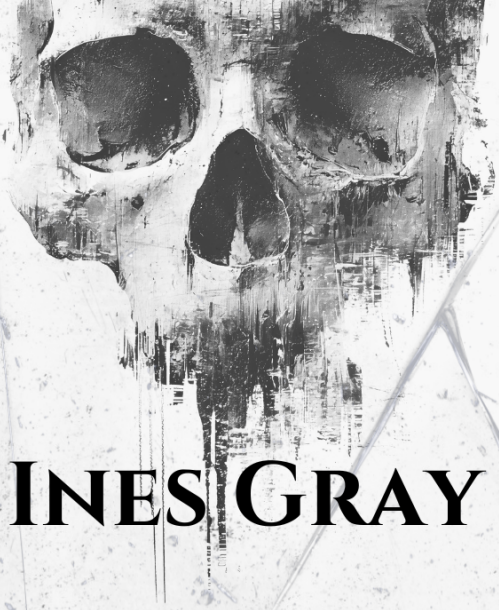
Angel's Salvation

Watchers and warriors series
Book III



Ines Gray

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Dedication

To my husband and daughter for supporting my many creative endeavors.

Content Warnings

All content warnings can be found on the Angel's Salvation book page on my website at https://www.inesgrayauthor.com/angel-s-salvation-fantasy-paranormal-romance-series. This book is a paranormal fantasy romance with dark themes. It contains mature content and is intended for adult readers of eighteen years or older. Some readers may find some scenes distressing or disturbing. Please visit my website for more information.

Playlist

"Blood In The Cut" - K. Flay
"White Flag" - Bishop Briggs
"Guillotine" - Mansionair & NoMBe
"Angel" - Aerosmith
"Something Just Like This" - The Chainsmokers & Coldplay
"Another Night" - Real McCoy
"Beggin For Thread" - BANKS
"This Kiss" - Faith Hill
"Stay With Me" - Sam Smith
"Welcome to Hell" - Venom
"Heathens" - Twenty One Pilots
"Knockin' On Heaven's Door" - Guns N' Roses
"Zombie" - Bad Wolves
"Sure Thing" - Miguel
Theme Song: "More Than Words" - Extreme



Chapter One

Three Months Later

AMANI SLID THE TENSION tool into the keyhole of the fancy wooden door, its carved designs a testament to overindulgence. For a third time, she eased the rake up and down, in and out.

Click.

The corners of her mouth curled. "Bingo."

The rush of victory fell away as she froze. A warning tremor skittered along her flesh, and the hair on her arms stood on end. Tilting her head, she listened — a chill crawling up her spine as if Lucifer himself panted down her neck.

Lowering her eyelids, she waited, counting between breaths.

One. Two.

The drone of distant words drifted to her ears.

"Fuck! Perez."

Amani leaped to her feet, jammed the tools into her bra, and flattened to the door. Her watchful eyes combed the corridor.

Empty.

Fast as a hare, she slipped across the hall and tested the knob of a second door.

Locked. Shit, shit, shit!

The clack of hard-soled shoes on marble grew louder. Amani spun in time to see Manuel Perez round the corner. A cell phone slid into the pocket of his tailored slacks. Predatory eyes latched onto hers.

Within seconds, Amani willed her pulse to slow. She pressed a palm to the wall and gripped the fabric above her thigh-high slit. With one calf kicked out, she wriggled the corset bodice higher. A practiced calm fell over her features.

Perez's dark glare dropped to her cleavage. It leaped back to her face just as quickly. A thick vein pulsed out a warning in his temple. *"Preciosa?"*

The Venezuelan drug czar might be devastating, if not for that calculating killer vibe. Then again, that vibe probably landed him plenty of action. But if so, why not tonight? Why the most powerful drug lord in South America chose to mingle alone at his own party was a mystery.

Most targets surrounded themselves with busty women, or well-endowed men, depending on their tastes. Regardless, having a consort always worked in her favor. They provided excellent distractions and allowed her to slip in under the radar. His lack of companionship made it difficult to do her job.

Perhaps Perez is smarter than I thought.

She'd been trying to shake the arrogant ass since her arrival. But somehow, he'd stuck to her like a barnacle. Well, that was until thirty minutes ago, when one of his men finally dragged him away.

A half grin twitched on his lips, easing the tension in his shoulders. "What are you doing here? Security should have stopped you long before you made it this far."

Amani had to give it to Perez. His security rivaled that of a celebrity. For the past half hour, she'd been playing cat and mouse with them. Too bad for him. She excelled at finding

weak links. And she'd found his. His particular *weak link* was enjoying a midsolium nap in a closet down the hall, drool dripping down his shirt.

Amani ignored the question, straightened, and huffed. "Where the hell's the lavatory, Manuel? Your mansion's an archaic labyrinth. I've been wandering for ten minutes." She flicked a wrist, giving him a dramatic shrug. "One of your caterers sent me this way, and I can't find a thing. You'd think a man with your resources would invest in a proper floor plan." She brought one hand to eye level, bending the fingers and pretending to examine the blood-red claws glued to the tips. "I don't like wasting my time." To emphasize the rant, she pushed out her bottom lip and threw him a wide-eyed stare. Perez arched his brows as her tirade continued, punctuated by the stomp of a stiletto heel. "How do you expect anyone to know where they're go —"

In a blur, he closed the distance, stopping inches from her face. One corner of his mouth tipped up, revealing platinum-white teeth. "Sounds like I have a few staff to correct, but let's stop with the games, beautiful. I wouldn't want to *waste your time*. We both know why you're *really* here."

Amani's stomach backflipped. No way in hell could he know. Still, she met his confidence with a sultry smile, batting Maybelline-coated lashes. "Oh?" She leaned closer, letting her body graze his. "Why am I here?"

Perez reached past her and unlocked the very door she'd been picking. Before she could fathom the action, he spun her over the threshold, lifted her onto a flat surface, and shoved the skirt of her dress up to her waist. In another blur, he kicked the door shut.

What the —?

Instinct took over. Amani's hand shot to her thigh, smoothing the hem of her Vera Wang over the twin daggers concealed beneath leather and lace.

Perez's sultry gaze bore into her. His head slanted.

Oh shit! Amani's eyes widened.

She buried her fingers in Perez's hair and yanked down. His puckered lips landed on her throat instead of her mouth. *Oh thank God.*

A low hum vibrated along her pulse point. When something wet and warm dragged over her collarbone, she cringed. Perez groaned. He drifted lower, his teeth grazing her skin with a playful bite. "You taste even better than I expected. Hypnotic. Exotic. You think I didn't notice the stolen glances, Sophia?"

Amani choked and coughed. Leave it to Perez to mistake reconnaissance for flirtation. His arrogance reached an intolerable level, rivaling the overpowering cologne filling her nostrils. Then again, it meant she was good at her job.

Reining in the disgust for the man nipping a line across her throat, she responded with a hum.

"I've been watching you all night," Perez said, a growl brushing her skin. Hot fingers crawled up her thigh.

"Mm-hmm." Amani tightened her grip in his hair. *Far enough, asshole!*

A scan of the room confirmed she'd been picking the right lock. The military-grade computer, perched on a gargantuan desk, gleamed in a heavenly light.

The drug czar's vulgar tongue slid over the swell of her breast, snapping Amani's attention back to the immediate problem.

His voice dropped to a husky tone. "I've been mentally undressing you for the past hour. You're exquisite. Your eyes sparkle like sapphires in moonlight."

A choked noise caught in Amani's throat. Was he trying to seduce her? She managed another hum, her mind scrambling for a plan. Another hot palm slapped the opposite thigh. Internal alarms blared.

Time to move.

Too late. Perez shifted. With impossible speed, his arm snaked around her waist, hauling her body to his. The pressure forced her knees up, parting her thighs involuntarily. When the bulge behind his zipper nudged her underwear, Amani froze. The hesitation cost her. Firm lips crushed hers. Strong fingers gripped her skull. Smoky hints of bourbon and tobacco invaded her mouth.

Amani gagged. The urge to vomit wrestled with the instinct to fight.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Again, her hand darted to her thigh. This time, each finger curled around a titanium hilt. She inched the dagger upward. Seconds from driving the steel tip into Perez's carotid artery, a series of impatient thumps bounced against the door.

"Fuck off," Perez snarled over his shoulder. His mouth returned to hers before she could duck under his arm.

The voice on the other side warbled like a skittish bird. "*Jefe*, it's urgent."

Perez groaned. He nipped her lip, then pulled back. "Fucking incompetents."

Amani sheathed the dagger and shoved the hem of her dress back down. Perez nuzzled her cheek, his hoarse voice brushing her ear. "I'll find you later to finish this. Don't leave the compound." A heavy-lidded gaze dropped to her mouth.

Amani forced a smile that nearly cracked her face. "I can't wait."

She dismounted, smoothing her dress as she trailed behind Perez. At the door's threshold, Amani brushed past, swiping the Lockseal gel from her thumb across the latch.

Perez handed her off to the soldier. "Juarez, take the lovely Ms. Rojas back to the party."

"Yes, *Jefe*." The other man cleared his throat, squinting sideways at Amani, then refocused on Perez. "Caesar requested your immediate presence."

Perez inclined his head. "Until later, *preciosa*." He disappeared around the corner.



Fifteen minutes later, after scrubbing her tongue with soap and wishing for Listerine, Amani stood before the mahogany desk. Having a mind of its own, her foot *tapped, tapped, tapped* a nervous rhythm as she waited for the data to transfer. She'd lucked out. There were no security cameras in Perez's office, but her watchful eyes continued to scan.

Yet again, her gaze snagged on a drawer with an intricate lock. *So unique.* The pewter dragon's head looked out of place on the modern desk. Given the lack of security, Perez no doubt believed his office was secure. But if so, why take precautions to lock one drawer?

Cold air teased Amani's nape. Loose tendrils of hair dusted her flesh. She scanned the dark room, pivoting, searching for a cracked window or an opened vent. The phantom breath feathered her neck again.

Nothing.

A shiver skipped along her spine. Goose bumps rose. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone watched every move.

Amani shoved the odd sensation aside and refocused on the drawer. Curiosity burned a path through her veins. She dropped to a squat and dragged a finger over the carved lines of the metal lock. The etchings made the dragon's face appear alive. Someone with great skill had created it. Leaning closer, she examined the cunning ornamentation of the gaping maw. Pointed teeth framed the keyhole.

"So strange." It was a puzzle begging to be solved. Unable to resist any longer, Amani retrieved her tools and got to work.

In less than five minutes, the lock gave way. "Bingo."

She tugged the handle. Metal slides screeched. A black hole yawned open. Amani snagged the penlight, disguised as a barrette, from her chignon. With a click, she angled the beam into the drawer.

Her heart sank. Files, papers, mundane clutter. *Nothing worth my trouble.*

When she moved to shut the drawer, a glint of metal beneath a manila envelope caught her eye. Tapping the papers aside, she grazed the cool surface of a plain antique box. The oxidation hinted at years of secrets. Grinning, she lifted the box to eye level.

No lock.

Her fingertip brushed the smooth edge of the box. A jolt of static electricity crackled with an audible *pop*. Amani yelped and jerked her hand back. "Seriously?" A breathy laugh escaped her as she shook off the sting. Steeling her spine, she snapped the top open.

Choked air clogged Amani's throat. The box trembled in her grip. *Oh wow.*

Under the shroud of darkness, an orchid glow pulsed from within. As she brought it closer, the brilliant light heated her face. The smooth surface of a violet stone illuminated

the box. Inlaid with an intricate metal design, the gem's craftsmanship screamed ancient. Beneath it, a fine chain coiled like a serpent, poised to strike.

Amani stroked the warm glass. Energy buzzed beneath her fingertip. Once more, a chill tickled her nape. This time, the thread of air reached her ear.

"Save me!"

Amani yelped. The box slipped from her grip. She spun around, her heart ricocheting beneath her breastbone. Her wide eyes swept the office, seeing only shadows darkening the corners. Unwanted memories flitted through her mind, the image of another dying and pleading those same words. *Save me, Mani.*

Amani shoved the flashback aside. Rooted to the floor, she gulped air. "Who's there?" Her voice shook. Every muscle corded, ears straining for the faintest sound.

Nothing. No footsteps. No creak of a floorboard. Only the whir of the computer's hard drive as it worked in the background.

Unable to move, Amani stayed motionless. Minutes passed like hours. Still, nothing moved. She finally let out a puff of air, then retrieved the amulet and box from the floor. "Get a grip. You're losing your mind."

The computer clicked, signaling the transfer was complete. The sound snapped her back to the present.

Amani pinched the bridge of her nose, then dragged a finger over to massage a temple. "Fuck it."

She stood and crossed the room. A search of the minibar brought satisfaction. The second box was much smaller, but the perfect size. She tossed the row of sweet-smelling Cohibas into the trash. The expensive cigars made no sound as they hit the bottom of the bin. The glowing amulet fit

perfectly inside its new home. Fingers shaking, she snapped the waterproof humidor shut.

With obsessive attention to detail, Amani returned everything. She grabbed her flash drive and slid it into the discreet pocket of her bra. The humidor made for a tight fit down the front of her Vera Wang, but with a little elbow grease and a lot of pounding, it finally wedged between her skin and the fabric. An awkward breath followed. Uncomfortable? Maybe. But she didn't have time to dwell on the discomfort.

She made one last sweep, ensuring every detail looked as it had when she arrived. On a mad dash for the exit, Amani skidded to a halt. The voices of Perez and Caesar filtered through the door. Her pulse spiked.

Moving into overdrive, she pivoted on the balls of her Jimmy Choos and slinked across the room to the only window. The ancient crank groaned as she turned it. Not a moment too soon, her stilettoed feet slipped onto the concrete sill. She turned outward and closed the first-floor window just as the office door swung open.

Amani leaped, nailing a Black Widow crouch on the manicured lawn. The cramped humidor dug into her hip. Ignoring the pinch of pain, Amani slipped off her heels, fisted the hem of her dress, and bolted. Her bare feet pounded across damp blades of grass like an Olympian competing for gold. She scoffed. Only Perez would have lush grass bordering the Amazonian jungle.

The silvery property stretched on and on, lit by filtered moonlight. Keeping her head on a swivel, she hoped like hell the Dobermans were elsewhere.

The silhouette of the perimeter wall towered before her, reaching for a starless sky. At a corner column, she slipped her heels back on, tore the belt from her bodice, and looped

it around a decorative cap. Amani tugged, testing the hold. Her breaths sawed in and out of her lungs. Adrenaline thrummed through her veins as she climbed.

At the top of the wall, Amani straddled the flat concrete. Humid air greeted her. A momentary burst of white light created a strobe-like effect across the night sky. Amani lifted her chin. Thunder cracked. Misty rain wet her cheeks.

Rolling onto her abdomen, she gripped the wall's edge. Pain throbbed through each fingertip where the fake nails snapped. Uneven stone cut her skin. Before dropping the final few feet, she kicked off the stilettos. Her bare feet sank into soft, spongy ground. The Vera Wang suffered. Shredded silk tangled between her knees. With a quick flick, she tore the fabric free, leaving her legs bare. Luxurious material fluttered to the ground.

Remorse struck. *Dammit!* The gown had been beautiful.

Squatting, Amani sifted through the jungle rot. Her bloody fingers wrapped around one strappy heel, then the other. A relieved breath escaped her. With efficient twists, she snapped off each stiletto and tossed the pointy remains over her shoulder.

In the distance, a siren wailed. The thundering of her heart nearly cracked a rib. She leaned a steadying palm against the wall and slid the modified shoes back on. "Dammit! Already?" Anxiety threatened to buckle her rubbery knees. The last time she heard that sound, someone died.

Amani spun toward the jungle and face-planted into a wall of muscle. She yelped. The acrid stench of body odor filled her nostrils. A thick hand tangled in her hair, yanking her head back with unnatural strength. She cried out. Burning pain seared her scalp. Several pins tore from her updo, and curls spilled down her face.

"Going somewhere, thief?" The towering guard lifted her until only the tips of her toes touched the ground. More stabs of pain shot through her scalp.

Reflex took over. Amani's hand shot to her thigh, fingers gripping cool metal. A spear of moonlight glinted off the dagger. She thrust upward, driving the blade beneath the guard's ballistic vest. Sharp metal sank into his ribs. A howl of pain cut through the utterances of the jungle.

With a quick twist, she yanked the blade out. Warm liquid surged over her hand. The grip in her hair loosened. Amani spun away, ignoring the painful clump of curls tearing free. She dropped into a predatory crouch and sliced through the tendons above the soldier's knees. He collapsed into a screaming heap.

In one smooth motion, she flicked each side of the dagger over her dress and returned it to its sheath.

Amani ignored the writhing man on the ground and scanned the overgrown jungle. Moonlight scattered ribbons through the thick wall of foliage, revealing protruding branches and tangled roots. Sticking to the narrow route she'd cleared during recon, she sprinted into the dense undergrowth. Fronds as large as elephant ears slapped her skin. A distant howl cut through the buzz of cicadas, followed by a chorus of answering cries. Her stomach dropped.

Bloodhounds.

The mournful baying grew in intensity. Maybe they weren't as cutthroat as the Dobermans, but they'd hone in on her scent and lead Perez's men straight to her.

Ten feet ahead, slung over a low branch, the faint outline of her bug-out bag emerged. With a practiced sweep, she snagged it. The strap slid across her forearm and settled over her back.

The baying of the hounds grew closer. Giddy yips mingled with their eager barks and the rustle of pursuit. Amani focused on the rhythm of her steps, counting yards in her head.

Thirty-five.

Twenty-five.

Ten.

The roar of crashing waves ahead promised escape.

Amani sucked in blister-burning air. "Five." Her shoulders tensed. Twigs snapped beneath her feet. Decaying leaves squished in dark puddles of muck. "Three."

A few more yards.

The river's roar grew louder. "Two." Something whizzed past Amani's ear. A crack splintered the bark of a nearby moriche tree.

"Fuck! Are you seriously shooting?" Amani ducked, sidestepping in time to avoid the kiss of a second bullet. Her ankle rolled. A low-hanging branch scraped her cheek, eliciting a curse. "Oh hell, that was close. Too —"

Hot metal sliced Amani's quad like a knife through butter. A burning scream tore from her lungs to her esophagus. She stumbled. Her toe caught in soft soil. The ground fell away.

Amani pitched forward, tumbling down the riverbank. She barreled toward the turbid channel, uneven rocks shredding her skin. A sarcastic laugh escaped her on the descent. One thought flashed through her mind.

How ironic. I'll be dying on my birthday.

With the grace of a brick, Amani slammed into the water.



Chapter Two

VAL STARED AT A familiar wall of communication gear and monitors. The flickering screens showed scenes from all over the globe.

Lightning bolts of emotion shot up and down his spine. Unable to mask the brewing storm, he moved into a pace. Elias leaned back in his chair, brushing Val's thigh. The contact was brief, but it sparked unwelcome rage. Poisonous anger surged through Val's veins before he managed to clench his teeth and shove it back down.

This hair-trigger temper wasn't like him. Ever since embedding himself with the Rogue, his moods had turned mercurial. Volatility simmered beneath his skin like a barely-leashed entity, clawing for release.

He swallowed the guilt down, his voice rough as sandpaper. "Sorry, boss."

A new emotion churned in his gut, fueled by the secrets he kept from Elias. No, not secrets. *Lies. Call them what they are.*

Elias waved a lazy hand through the air, signaling no harm, no foul.

Val focused more on the monitors, letting his mind drift. Thirty-five years ago, a senile seeress with a penchant for

cryptic foresight had placed him on this path, a path that would either be his salvation or his doom.

"Into a lion's den of evil with you. Become Rogue or fail." The words still haunted him — a never-ending mantra.

Rimma's vision forced his hand. Now, he had no idea how to claw his way out of this black pit. No idea if the choices he'd made were the right ones. No idea if he'd ever get a chance to see forever with his soulmate.

Cold sweat beaded along Val's brow. He wiped it away with a shaky hand.

Before traveling halfway across the world to find the blind witch, Val had considered himself a calm, reserved angel, a reflection of his boss, who was more like a father.

Now? Now he was … *altered*.

Morphed into a ticking time bomb, counting down to destruction.

Gods. What if his time undercover had been for nothing? What if he'd done more harm than good? Fear churned in his gut like a sickness.

Elias tapped a final key, forcing Val's focus back to the present. The screen flickered, and the dark-haired Szendori twin popped up, her pixelated features barely distinguishable amid the monitor's static. Val ceased with the back and forth tempo. Impatience coiled in his chest. He flattened two sweaty palms to the surface of the mahogany desk.

A few more minutes like this, and I might explode.

Thankfully, Zue's voice cut through the intrusive thought. "I think I caught a break." Her nose crinkled. At least Val thought it did. The distorted feed made it hard to tell.

Elias leaned closer to the wall of monitors. His features pinched, revealing a few creases at the corners of his eyes. His fingers flew across the keyboard, and the connection twisted and turned until the Szendori's image stabilized for

the most part. A single jagged line sliced through the scholarly human's face.

"I hacked Russian and U.S. satellites over South America," Zue said matter-of-factly. The swift sound of fingertips tapping keys rose through the speaker. "I'm sharing my feed, so you can see what I found."

Her floating head shrank to the bottom of the monitor. The screen shifted. A satellite photo popped up, revealing a blurry figure.

With each of Zue's taps, the image sharpened in incremental bursts. Air lodged in Val's throat. The figure took shape. Blood roared in his ears, syncing with the internal hum of the *Ohra*.

More tapping. More clarity.

The person wore a baseball cap pulled low, caught midglance, looking over a shoulder. Val moved closer. The slamming behind his breastbone threatened to punch through. Unwilling to blink, he kept his eyes glued to the screen.

Again, Zue's voice pierced his thoughts. "I took a chance, thinking this might be her," she continued, using that smooth, logical tone. "For the sake of time, I went ahead and cross-referenced the image using facial recognition software."

One last tap sent a ripple across the screen. The pixels shifted, coalescing into the clarity of a face. Val exhaled.

"Is this her?" Zue asked.

Nephesh Ohra. His throat tightened. Somehow, he managed to choke out a confirmation. The hum of the *Ohra*, the connection to his mate, transitioned into an intense vibration that coursed through his body like tiny sparks.

He drank in every detail. Smooth, dark skin. A strand of curls slipping free from the cap. And those indigo eyes,

framed by thick, dark lashes. His heart gave a thump. *Beautiful mate.*

She hadn't changed. Neither the grainy film nor the low-hanging cap could disguise her from him. Val cleared his throat and somehow kept his voice steady despite the internal whirlwind. "That's her."

His gaze lingered on the screen, analyzing every detail. "She looks like she's hiding in plain sight."

Baggy men's clothing swallowed her whole. An effort to blend in?

Zue's shrunken head bobbed. "Yep. It looks like she's deliberately avoiding security cameras, too, which is probably why neither Traal nor Elias could find her. But my satellites?" A corner of the Szendori's mouth quirked up. "No one escapes those."

Her tone shifted to a more focused cadence. "Here's what I have so far. Her name's Amani Wilhite. And, good gods, her information was buried *deep*. At first, I hit a fake file. It was really good. A decoy that would trick most people." Zue's upturned lips bloomed into a wide smile. "But it wasn't good enough to fool me."

Ash stepped forward. Until now, he'd been a quiet presence in the darkest corner. He moved toward the desk, his sleepy-eyed gaze narrowing on the monitor.

Guilt flared. Val hadn't meant to rouse everyone at HQ when the *Ohra* struck. But the urgency to reach his mate had outweighed any discretion. Besides, he still couldn't shake the feeling she was in trouble.

The American cowboy lifted a hand to stifle a yawn. He leaned a pajama-clad hip against Elias's desk. His silver eyes brightened with curiosity. "Why was the real file buried?"

The Szendori twin froze midmotion, fingers hovering above the keyboard. The squiggly line cutting through her

face pulsed. Elias leaned closer. His index finger tapped the monitor twice. "Dammit, did it freeze?" His tone rose. "Azuet? You still there? Did you hear Ash's question?"

Her eyelids fluttered, breaking the stillness. "Oh, sorry." She adjusted the black-rimmed glasses perched on the tip of her nose, her tone apologetic. "There was a glitch in the connection. Can you repeat the question?"

Elias's brow furrowed. He reclined, folding both arms behind his head. "Why do you think the original file is buried?"

"Oh, that." Zue's tone turned contemplative. "I'm not sure yet. I still need to dig deeper. But Amani is American, originally from a small town in Washington state. She's an only child. Her father's still alive, but he's a widower. Her mother died from suicide nine years ago." Another flurry of keystrokes sounded through the speakers. "Based on the fake file, I'm guessing she's some kind of American operative. I'm sending her coordinates now. This screenshot is an hour old. She's in Caracas."

"Venezuela?" Val dragged a hand over his jaw. A string of curses followed. The trip from London to South America would take more hours than he cared to spare.

Elias straightened. "Do you have anything else for us, Azuet?"

"Not right now." *Tap, tap.*" I just emailed the coordinates. I'll keep digging, and when I find more, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks," Elias said, his tone growing more serious. "I'm glad you're on our team, Azuet. You're damn good at this."

Zue's bronze complexion darkened with a blush. She nodded. Her gaze darted to Ash, then she ended the call.

Val resumed the pace with new vigor. The information crashed through his thoughts. As he mentally prepared for the trip, he focused on the destination. It'd been decades

since he'd last set foot in Venezuela, yet he knew of the country's troubled past.

Amani.

The new name lingered on his tongue. An easy transition. She'd gone by Amaya in her last life. To him, she'd forever be *saeta*.

A snarled curse pulled Val from those thoughts. The air in the room crackled with heightened angel energy.

Val narrowed his eyes on Elias. "What?"

His boss spun around, scowling. "According to these coordinates, Amani's immersed in the territory of Manuel Perez, a well-known drug lord in Venezuela." Elias stood and crossed the room to stare out the large plate-glass window. "Kyle had a recent run-in with him. Cruz and Journey worked for Perez's predecessor while undercover. That organization is why they're in Kyle's witness protection. Perez is bad news. This makes retrieving Amani a hell of a lot harder. Probably more dangerous than it should be."

Ash dropped into a side chair. His gaze ping-ponged between Elias and Val. "What are you thinking?"

Elias exhaled. "Zue thinks Amani might be a government operative. Translation — she could be there on assignment, which means Perez might be her target." Elias waved a hand through the air. "Or someone in his crew."

Ash's brow wrinkled. "Which means her cover could be blown. And that's why she's in men's clothing." He met Val's gaze. "Could explain why you keep getting that feeling she's dying. Maybe she's worried it's imminent."

A knot tightened in Val's chest. Not knowing the source of the suffocating feeling was torturous, but the thought of Amani falling into the hands of a cold-blooded drug lord was no better.

Elias cocked a brow. "And according to Kyle, Perez is one sick bastard. I don't want to cause undue stress, but you should know that his go-to when betrayed is torture."

Val's entire body tensed. "Then I need to leave now."

Elias held up a flat palm. "Soon. I have a Nightshade charter on standby. They know you're coming, but I think you need to prepare for the worst."

"Meaning?"

"I think it'd be wise to swing by the medical unit. Grab some supplies from Gladys. Maybe even get a crash course in basic medical techniques. Better to have them and not need them than to need them and not have them."

The burning need to reach Amani gnawed at Val like an insidious parasite beneath his skin, but Elias was right. She'd be better off if he were prepared. "Okay. I'll pack a lightweight bag, then meet with Gladys. I've traveled through the jungle before. It's tough, but worse when weighed down. Do we know anyone in Venezuela?"

Elias nodded. "I know a Szendori there. I'll reach out to Mikael for advice. He's likely got intel on Perez, too. Then I'll contact Kyle. He might have more details."

Elias turned to face Ash. "Sorry, Ash. I know you just got back, but you'll need to head to Venezuela next. Val might need backup."

Ash gave their boss a half-hearted shrug. "It's not like I have anything else lined up. Since Wolf went home with Devin and Marco, I don't have anyone waiting for me anymore."

Val was glad that Ash had been chosen as backup. Since rejoining the Watchers company three months ago, he and the American cowboy had tackled four jobs together. Each success had deepened an understanding of respect. Over time, he'd grown to trust Ash.

Elias returned to his chair and tapped several keys. "Ash can't fly out tonight. He has another assignment to finish tomorrow, but he'll follow on a charter to Venezuela as soon as possible." Elias paused, then pointed to a photo of a dark-haired man popping up on the screen. "This is Perez. I'll send it to your phone. For now, I suggest you see Gladys first. I'm texting her so she can prepare a med kit, one that will fit in your pack. After that, you can head to the flight field. I'll let Nightshade know you're coming."



Thirty minutes later, back in his suite, Val shoved the small med kit, along with a container of mage-made herbs and elixirs, into his backpack. His mind raced with thoughts of Amani. He stepped up to the dresser, snagged her locket, and flipped it open with a practiced flick of his thumb. The photos inside remained unchanged. The faint sepia tones of his and Amani's faces stared back.

The locket had followed his mate for centuries. He'd kept it around his own neck for the past thirty-five years, hidden beneath his shirt and close to his heart. Spending time with the Rogue left him in a constant state of struggle. And now, his *altered* state wanted control.

The internal battle made him feel unclean. Unworthy of his *Nephesh Ohra*.

Brushing a shaky thumb over the photo, Val's thoughts drifted back to the day he scaled the highest peak of the Skalisty Range in search of Rimma. If he wanted to blame anyone other than himself for this loss of control, Gadreel might be a good start. The full-fledged fallen angel with a propensity for greed had guided him to the ancient witch.

Reaching the mountain's tallest peak, the Siberian winds whipped Val senseless, numbing his fingers and limbs. He swept freezing flakes from his lashes. After two days of the grueling climb, he couldn't believe the sight before him. A dense wall of fog materialized inches from his face. The strange white mass twisted and turned, looking alive. Energy pulsed from within. Val steeled his spine, withdrew his sword, and took a cautious step forward into the orphic mist.

Submerged in the cloud, the whipping wind ceased, plunging the mountain into an eerie silence. Val's heart thudded in his ears. Using his sword, he sliced through slithering tendrils of the ghostly cloud that gripped his wrists and ankles. After what felt like an eternity, the shadowy outline of a small structure emerged.

A rap on Val's suite door tore the memory away. He lifted and closed the locket, pressing his lips to the metal.

No way in hell would he allow his time with the Rogue to be for nothing. He'd sacrificed too much.

Raising his gaze to the mirror over the dresser, he met his own dark eyes. A physical sign of the change. "It won't be for nothing, *saeta*. I promise." With a final squeeze, he shoved the locket into a pocket.

Shouldering the backpack, Val crossed the living room, swinging the door open. Ash stood in the hallway, still wearing pajamas. A new, clean shirt now hugged his torso.

Val pinched his brows together. "What's up?"

Ash scratched his five o'clock shadow with one hand, pausing before speaking. "Just seeing you off."

Val moved into the hall, forcing Ash to step back. He closed and locked the door. "I'm in a rush. Kyle's pilot is waiting on me. Get to the point. You're obviously here for another reason."

Ash dropped his hand, giving up the charade. "I'm checking on you before you leave. You're not going off" — he

paused as if searching for the right word — "half-cocked, are you?"

"Half-cocked?" Val shook his head, spinning on a heel, and beelined for the elevators. "What does that mean?"

Ash clung tight to his heels. "You know I saw it. I saw you change a moment before you decapitated that demon on the last job. You looked like …" Ash's words trailed off. He made a sound in his throat.

"Spit it out."

The cowboy's features twisted. "Hell, Val, you looked like the demon you killed. A Rogue. Fangs, black veins. Everything. I thought you left that world behind. What the hell is happening to you? It's been three months."

Val's body stiffened. He had no interest in discussing the evil still festering inside him, the lingering bond to the Rogue he couldn't seem to sever. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Ash's large hand gripped his bicep, halting him in his tracks. The rookie stepped into his path. Val cocked a brow. Irritation sharpened his canines. "Do *not* piss me off, rookie."

"Look, man, I'm not judging. All of us can thank our useless fathers for this fight against the fallen angel blood in our veins. We're all one step away from letting our demon take control. But you're much closer than anyone I've ever seen. Worse than Moon before he found Claire." The words seemed to catch in Ash's throat as he paused. "I'm just worried you can't do this on your own. Wait until I can fly out with you. What's another day or two?"

Grinding down on his molars, Val shoved Ash aside on a growl. "Something's wrong. I can't wait. I've already wasted too much time. One more day and she might be dead." Punching the elevator's call button, Val turned to face the

man he'd come to trust over the past three months. "I'll be fine."

Ash's hand shot out, yanking him from the elevator door as it opened. Cold concrete slammed against Val's back. Ash's irises flared bright silver. "Dammit, you'll lose control. And when you do, you'll scare your mate! Is that what you want?"

A crimson haze blurred Val's vision. His new fangs punched down. Evil flooded his veins, a part of him relishing the feeling. Before thinking, he had Ash's throat gripped in a fist, lifting the rookie off the floor. "I am ancient compared to you. Do *not* tell me what to do. You have no idea what I've been through to get her back. You have no idea what it's like to watch your mate die over and over when *you* were the one responsible for keeping her safe."

Ash retaliated. Energy erupted from his palms, slamming into Val's chest. The impact sent them both flying down the hall. Val's grip loosened.

A closed fist slammed into his jaw, snapping his head back. Before Val could counter, another wave of energy burst from Ash, splitting them apart. They slid on their asses to opposite walls, glaring at one another, chests heaving.

Ash dragged a palm down his face, his words sounding heavy. "You were choking me, but I think I made my point." He lifted his chin. His silver eyes met Val's. "Your demon's got a hair-trigger."

Val stood and reached for his backpack, swiping it from the floor as he glared at Ash. "Don't look so smug. My demon barely surfaced." He stepped into the elevator, the steel doors closing on a hiss. His gaze never left Ash's tight expression. "I do have control. If I didn't, your head would no longer be attached to your body."



Chapter Three

Hidden in shadow, Amani pressed her back to a crumbling stone wall. She gave the street a once-over, analyzing every passerby through narrowed eyes.

Friend or foe?

She couldn't be sure.

Her body screamed with exhaustion. Every charley horse was a reminder of her stupidity. The river had tried to drown her. Then when she'd finally dragged herself from its depths, the jungle's heavy air had tried to choke the breath from her lungs. Even the mountainside path she'd followed to the city seemed hell-bent on her demise, sending her ass over feet down a mudslide.

Still, she'd made it here in less than two days — the grimy underbelly of Caracas.

And yet, she'd missed exfiltration.

Her suspicion narrowed on a man peddling goods from a tray. His persistent shouts cut through the din of the market. Something about him tugged at Amani's memory. Was he one of Perez's soldiers? Faces blurred into paranoia.

I'm fucking John Wick.

In a city full of assassins, everyone looked suspect. Even that kid on a scooter who kept eyeing her.

Dammit! Taking the amulet had been reckless. The split-second decision had cost her.

But hadn't the piece of jewelry *called* to her? Hadn't it *begged* for protection?

The thought was absurd. Laughter burst from Amani's lips. She slapped a hand over her mouth, shoulders shaking as she fought the hysteria.

I'm losing my mind.

Exhaling, she forced the bubbling delirium down and stepped back, melting into the darkness of the alley. Amani dropped to a low squat behind a rusty dumpster and pulled the burner phone from a pocket. Her fingers flew over the buttons, punching in the number etched into her brain. One she'd sworn never to use again.

SOS. Nightjar naked.

Death imminent.

Extraction dire.

Caracas safe house needed.

SOS. SOS. SOS.

She hit send, stared at the screen, and willed a response to appear. Minutes stretched into hours. The device grew heavy in her hand, mirroring her desperation.

On a curse, Amani stood and hurled the phone to the gravel, crushing it beneath her heel. The sharp crack of shattered plastic echoed through the gangway. Kneeling, she retrieved the SIM card, snapped it in half, and scattered the pieces into the dumpster.

That was it. Her last chance, dispatched into the ether. If no one came, she was on her own. Her head fell back against loose stone, trying to block out what she already knew. Tears burned at the corners of her eyes.

The CIA didn't rescue contractors.

No one was coming.

Her mind swam, desperate for an answer. A plan. Anything. But bone-deep exhaustion set in, and a foggy haze clouded her thoughts. What she wouldn't give for a few hours of sleep.

Maybe clear my head?

No! She didn't dare.

The ripe tang of her own perspiration and grime overwhelmed her senses. She slid down the hard wall. A day and a half without food. No bath. No sleep. Soon, she'd go mad.

Stop it! She couldn't afford to fall apart. Not yet. She needed a plan.

I need sleep.

Amani's body gave out, and her bottom hit the dusty ground. She tugged at the brim of her cap, tucking loose curls beneath it. On a yawn, she pulled both knees to her chest and dropped her chin.

A series of mewls broke the silence. From the shadows, three alley cats crept forward. A petite tabby with bright green eyes lingered behind the others, then mustered enough courage to approach. His soft keens, coupled with the flick of his tail, held her attention.

The corners of Amani's mouth twitched. She cooed, stretching out a hand for him to sniff.

He hesitated, his tiny whiskers twitching, before deciding she wasn't a threat. A high-pitched *meow* rang out. He moved closer with a cautious gait.

"You're so brave, little guy." She rewarded his courage with a scratch behind matted ears.

Frowning, she assessed the kitten's condition. "You've seen better days, too, huh?" His constant cries made her lips curl downward. "Hungry? I know. Me too. I don't have anything to give you. I wish I did. *I've* barely eaten anything."

The cuddly fluffball nuzzled his way onto her lap. And for the briefest moment, a sense of calm settled over Amani.

As her fingers stroked the tabby, her eyelids lowered. The kitten's chest rumbled against her thigh. The vibration seeped into her body. *Strange.* It offered comfort, as if it were radiating from within.

Her weighted eyelids fluttered, unable to stay open. *Just a few minutes. That's all I need.* The lure of sleep teased her.

A resigned exhale rolled from Amani's lips. Five years. She'd spent five years in this career of espionage. And now she'd fucked up with a capital *F*.

Not your first time.

The memories of long-ago mistakes tapped at her skull, wanting to burst free. She shoved them back down.

That damn amulet! She should have left it alone. If she had, she'd have made it to exfil on time, leaving Perez with his dick in his hand.

Regret, *that ever-present bitch*, gripped her. A familiar chokehold. Still, she couldn't bring herself to completely regret stealing the hypnotic stone. No, what she regretted were the consequences. Bad decisions got spies killed.

This again.

Her conscience wouldn't let it go. Not then. Not now. Her eyelids grew heavier. The kitten's purr lulled her closer to the edge until the gentle hum faded into nothing.

Helo blades pierced the quiet air. *Thwap. Thwap. Thwap.*

Amani's breath quickened. The pounding beneath her breastbone kicked up. Gut-wrenching screams echoed in the background, growing louder, threatening to rupture her eardrums. A ghostly hand wrapped around hers.

"Save me, Mani!"

Beneath Amani's fingertips, the kitten's fur turned slick and syrupy. Amani's eyes snapped open. Blood coated her palms. In her lap, Talia's lifeless eyes stared up.

Amani screamed and jolted awake, sucking in lungfuls of air. Blinking, she struggled to remember where she was — Kuwait, Morocco, Indonesia?

No! Venezuela.

The kitten bolted from her lap, startled by the sudden movement. Trembling, Amani buried her face in her hands. Trying to slow her breaths, she drew in much-needed air.

"I … I'm Sophia Rojas. The daughter of a Mexican businessman."

No! That's your cover. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked.

"I … I'm Malaika Falade. A South African geologist." Her palms moved to cup her temples. She shook her head.

No! Dammit, think!

"Amani. I'm Amani. An American spy."

The CIA had used her appearance to their advantage for years. Her biracial heritage and skin tone, paired with almond-shaped navy blue eyes, had earned her the moniker *Nightjar* for the bird's astonishing ability to blend into most surroundings. But as of late, the identities had begun to bleed together, making her question her own identity.

Am I even real?

Amani slowed her breathing, forcing herself to concentrate. Soon, the reality of her dire circumstances returned.

Move.

Groaning, she pushed herself upright, shaking out stiff limbs and stretching muscles that protested. She glanced down at the baggy, mismatched clothing and sighed.

She was tired of this life. Her thirtieth birthday had come and gone without fanfare. No calls, no texts, not a single

well-wish. She couldn't remember the last time she'd celebrated her birthday. How could she, when she was never Amani Wilhite? Always someone else. Her father might have called if he had a number, but she didn't have one to give. Handing out a burner number wasn't an option. Even if it were, she wouldn't jeopardize his safety.

A pinprick of regret pinched in her chest. When had she last visited her father? A year? Longer? Would she ever get the chance to see him again?

Her gaze dropped to the tabby, now weaving a figure eight around her ankles and purring like a little engine. Her thoughts drifted back to the amulet. Squatting, Amani scratched the kitten's head. He leaned into her touch with a happy mewl.

"Well," she murmured, keeping her voice low, "at least if Perez finds me, he'll never find the amulet. It's safely hidden." She pressed a finger to her lips. "Shh. Don't tell. Keep my secret?"

The tabby's emerald eyes widened. He cooed as if to say *Your secret's safe with me.*

Amani's fingers lingered in the cat's scruff before she stood. Determination straightened her spine. Her stomach moaned, demanding food.

"Time to find something to eat." Her chin dropped as she eyed the strays. "If I make it back, I'll bring you all something. Sit tight."

Amani edged back down the crumbling wall toward the street. No one had passed by in minutes. Her stomach spasmed, demanding sustenance. Starvation led to mistakes, and mistakes were fatal.

Decision made. *I need food.*

On the street, Amani turned right, keeping her chin tucked and careful not to let her hips sway. Experience had

taught her it wasn't enough to look the part. A spy had to become the part. Men didn't walk like women. Amani adopted a saunter, shoved her hands in her pockets, and swept her eyes left and right.

At the next intersection, Amani paused, cocking a shoulder against a graffiti-covered wall. Her fingers flipped through the small bit of change in her pocket. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She studied the crowd. She wasn't familiar with Caracas. A cluster of tourists buzzed around street vendors selling counterfeit clothing and purses. The options here were slim, but American money would be sought-after. If she used it sparingly, it might stretch further.

Her gaze settled on a pair of food vendors, their stalls overflowing with empanadas, arepas, and other street fare. A hot poker cut through her belly. The need for food nearly dropped her to her knees. Stealing was a last resort. The prospect of ending up in a Venezuelan jail was detestable. Rotting in a cell was bad enough. Worse yet, they'd probably hand her over to Perez.

Amani studied faces, searching for anyone who lingered too long or watched too closely. After several tense moments, she exhaled and made a decision. A bottle of water and a small bite to eat. It wouldn't be much, but dehydration would kill her faster than hunger.

With her eyes downcast, Amani approached the nearest food vendor, keeping her voice low and steady. "Water, please."

The attendant set a bottle on the metal counter. As she counted out change, saliva stuck to the corners of Amani's mouth. Her eyes zeroed in on a drop of condensation, her tongue feeling thick. She spread the money out on the counter and met his gaze.

"What will the rest get me?" Perhaps he'd give her a break for the American coins.

An eerie silence fell over them.

From beneath Amani's lashes, she caught the vendor's gaze drifting upward. His focus locked onto something over her shoulder. The hair on Amani's nape prickled. The cupped hand holding the last of her coins shook. She nearly lost control of her bladder.

Turning, Amani froze.

Caesar, Perez's top enforcer, stood a few feet away, flanked by four soldiers. His dark gaze bore into hers, flashing an odd hint of crimson around the irises before a predatory smirk curved his lips. He shook his head, his tongue clicking.

"Ah, *preciosa*. We've been looking for you." With a flick of his finger, the circle of men tightened.

Instinct rose. Amani surged forward, shoving through the cluster of soldiers. The last of her money clinked onto the pavement like metal rain.

She bolted.

She'd always been fast, a track star in school. Her legs pumped against empty air now, cutting through the exhaustion.

Orders shrieked. A cacophony rose. Amani wove between startled bystanders, dodging obstacles like a character in a high-stakes video game.

Which way?

She didn't know the city. Someone closed in. Fingers brushed the back of her collar. She veered left, rounding a trash can and delivering a sidekick. The metal container toppled into the soldier's shins, sending him flying. Her baseball cap tore off her head, pinched between his fingers. A mop of unwashed curls tumbled down her back.

Amani's boots slapped the asphalt again, catapulting her forward. Near the end of the street, she hurdled a wooden bench. Her lungs blazed. The humid air seared her esophagus. On a right turn, she hit loose gravel, skidding and flailing like an injured bird that couldn't take flight. At the last moment, she righted herself. With each footfall, her boots pounded the pavement, and Amani regained speed.

Screams and expletives rose in the street.

"Move!" a deep voice snarled.

In her periphery, a large shadow dove. Amani ducked a beefy arm. Fingertips grazed her hair. The motion sent her head over heels. Loose rock peeled flesh from bone. She rolled to her feet, ignoring the pain, and shoved forward.

Amani hit an alley. Her eyes narrowed on a fire escape. Adrenaline surged. She sprinted faster. Her hand shot out, grabbing a dumpster handle and swinging her legs over the top. She spun. Her toes touched the flat surface half a second before launching upward, reaching for the bottom rung of the ladder. Three fingers wrapped around the metal, then four. Muscles strained. She managed to get the fifth finger over the rung.

Something clamped around her ankle.

"No!" Amani kicked. A firm yank pulled her down. The rung slipped free.

Asphalt hurtled toward her. The impact rattled Amani's bones and wrenched the air from her lungs. Her chest heaved for a breath. The blinding sun blurred her vision before a shadow eclipsed it.

Caesar's face hovered above her, his white teeth gleaming. A sadistic laugh echoed through the alley. "You're fast. I'll give you that." Had she imagined a thread of admiration? Another chuckle followed. "But not fast enough."

In a blur of blinding rays, the butt of Caesar's rifle rose, then sliced down, striking Amani's skull. Pain spiderwebbed. A strangled grunt burst from her lips. White light flashed behind her eyes. The world tilted. The sounds of the street faded. The last thing Amani heard was Caesar's guttural laugh.