

One

Everyone needs a vacation now and then, and angels are no exception. It was a concept that seemed to elude the Fates. My annual stint as a celestial bounty hunter had been supposed to end last week, but complications had arisen, as they so often did. Retrieving hell-doomed souls and hunting down unruly demi-demons isn't a nine-to-five job.

But now I was finally finished. Kristof didn't know I was back yet, so I thought I'd get ready for our holiday trip and surprise him. I was looking in the mirror, making a few last-minute adjustments to my costume, when my house vanished and I found myself staring at a mosaic of a wedding, with lots of garlands, flowers and flowing robes. The bride began to turn, so slowly it seemed a trick of the light. Over her head, a dove's wings moved, just a fraction. The mosaic of life—always changing, always the same. Deep.

I turned away from the wall and glowered into the white marble cavern that was the Fates' throne room.

"Hey!" I shouted. "I'm on vacation here!"

The floor began to move, as slowly as that damned mosaic. Atop the dais, a middle-aged woman with long, graying blond hair pumped a spinning wheel, gathering the thread as she wove. I clamped my mouth shut, not wanting to cut anyone's life unnecessarily short. She paid me no heed until she'd finished. Then she looked up and gaped at my low-cut, laced white bodice, skin-tight calfskin breeches and knee-high boots.

"It's my vacation outfit," I said. "We're going to La Ceiba, so I have to look the part."

"La Ceiba?"

"The pirate town. Kris likes playing pirate." I paused. "Kris *really* likes—"

"Enough." The old Fate appeared, taking her sister's place. She had wiry gray hair, a bent back and shriveled face made even uglier by her perpetual scowl. "Wherever you're going, Eve, I hope *that's* not part of your costume."

She pointed a wizened finger at the four-foot angel sword slung across my back.

"Er, no. Of course not. That would be inappropriate."

Damn. Once I disenchanting the sword, I couldn't get it back until my next tour of duty. I pulled it off, the etched metal glowing, murmured a few words and it vanished, replaced by a boring—if more thematically correct—scimitar.

"There," I said. "As I'm sure you already know, Trsiel and I finished the demi-demon contract. I've submitted my report. If there are any questions, he'd be happy to answer them. I'll see you ladies in six months—"

"We have another job for you."

I stared at her. She stared back.

“You forgot to flip the calendar again, didn’t you?” I said. “I’m off-duty. Technically, I was off-duty last week, too. Not that I’m complaining . . .”

“You already did. Repeatedly.”

The middle-aged Fate took over. “You’ll get your break. As soon as you do this one last thing for us. A group of djinn have been tormenting people who summon them.”

“Um, yeah, because that’s what djinn do. According to the ancient treaty of something-or-other, they’re allowed to toy with anyone who breaks the summoning contract. Screw them over, and they’ll screw you back. Fair is fair.”

The youngest Fate appeared—a pretty little girl with bright blond hair, so tiny she had to stand on tiptoes to see me over the spinning wheel. “Have some experience with that, Eve?”

“With the summoning contract, sure. That’s what puts the *dark* in dark witch—we use whatever’s available, including djinn. I was never stupid enough to break a contract.”

“Neither were these people. They’re supernaturals, too. Dark magic practitioners, like you, who know how to do such things safely.”

I leaned on my scimitar. “Or so they think. That’s the problem, as I always told my students. A djinn *wants* you to break the contract; otherwise, where’s the fun in it? They’re tricky bastards, so you have to be careful.”

“These djinn recently entered into a contract with a young witch. When it came time for her to fulfill her end, they bound her and left her, without food and water for two days, until the contract expired, when they were allowed to begin tormenting her for real.”

“That’s not fair.”

“We thought you might agree.”

Damn. They knew I hated hearing about witches getting screwed by demons—well, metaphorically. If they want the literal sort, that’s their choice, one my own mother had made, and I appreciated the extra powers that came with being half-demon.

Still, a vacation was a vacation.

“Trsiel can handle it. Pair him with Marius or Katsuo—they’re always up for a little extra adventure.”

The middle-aged Fate returned. “They’re all busy. Now, we believe the problem with the djinn is lack of leadership. With their demon master unavailable, they’re testing the boundaries.”

“Who’s master of the—?” I stopped. My grasp of demon politics wasn’t what it should be, but this one I knew. “Dantalian? Um, he’s been unavailable for five hundred years, and the djinn just realized he was gone?”

The old one now, fixing me with a glower. “Naturally, he has under-demons handling his affairs during his exile. We believe one of them has finally decided to stage a coup.”

“Dantalian’s not going to like that . . . Ah, now I see. That’s why you want me—I know the old guy. So I just pop over to Glamis castle, tell Dantalian about the evil scheme afoot, and he’ll get his other flunkies to stomp it out. All right then. Since it’ll be quick, I’ll do it. Consider it a favor.” I lifted my hands for a teleport spell.

“You are not going to Glamis, Eve. You are not consorting with demons. You have not seen Dantalian since that unfortunate business with the Nix five years ago. Correct?”

I didn’t even bother to answer. They knew full well that I’d been cultivating the exiled demon as a source. But God forbid they should admit it, because then they’d need to admit they thought it was a good idea.

In the beginning, I'd played along with them, happy to lie by omission as long as the Fates didn't interfere with my methods. I love an underhanded, authority-subverting scheme as much as the next person. But when I was continually expected to provide results and lie about how I got them, the bullshit started to stink.

"We all want this resolved quickly," I said. "So you give me the job, and I'll run off and fix the problem—"

"You are not going to Glamis, Eve. That is a direct order." The old Fate's gaze bored into mine.

"Fine. If you don't want Dantalian to fix this, you don't need me to handle it, do you. Get one of the others."

"They aren't available."

"Well, neither am I."

"You are now."

She waved her fingers and the throne room vanished.

Two

The Fates teleported me to the ascended angel staff lounge. It's not called that, naturally. We aren't staff. This is a calling. An honor. A noble mission.

Bullshit.

It is a job—the first I'd ever held. I'd spent my life avoiding exactly this, responsible only to myself and, later, my daughter. I'd left the Coven at seventeen, then spent years traversing the country, learning the kind of magic that gave the Coven Elders vapors. By twenty-five I'd become a renowned teacher of the dark arts. Then I met Kristof Nast, got pregnant, left Kristof, had Savannah, and continued on, building my reputation, teaching my craft, staying one step ahead of the interracial council and my growing number of enemies until, one day, I hadn't been fast enough to avoid the fate some would say I'd been running from all my life.

I'd been thirty-eight when I died. Ask me, though, and I'll say I was forty, just to avoid that “wink-wink nudge-nudge, *sure* you were thirty-eight” shit. I have my faults. Vanity isn't among them.

One fault I *will* admit to is an overdeveloped sense of loyalty. I do stupid things for people I care about, and that's what got me into the angel business. I'd made a deal with the Fates to protect my daughter. Now I spend six months a year with Kristof as a ghost, and six months as

an ascended angel. Like Persephone banished to heaven instead of hell. Someone *else's* idea of heaven, I should say, because it sure wasn't mine.

I made the deal, and I don't regret it. Sure, I bend the rules, but that's why the Fates chose me. I was their fixer, the one they sent on jobs that required a less than angelic touch. In the relatively short time I'd been at it, my success rate matched that of ascended angels who'd been on the job for centuries.

Yet somehow I was still the bad girl, no matter how hard I worked, how much good I did. It was just like when I'd been alive—all anyone saw was what I did wrong. Back then, I hadn't minded, because my bad-ass reputation kept Savannah safe. Here, it was starting to piss me off.

"You do realize that's not how real pirates dressed," said a deep voice behind me. Marius—another ascended—walked around me, slouched onto the sofa, and gave me a slow once-over.

"Which is really a shame."

"Hey, angels can't ogle," I said.

"Can't or shouldn't?"

I shook my head and cast a spell to change into my usual attire—a blouse, jeans and boots. Marius, dressed in a toga and sandals, looked like he was getting ready for a costume party himself. But he had an excuse. Most ascended angels were warriors in life. Marius had been a gladiator. He didn't need to keep wearing the same clothing, but he viewed pants much the same way I saw skirts—a fashion torture to be avoided at all costs.

Marius had been about my age when he finally lost a bout. He looked at least a decade older, with graying hair and a leathery, square face. The scars didn't help, but as with most warriors, he regarded them as marks of pride, and not something he'd consider having magically removed.

"I hear you got the djinn contract," he said. "I thought you were on vacation."

“So did I.”

“Shit. Damn Fates.”

I’m sure he didn’t say *shit*, *damn* or any such Anglo-Saxon curse. That’s what I heard, though. With angelhood we get a few powers, and one is a built-in universal translator. Marius spoke first-century Latin and I heard twenty-first-century English, which could be a little odd, like watching a badly dubbed movie, the lips rarely matching the words coming from them.

“If you need help, I’ve had plenty of experience with djinn,” he offered.

“You aren’t on assignment?”

“Nah. I finished the last one early and the Fates don’t have anything for me yet, so I’m just kicking back . . .” Seeing my expression, he stopped. “The Fates told you no one else was free, didn’t they?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What is their problem with you?” He shook his head. “Well, if you need help, I’m around. Seriously. Just ask.” He grinned. “For me, demon butt-kicking *is* a vacation.”

So the Fates picked me for this assignment knowing not only that Marius was cooling his heels, but that he also had more experience with djinn? Enough of this bullshit. I wanted out. Time to stop bitching about it and do something.