, that’s going to be easy given what I’m investigating.” His gaze moved down again, narrowing

slightly when it came to rest on my left arm. “Interesting tat.”

“Yeah,” I said dismissively, not even glancing down at the wingless lilac dragon that twined its way up my arm from my fingertips. I certainly *wasn’t* about to explain that it wasn’t actually a tattoo, but something far more deadly—a Dušan, a spirit guardian that came to life on the gray fields to protect me. “Have we got a deal?”

“Maybe. Let me dig around a little, just to see if there really is a worthwhile story in all this.”

“Just don’t take too long to decide, because we haven’t got a whole lot of time left.”

He nodded, finished his coffee in one long gulp, then rose. “I’ll let you know, one way or another, by tomorrow.”

He walked out. I tried to resist the urge to watch, but my gaze still flicked that way. The man sure could move nicely . . . Something fluttered at the outer reaches of my vision. It was almost ghostlike, a wisp of silver that was quickly shredded by the sunlight streaming in through the window. I frowned, scanning the front of the shop, intuition tingling. Whatever it was, it didn’t reappear.

Jak left the café and the door whooshed shut behind him. I sighed in relief and ordered a second cup of coffee. My damn hands were shaking so bad it took several attempts to swipe the credit card through.

“You should not have met him if his presence affects you so.”

The words came out of the emptiness behind Jak’s chair even as the heat of Azriel’s presence caressed my skin. Reapers, like the Aedh, were beings of energy rather than true flesh and blood, but they could attain that form if they wished to.

Which was how I’d come about. My father had spent one night in flesh form with my mother and, in the process, had given life to me—a half-breed mix of werewolf and Aedh who was lucky enough to get most of the best bits of each and few of the downsides.

“You’re the one that said we had to do everything possible to stop the remaining portals from being opened. No matter what I might think or feel about Jak, he *is* good at digging up forgotten information.” I stabbed my spoon into my cake for another bite. “If it’s out there to be found, he’ll find it.”

Azriel formed substance on the other side of the table and sat down in Jak’s recently vacated chair. While reapers were basically shape-shifters, able to take on any form that would comfort the dying on their final journey, they did possess one “true” shape. Usually I just saw whatever form they used to claim the soul they were meant to escort, but for some weird reason, I always saw Azriel’s real form rather than the shape he decided to take on. Even he had no idea why this happened—or if he did, he wasn’t telling me.

Which wasn’t exactly a bad thing, because his real form was rather stunning. His face was chiseled, almost classical in its beauty and yet possessing the hard edge of a man who’d won more than his fair share of battles. He was shirtless, his skin a warm, suntanned brown and his abs well defined. The worn leather strap that held his sword in place seemed to emphasize the width of his shoulders, just as the dark jeans that clung to his legs hinted at the lean strength of them. A stylized black tat that resembled the left half of a wing swept around his ribs from underneath his arm, the tips brushing across the left side of his neck.

Only it wasn’t a tat. It too was a Dušan—a darker, more stylized brother to the one that now resided on my left arm.

Azriel's gaze met mine, and his blue eyes—one as vivid and as bright as a sapphire, the other the color of a storm-held sea—hinted at sympathy.

“Couldn't you have just asked him all this on the phone?”

I grimaced. “Jak's the sort of person who prefers face-to-face meetings.”

“Because of his gifts.”

“Yes.” I gave the waitress another smile of thanks as she delivered my second cup of coffee. She didn't even blink at the half-naked sword-carrying man sitting opposite me.

But that wasn't entirely surprising. The same ability that allowed reapers to see what form a soul would most likely accept in their guide allowed Azriel to take on an outer skin that would raise no eyebrows, no matter where he was. The waitress probably saw him as just another man in a suit.

“Actually,” he said, “she still thinks Jak sits at the table.”

“Well, I'm glad he isn't,” I muttered around a mouthful of cake.

“Odd words, since your thoughts suggest otherwise.”

“As you have previously noted, human thoughts are not always rational.”

“But you are not human.”

“And right now, I'm not exactly rational.” I finished the last of my cake, then pushed the plate away and reached for Jak's. Never let it be said that I let chocolate cake go to waste, even if it wasn't the best I'd ever tasted. “So, what's next?”

He shrugged. “Until your father contacts us with details of the next key's location, we are basically at a standstill.”

“Well, if he wasn't the one who stole the first key from us, maybe he won't.” And if he wasn't the one who'd stolen it, I was more than happy for him to remain far, far away. If only because I'd seen him angry—and, despite the fact that I'm part werewolf, it had taken days for the bruises to fade. “Maybe he'll consider us too great a risk to use us again.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you honestly believe that?”

He knew I didn't. He could read every thought, after all. I threw the spoon onto the plate, but it bounced and clattered over the edge of the table. Azriel caught it casually in one hand and gave it back to me.

“Finish the cake,” he said softly. “You need the sustenance.”

I scowled at him. “Stop mothering me. Besides, cake isn't sustenance.”

“It is impossible for me to mother you when I am male,” he replied evenly, but there was a hint of humor glinting in the depths of his eyes, and, as usual, it did strange things to my pulse rate—which only emphasized just how irrational I really was. He added, “And is not chocolate one of the five essential food groups?”

I rolled my eyes. “You, reaper, need to stop believing everything you read in my thoughts.”

He merely raised an eyebrow. “If it is not essential, why do you have it so often?”

I studied him for a moment, wondering if he was still teasing me or not. “Because it’s like love and sex—it’s just something a woman has to have.” I paused, but couldn’t resist asking, “What about you? Is there anything in your life that you’d consider essential?”

“Valdis,” he said immediately.

“Valdis is your sword.” A demon-forged sword with a whole lot of power and a voice and mind of her own, granted, but still a sword. I had a similar one sitting at my back, but Amaya was shadow-wreathed, and no one would ever see her—not until her black blade pierced their flesh, anyway. “Swords don’t count.”

“Then it would be duty,” he said.

I snorted. “It’s a sad statement about the reaper community that duty is considered a far higher priority than love and laughter.”

“It is natural our priorities are different considering our beings are completely different in design.”

I frowned. “Aren’t you even curious as to why we humans consider love, sex, and chocolate so vital to our existence?”

“No.” He paused. “Which does not preclude the possibility that I have experienced at least *one* of those options.”

“I wasn’t talking about the reaper version of love and sex.”

“Neither was I,” he said, amusement teasing his lips.

I stared at him for several seconds, completely dumbstruck. No, he surely couldn’t mean . . .

He’d shown no interest in eating in the time I’d known him, so I had to think chocolate was out. And it was hard to imagine him falling in love with a human, given his often harsh opinions of humanity as a whole. But that left only sex and I really couldn’t imagine . . .

“Why not?” he asked softly. “If I can find death in this form, why would you think me incapable of finding other emotions?”

“Death isn’t an emotion. Neither is sex.” I said this in total disbelief. I was still trying to get my head around the fact that Azriel had had *sex*. In *human* form.

“On the contrary, death is a time of great sadness. And does not sex bring joy and completeness?”

“Yeah, for us. You’re not us.”

“Why can you believe it possible for the Aedh to enjoy the benefits of flesh, but not a reaper?”

The Aedh he was referring to was Lucian. Despite all the help Lucian had given to us recently, Azriel both disliked and distrusted him, to the point where he refused to call him by name—even if he was in the same room with him.

"I believe it because I've seen the joy Lucian gets out of sex. Besides, reapers are soul guides and it seems to me that you all treat that role with great respect and utmost devotion. I would have thought fraternizing with us would be banned." Hell, there seemed to be rules forbidding almost everything else in the reaper world.

"Ah, but it is," he said, and there was an almost bitter twist in his brief smile.

I blinked. "Okay, now you're just confusing me."

He studied me for a few minutes, his gaze more intense than usual, as if he were judging me. Which was odd, because he was connected to my chi and probably knew me better than I knew myself.

"You remember I mentioned the friend that died?"

"Yes."

"He was sent to retrieve a soul, but found a trap instead. Ten more reapers found their deaths before I tracked down the person responsible." Azriel paused, and regret touched the air. *But over what it had cost him*, I thought, *not what he'd done*. "I was not a dark angel—not a Mijai—at the time, but I did what I had to do to uncover the killer."

Which was what he'd advised me to do not so long ago, and the only reason I'd come here to see Jak today. "And doing what you had to do involved sex with a human?"

"Yes. Seducing the killer's former mistress was the only way I could uncover his location."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why couldn't you have simply read her mind, or even waited until he came to see her again?"

"As I said, she was his *former* mistress. Apparently he stopped seeing her just before the killings began. And though it is extremely rare, there are minds reapers cannot read—that is why you sometimes see the classic gray shroud form of reaper." He shrugged. "Violence was out—I would not desecrate my position as a soul guide that badly—so my only option was seduction. It took two weeks to gain her trust and get the information. That time was . . . enlightening."

I bet. "So you became a Mijai because you seduced a woman?"

"And scattered the soul of my friend's killer to the four winds, never to be reborn."

Holy shit . . . He really *had* got his vengeance. "How the hell are you even still alive?"

I might not know a whole lot about the reaper world, but I *did* know that sort of action was out of bounds unless it was ordered by whoever was in charge of the Mijai. Or dark angels, as they sometimes called themselves.

"It was a close decision," he said softly. "And I am still paying for my actions, even as a Mijai."

"So your becoming a Mijai, and then being assigned to follow me, is part of that punishment?"

"Yes."

No wonder he'd been so hostile at the beginning of all this. "So when this assignment is over, will you be forgiven?"

“I doubt it. My sin was great. My penance will be a long one.”

I eyed him for a moment, suspecting there was more to his punishment than what he was admitting. “And you don’t care, do you?”

“I care that I will never again be a guide. Beyond that, no.”

Because he’d avenged his friend. And to think I’d once thought this reaper wasn’t capable of emotion.

I lifted my cup, then paused, the coffee washing warmth across my lips. There was another odd glimmer in the shadows behind Azriel. It definitely wasn’t smoke from the deep fryers or anything like that, because it was stationary under the vents. Steam would have been sucked out.

What? His voice slipped into my mind as smoothly as dark silk.

I think we have company.

Where? He didn’t move, but blue fire began to flicker across Valdis’s sharp edges, a sure sign that sword and master were ready for action.

It’s behind you.

His eyes narrowed a little, and power slithered through the air. His, not that of whatever it was behind him. *It is neither a ghost nor a day walker—although there is one in the room.*

I raised my eyebrows. *Day walker?*

The spirit of one who has left his living body to roam this world./p

Ah. An astral traveler. *So what about those shimmers of silver I keep seeing?*

Those, he said, his mind voice flat, *are Ania.*

I had no idea what that was—other than that it wasn’t of this world—but *right now there was a more important question.* Why didn’t you sense them before I did?

He hesitated. *My concentration was wholly on you rather than on our surrounds. It is a mistake I shall endeavor not to repeat.*

Considering all the mistakes I’d made over the past few weeks, I could hardly grumble at his one brief lapse in concentration—and it was oddly gratifying that I was the cause of it. I frowned at the shimmer still standing in the shadows behind him. *What is an Ania?*

The ancient Greeks gave them the name—it means, literally, the female personification of trouble.

Which doesn’t exactly tell me what they are. Or why they’d be here in this café, closing in on us.

Ania are demons. They can be summoned to perform a number of tasks, including harassment, assault, and murder. He paused. It is unusual to see them in great numbers. They are normally solitary beings.

Two is hardly what I’d term great numbers. And given the size of the shimmers I’d seen, as demons went, they seemed to be on the small side.

There are at least six here, and size is not an indicator of dangerousness when it comes to demons, he chided softly. Ania are rarely seen outside the dark realm. They are hard to summon and harder to control.

So they're not the type of demon that breaks through the portals of their own accord?

No. His expression was grim as it met mine. Whoever summoned them has been able to do so simply because the strength of the portals has been weakened.

Because there were now only two portals protecting us from the hordes of hell rather than three. And that was entirely my fault.

Losing the first key is a blame that lies on us both.

Considering he'd been busy protecting me, and all I'd had to do was hold on to the key, that wasn't exactly true. But it was pointless getting into an argument over it—no amount of arguing or remorse was going to change what had happened. So the Ania are here to kill us?

If killing was their intent, they would have attacked immediately.

Then what the hell do they want?

That I cannot say until they actually act. He hesitated. But Amaya and Valdis are well equipped to handle Ania.

That I knew. Valdis practically glowed with the blue of her fire and Amaya's hissing rolled across the edges of my mind, filled with eagerness and the need to rent and tear.

It wasn't the swords I was worried about. Or Azriel. It was me. I'd proven woefully inadequate when it came to protecting myself against the more dangerous elements that kept coming at us.

You are alive, Risa. Given what we have been through, that in itself speaks volumes about your ability to survive.

Surviving and fighting were two entirely different things. So what do we do?

We attack.

I glanced around. There were at least half a dozen people eating and drinking in the café, not to mention the five staff members. Not with all these people in here, we won't.

He raised an eyebrow. Power slid through the air and, as one, everyone got up and walked out.

I blinked. I guess that solved one problem.

But it caused an even bigger one.

Because the minute the people left, the Ania attacked.

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