

Chapter 1: Benn

Cold.

That was the first thing he noticed when he stopped dreaming.

So cold.

Shivering in that paralyzed state between sleep and consciousness, his body disobeyed commands to move. Whispered, garbled sounds gradually sharpened into voices as his senses started firing in fits and starts. By the time he clawed his way to the surface, painful reality set in. Not only was he freezing, his nose throbbled like it had when Vanek broke it in the ninth grade. His father had punished them both for fighting over a girl. In the end, the elusive Merek had gone out with Kero instead. He learned two lessons that day. One, females weren't worth fighting over, and two, Vanek had a wicked left cross. None of these memories had anything to do with his current situation though, other than the fact that his nose was probably broken again. Pulling his scattered thoughts back to the task at hand, he took inventory of the rest of his body.

He couldn't feel his fingers. He couldn't feel his feet. He tried to wiggle his toes but had no sense of movement. His lip was cut open and stung like a bitch. His temples pounded dully. He drew a deep breath. Ow. Shit. That hurt his chest. Actually, every friggin' thing hurt. He wasn't usually a baby about a little bit of pain, but this was ridiculous. Pulling his healing energy back to his core, he tried to flow it smoothly through his muscles and bones to warm and mend. But the usual pleasant tingle of knitting flesh was gone. Instead, he just felt cold.

Why wasn't he healing? How long had he been lying here? And where, exactly, was *here*? As awareness trickled back, he grappled weakly with his memory. Instead of horrific nightmares of shrieking mouths and distorted faces, there was nothing but a flickering blank canvas now. Ghostly grey shapes flitted across his mind. Shadows and light really, nothing solid, nothing clear. The shapes thickened and dissolved into a heavy fog that pressed him under the barrier between life and death into a smothering darkness. It felt right, somehow . . . he was home. There would be peace at last. Relaxing with relief, he let go, sinking lower and lower, surrounded by a welcoming, silky heat—coiling around him, dragging him into the Grand Abyss.

No! Wait! Not the Grand Abyss! This wasn't right. He wasn't meant for this. He wasn't damned! Struggling against the slow descent into everlasting pain, he parted his lips to yell for help. Oily water filled his mouth. Some soft debris nudged at his tongue. Horrified, he spit it out and clamped his mouth shut. Forcing a breath through his nose, he regretted it immediately. The putrid air reeked of death. Where the hell *was* he? Strange mechanical sounds finally breached the wall of fog between his ears. Was that the rack? It didn't sound right. The rack didn't squeal and hum. The Painkillers kept them lubed up.

Someone flipped him onto his back. Two human men loomed over him. He blinked in confusion. What were humans doing in Hell? They weren't allowed inside until they were dead, and these assholes were definitely not dead. The one closest to him chuckled meanly and kicked him in the ribs, sending him rolling into another disgusting puddle. "Look at him bounce, Smitty! Fucking bum."

Clearly the more practical mugger, Smitty ignored the comment and started rifling through his pants pockets saying, "Grab that watch. I've got his wallet." Flipping the wallet open, Smitty grinned with real humor. "It's our lucky day, Sanchez. This dick's got money." He tucked a wad of bills into his pocket and tossed the wallet to the ground.

“Aeiog’ae ltee!” he croaked in protest. *What was that?* Trying again, he growled, “Aeiog’ae ltee!”

Smitty slapped Sanchez on the back to grab his attention. “What’s he saying? That ain’t English.”

“Who gives a shit? Let’s go.”

Pushing himself to his knees, he tried to stop the world from tilting 90 degrees. His mouth watered sourly while spots danced in his eyes. *Sonofabitch!* He had to get a grip. He bit his lip to keep from passing out. All four hundred and twenty-two of his survival instincts screamed at him to get up. *Move! Fight!* His heart pounded like a jackhammer, but his body wasn’t cooperating. He was weak, sick. Nausea and pain threatened to swallow him whole. Why wasn’t he healing? Something wasn’t right. Rallying his strength, he lurched to his feet, squinting to focus. It was dark. *Night?* Brick buildings surrounded him, their rough surfaces undulating with shadows as vehicles passed by the end of the alley. *Vehicles?* Whoa! Wait! Stunned, he gaped like an idiot as a car drove by, then another, and another. Where did they come from? Blinking furiously, he rubbed at his eyes hoping to erase the impossible image. When he looked up again, the alley, the brick, and the fucking cars were still there. So were the humans who had somehow gotten the jump on him.

Laughing casually, Smitty and Sanchez had already started walking away when he finally got his act together. Oh, fuck no! He’d be triple damned before he let these weak creatures get away with kicking his ass and stealing his shit.

“Feeoolsnaee! R’eviooe!” he shouted.

What the hell just came out of my mouth?

The humans froze and slowly turned back around.

Smitty asked, “What the fuck is wrong with you, boy? You speakin’ in tongues?”

Sanchez tossed in his two cents. “No, man. That’s crazy-ass bum speak right there. Fucker’s probably stoned out of his mind.”

Tongues? He was speaking like he always did, but the words didn’t sound right. Swinging his eyes left and right, he was more confused than before. This had to be a joke. Someone stuck him in a virtual reality booth. That had to be it. Was Koivu punking him again? He’d pulled some pretty extreme pranks before, but this was going overboard. Wincing at a sharp pain in his side, he shivered in the cold air and spat, “Teslkte,” in disgust.

Friggin’ Koivu probably slipped something into his beer. That would explain the sickness. Dick. He was going to beat him senseless when he went in to work tomorrow. The friggin’ guard would need to take a sick *week* when he got through with him. He had to give Koivu some props though. The fake humans were a stroke of brilliance.

Weaving oddly, Sanchez moved closer until they were toe to toe. Cocking his head to study him more closely, the skinny human finally said, “Stay down this time,” punched him in the gut, and walked away.

After puking up whatever was in his stomach, he sagged against the wall until a rat the size of a cat parked itself on his foot and took a bite out of his ankle.

Jumping away, kicking blindly at the thing, he swayed and stumbled, finally making his way to the mouth of the alley. Massive buildings covered with blinding neon signs reared up from the asphalt. Stopping dead, he could only gape as a sea of humanity parted around him. There were thousands of humans chanting and carrying signs, with their souls still neatly tucked into their meatsuits.

Oh, sweet Lucifer—he wasn’t in Hell anymore!

The tide of humanity swept him along, buffeting him on all sides, sending him careening off one person after another, as his head swam and his soul screamed in denial.

“Hey, dumbass, get out of the way!” Someone shoved him to the right, sending him stumbling and tripping down a flight of stairs. The last thing he heard was the sound of his head hitting the concrete.

“Professor Daniels?”

“Professor?” A curt female voice came from just to the right of his head. “It’s time to wake up now. Can you hear me?”

A rumbling male voice finally broke the expectant silence in the room. “His name is Benn.”

“Good to know. Are you his next of kin?”

“I’m his boss.”

“Are you from the university?”

“Not exactly. Is he okay?”

“He will be. He’s lucky. He suffered a concussion, but should recover completely. He’ll be coming around pretty soon and then we’ll evaluate him further.”

The conversation continued to float above him as he drifted back to consciousness. The authoritative male voice was vaguely familiar. The female voice was not. Where was he? Other sounds gradually broke through the haze. There was the subtle hum of a machine; the hiss of an air vent. An occasional cry of pain. Voices.

Cool fingers lifted his wrist and tucked his hand under a warm blanket. The faint odor of alcohol drifted by. *Where the heaven was he?*

A few seconds passed before the man spoke again. “Benn! Wake up!” A hand shook his shoulder. “It’s me. Nash. We need to get you out of here, buddy.”

Nash?

Another shake, this time rougher, the voice coming more urgently, “Benn! Wake your ass up! We need to go. *Now!*”

Nash!

Sitting bolt upright, he clutched his temples with both hands as the lights nearly blinded him and pain tried to take his head off. Shit. That hurts. Sucking in a steadying breath, he managed to stifle a groan. Even so, his words came through gritted teeth. “You’re not Nash. Who are you? Where am I?”

“Shh! Take it easy now.” The stranger who called himself Nash chuckled with relief and patted him on the forearm. “I’m Nash—new body—same demon. What do you remember, Benn?”

He closed his eyes to hide from the vicious light and rack his spotty memory. What did he remember? Reaching backwards, he put together some disturbing images. Falling down the stairs . . . waking up in an alley . . . before *that?* Sleeping in an abandoned building . . . drifting in and out of consciousness, ranting and raving . . . kept alive by a fierce, burning rage.

“I . . . I remember humans . . . yelling . . .” Yelling and screaming; the noise had been deafening, overwhelming. Desperate to escape it, he’d hidden in tunnels, in crumbling old buildings. He’d been starving, thirsty, but too terrified to leave. He’d thought it a nightmare at first. Time had stopped while his mind operated on its own. Some days there were continuous loops of acts of butchery that left him paralyzed with fear. Other days there was only a blank canvas of endless nothing. Disconnected from reality, he’d huddled and begged for the nightmare to end. But it hadn’t . . .

Nash squeezed his shoulder and said with feeling, "It's over now, my friend. You're going to be fine. I'm taking you to a safe place."

A safe place? A place without nightmares? Was it possible?

Blinking back the moisture in his eyes, he cleared his throat and asked shakily, "Where am I?"

"You're in a hospital. You were brought in a few hours ago. Apparently you took a header down a flight of subway stairs and knocked yourself out. The doctors say you'll be okay though."

"How did you find me?"

"See this?" Nash tapped a strange tattoo on the back of his hand. "You have one too. They tie us together. I've been looking for you since we got tossed topside. We're tracking down the team."

Topside? Topside?

Why did that sound so familiar? Topside? Ah, yeah. The fuzzy memory of home grew stronger until he could clearly picture it. Hell. SuperMax. Nash was his shift commander. He was the shrink in charge of the psych ward. Every prison level had a psych staff. The dirty souls had a lot to talk about in between languishing in perpetual misery and getting tortured by the Painkillers. So that's who he was.

Next question. "How did I get here and why can't I heal myself?" Lifting the blanket, he checked out the definitely smaller body. Rubbing his forehead, he realized it was smooth. No trace of the intricate diamond scales that identified his family. He ran his tongue over his teeth and tried to extend his fangs but nothing happened. Reaching up, he explored his canines with his fingertip. Human. *Human?* How the hell did *this* happen? He never possessed anyone before. The machine next to the bed went ballistic when he realized what had happened. "Where's my body?"

Nash shushed him and hissed, "Keep your voice down!"

"Keep my *voice* down?" It now went several decibels above the alarm sounds coming from the machine. "*Who* took my body?!" He yanked a transparent tube out of the back of his hand and stopped yelling to gawk at the bright red blood running from the now empty hole. The metallic scent reached up and cut through his righteous protest. *No. No. It can't be!* He licked his hand. Oh, gross! Spitting the blob of blood and saliva into the corner, he shouted, "Oh, great! Now I have human blood! What the *fuck*, Nash? *What the fuck?*"

Restraining him with both hands, Nash tried to stop him from jumping out of the bed, insisting, "Dude, you need to chill out before you attract more attention."

"I want my body back!" He was wrestling with Nash when a couple of nurses raced into the room.

When they saw he wasn't dead, they relaxed. Nudging Nash out of the way, Nurse #1 adjusted the machine, silencing the alarm and saying, "Good. You're awake."

Nurse #2 asked, "Is everything okay in here?" Her sharp gaze swept over the awkward tableau.

Pinned beneath Nash, Benn forced a happy, happy smile and nodded helpfully.

Still gripping his wrist, Nash crawled off of his chest and answered for both of them with a disarming smile that both nurses returned. "Everything's fine. Benn's a little disoriented. That's normal after a bad fall, isn't it?"

"Absolutely it is. It's a good thing you were here. You probably kept him from falling on his face!" Nurse #1 picked up his wrist with every intention of reinserting the tube.

He jerked his hand away, saying, “No! I don’t want that!”

Frowning, she tried to coax him into it. Her bossy tone reminded him of his mother. “Now, Benn, it’s only an IV for fluids. You were severely dehydrated when you were brought in. Malnourished, too. Looks like you’ve had a rough time lately. You want to get better, don’t you?”

Jamming his hand under his thigh, he said stubbornly, “I hate needles. I don’t want you sticking me again. Give me a gallon of anything liquid and I’ll drink it.”

Nash took the nurse by the elbow and guided her to the doorway before speaking quietly. She listened intently, frowned again, but left.

Turning back into the room, Nash ran his eyes over Benn and sighed. “Look, we need to get you released. You can freak out later. Right now, I need you to trust me and chill.”

Easier said than done. Chill? When his body was gone? How could he chill? “I’m going to ask you again. Where is my *fucking* body? This—” he swept his hand over himself again, “isn’t me. My memory is spotty, but I’m 100 percent sure I didn’t volunteer for this. Possession is a blood sport. You know how I feel about it. I hate it.”

“I know, man. I know.” Nash glanced over at the empty doorway before replying softly, “The bad news is we’ve been exiled. Stripped of our powers and tossed into human bodies. The good news is we’ve got transporters so we still exist. It could be worse. Carrick could’ve tossed us into the Grand Abyss. There’s no coming back from that.” He shrugged and added intensely, “Look, I’ll fill you in on the details once we get you out of here.” He wrinkled his nose and grimaced. “You need to get a shower first though. You reek like garbage, my friend.”

Two days, three showers, and seven double cheeseburgers later, Benn stared down at the racing current of East River from his perch on the Brooklyn Bridge. Cleaned up, fed, and brought up to speed at last, he shook his head in continued disbelief. He was stuck in a human body? He still couldn’t believe it. There had to be some mistake.

The first stage of grief is denial.

That’s what he would’ve told a patient. As traffic crawled by, he gazed at the city skyline across the river and winced at the sounds of humanity. It was unbelievably noisy up here. No one ever mentioned that little fun fact. He’d never been topside before. His intellectual parents hadn’t believed that demons belonged here. There was important work to do in Hell. That’s where they were born. That’s where demons should stay. He grew up perfectly happy to explore Hell and all of its levels and mysteries. Never in a million lifetimes had he been even remotely curious about the human plane. It was a place of fantasy, like a child’s book, and he’d left all childish imaginings behind by the time he’d gone to the academy when he was eight years old. Now? Thanks to Carrick and the Da’vinRa’, he was stuck here. Trapped in friggin’ Fantasyland. What the ever-loving fuck?

The second stage of grief is anger.

Oh, yeah, it sure as hell was. He’d never felt the thrum of rage bubbling through his veins like he did now. Every night he dreamed of home. Every day he thought of the family he left behind. The work he still had to do. The plans he had made for his life. That was all gone now. They weren’t going home. His plans were toast. He had more anger burning him up than even the dirtiest souls he’d counseled had. This whole situation was bullshit. He’d done nothing to deserve exile. He had no ties to any conspirators. Lucifer’s top advisor, Carrick, swept him up and labeled him a traitor without a shred of evidence. His family was loyal to the archangel. They knew him personally. Benn loved the guy like an uncle. He would never betray him. What

did his parents think? Were they even still alive? How far did Carrick go? If that monster hurt them, he would find a way to reach into his chest and rip his black, shriveled heart right out.

“Hey, man, you’re going to have to get a grip. We’ve got a visitor. You need to come back to Expat.” The blustery wind blew Vanek’s dark hair into his eyes as he parked his butt against the railing. The Vanek he remembered always kept his hair closely shaved. He’d claimed it was easier to keep clean, which made sense given the bloody activities that usually made up his day. Or *had* made up his day. His Painkilling days were over. He wasn’t in Hell anymore and wasn’t in charge of torturing dirty souls now.

It was hard getting used to seeing his friends in these new bodies. None of them looked the same, but he knew them by instinct. Was it the tats? Maybe. Or maybe it was the lingering demonic energy that still surrounded them, or the raw anger that hummed beneath their skin. To say they were *angry* was probably the understatement of the past four millennia. Shaking off his funky mood, he gave the river one last glance and turned to face Vanek. “Who’s here?”

Vanek’s face split into a cheesy grin. “Would you believe Raphael?”

“Raphael who?”

The wide grin dissolved into a laugh. “The *archangel* Raphael.” He laughed even harder at Benn’s shocked expression. “Yeah, you heard me. Let’s go. He’s been cool so far, but we don’t want to keep him waiting. I like my human life with Dylan. I’d hate for him to end it.”

“Would he do that?”

“Who knows with angels? I don’t know what to believe anymore.” Vanek shrugged and took off at a trot that Benn paced easily.

By the time they got back to home-sweet-home, aka Expat Security, Benn was practically vibrating with excitement. The only angel he’d ever met was Lucifer and he was cool. Sure, he was a wicked badass, scary intense, dangerous, mercurial, and moody, but he was also interesting, educated, curious, and generous with the residents of Hell. If you stayed on his good side, you didn’t have to worry about being tossed into the Great Abyss. What would his brother be like? Would he expose his wings? It was said their feathers held magical powers so they kept them hidden away. No one had ever seen Lucifer’s and lived to talk about it. Did they really have wings or was that a fairy tale? There was so much that demons didn’t know. How ignorant were they?

Benn’s temporary home was sprawled in the middle of a crummy industrial park in Brooklyn. The handful of two-story buildings and garages had seen better days, but they had everything they needed to run their cover business. In a girly effort to brighten up the place, Vanek’s girlfriend, Dylan, had planted flowers by the front entrance. Bright yellow and white daisies waved cheerfully in the warm summer breeze. He, personally, didn’t care about that, but hey, if she wanted to decorate, who was he to complain? It was a kind gesture and he wasn’t too manly to admit he liked the way they looked. Now that his takeover of this body was complete and the primal urge to scream bloody murder was nicely under control, he was actually itching to go exploring. Surely every inch of the human plane wasn’t covered by concrete and buildings. There had to be a mountain somewhere, right?

He gave one of the daisies a pat before pulling open the heavy glass door and striding towards the command center. “Is there a protocol for Raphael?” he asked Vanek.

Vanek gave a short nod as they entered the room. “Follow Nash’s lead.”

The command center wasn’t huge, but it had everything they needed to simultaneously run paid security operations for clients and track down the missing Trinity. The equipment included top of the line computers, a couple of work tables, and chairs. Nash and a dark-haired man stood

deep in conversation next to a huge monitor filled with a handful of security camera feeds. Dressed in grey slacks and a pale blue polo shirt, the man looked like many of the humans he'd seen in Manhattan. Tall, fit, and stylish, he would've blended in anywhere, except for his supernatural energy. The powerful current pulsed outward, reaching Benn from across the room. There was no mistaking this creature for a human if you were sensitive enough to know the difference. Benn instinctively averted his gaze when the man's blue eyes locked onto his.

"Come in, Benn." Nash casually waved him forward. "Meet Raphael."

Raphael looked him up and down, studying him keenly, before saying with genuine satisfaction, "Ah, another Trinity. Perfect. We have a lot to discuss, Benn."

Unsure what that meant, he hesitated. Should he sit, shake his hand, stand? What was the proper greeting for an archangel? Raphael took pity on him and reached out to clasp his hand in a firm grip. A gentle vibration hummed along his fingers leaving no doubt he was juiced up by more than a fancy latte.

Smiling tightly, Raphael announced, "Now that your takeover is completed and you aren't insane or dead, we've got a mission for you. You're going to use your transporter's identity and connections to research an artifact. A very, very dangerous one."

"Come again?" He couldn't have been more surprised had Raphael asked him to get naked and dance on the roof. *Artifact?* "I hate to sound stupid, but I'm not following you. What am I supposed to do, exactly?"

Raphael spread his hands and replied patiently, "Your transporter is the youngest antiquarian in the country. Dr. Daniels—you—has dedicated his life to understanding languages and cultures that most scholars wouldn't dream of tackling. Aramaic, Sumerian, Latin, and ancient Hebrew are only a few of your areas of expertise. This knowledge is essential to our search for this item."

"But I don't remember any of that. I only remember my life in Hell. I was a psychiatrist for SuperMax souls. I don't know how that's going to help me track down this artifact. I've never done research before."

Everyone scowled. Raphael seemed especially unhappy with this news and narrowed his eyes on Benn's face as if he were trying to read his mind. After several uncomfortable seconds, he asked, "Do you mind if I touch you? I might be able to help you remember."

Tucking his hand behind his back, he sidled out of reach. "Oooh, I don't know. Will I lose my memories? It's bad enough I've lost my body and my powers. I'm not willing to give up my memories. That's all I have left. I'll need them when I get home again."

Koivu had been hovering in the doorway, listening with interest but not commenting. He blanched and backed into the hall, shaking his head as he moved. Nash shot Benn a look that said he just made a huge mistake. Vanek chuckled under his breath and moved to the other side of the room. Raphael only sighed. The soft sound raised goosebumps over his skin.

Backpedaling now, he rushed to add, "What I mean is, I'll help in any way I can, but I really don't want to lose myself. Surely you can understand that?"

Raphael nodded. "I understand completely, Benn. You have every right to refuse my request. I cannot force you—nor would I want to. Free will is important. You do, however, need to understand the magnitude of the situation. Lucifer and I believe the Da'vinRa' is actively hunting for this item. We need to find it first. At this stage of the game neither side knows what the relic is, and that puts us at an advantage. If we can identify it, we can find it first. I have, as you can imagine, the resources available to hunt it down, but we must identify it before we can pinpoint a location. The human plane is much larger than you can imagine."

"Can you tell me what it's for? Why is it important?"

“The Da’vinRa’ are convinced it has the power to kill Lucifer. As you know, if Lucifer is killed, there will be a civil war in Hell. That conflict will spill over to my human plane and that would be catastrophic to the people under my protection. I won’t allow that to happen. It’s too early for Armageddon.”

This is why he was kicked out of Hell? The Da’vinRa’ want to start a civil war? Kill Lucifer? These yahoos were insane. No one can kill Lucifer. He’s bulletproof. But Raphael’s serious as a heart attack expression showed that he clearly believed Lucifer wasn’t safe. What if he *wasn’t* bulletproof? Hell would erupt in chaos if he were killed. Loyalists would fight the rebels to the last demon standing. The fallout would be horrendous for the defeated survivors. The victors would decimate entire bloodlines—including his own. He wished he could talk to his father right now, but that wasn’t an option. He was alone in this. It was his call. He knew what his father would tell him to do.

“I’m willing to help in any way I can, but I don’t think I can do what you’re asking without help. I’m still freaking out inside. You’re asking me to blend in with other humans and travel around this unfamiliar world searching for something without a name, or even a description. It’s an impossible mission.”

Raphael frowned even more deeply. “It seems to me that what you need is an assistant.”

“What kind of an assistant?”

“Someone who has the knowledge and skills to help you navigate the research and deal with the other academics.” He paused for a second before his face lit with satisfaction. “I’ll find the right person. Leave it to me.”