

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEMON OF ASTRAKHAN

There was a rumour that Aden Livingston had crawled his way back from the next life after making a deal with a Dark Witch. The deal, so the story goes, that he would be brought back under one condition, the Witch would take his soul as payment. As a result, Aden's eyes became red, warning everyone that he came in contact with that he was a demon, or at the very least, pretty damn close.

The other tall tales that circled the streets of Astrakhan and bleed into the warnings of locals would tell those who docked ranged in insanity. The more grounded theories were that Aden was simply not human and thus didn't deal in emotions such as that, which wasn't entirely far off, and the crazier theories edged towards the divine. Stories that suggested that Aden was an old god strived to wreak as much hell and chaos upon Landria as he could.

Admittedly, much of those tales had been stirred up by none other than Aden himself.

The real story was likely just as compelling, but it made him too pitiable and he simply couldn't have that.

So, for argument's sake, Aden was soulless or possibly an old god. Certainly, he was ruthless enough to pass for either one. It was the only way that he could survive in a place like Astrakhan which was run amok with thieves, gangs and criminals drugged up from the worst places whose lives were made from the darkest of tales. But hey, it worked out pretty well for someone who lived in Astrakhan.

After all, it was called the City of the Damned, and ironically, being brought to Astrakhan was what saved him from being damned. From being caught up in a war that he'd had no business being a part of. He'd traded that life for one of deceit and thievery. A life that he was, unfortunately, rather adept at, and he was uniquely qualified in this particular city. The City of the Damned traded in magic, and Aden Livingston had been raised by someone who was more proficient than most. This made Aden someone exceptional, especially since someone as young as he shouldn't have been so skilled in the Arcane Arts.

Hell, forget the young part. No one should've been as skilled as him in the Arcane Arts; numerous laws and knowledge-destroying crusades should have prevented that. Alas, Aden was...well, Aden, and his Arcane gifts, along with his rare Psionic magic made him a force of nature at just 17 years old, awarding him the role as lord of the Undead.

He made alliances, squashed enemies, and granted favours like nobody's business. In fact, it was under Aden's leadership that the gang gained more relevance than the Forsaken, the gang that had been around since the city's conception. Aden was sure to play the game of fighting for territory, accumulating wealth, but when it came down to it, Aden was careful to move the chess pieces when no one was looking.

He had bigger ambitions than this broken city, and fortunately for him, its inhabitants couldn't stop making deals with demons.

Aden wasn't picky, he'd make a deal anywhere with anyone, often in the confines of his own territory, because well, people would seek him out. However, once in a blue moon, Aden's dealings would bring him elsewhere.

Like the infamous Market District, the only neutral territory in the whole damn city. It was the part of

the city safe for tourists, due to blood oaths and god knows what else dark magic had gone into building the City of the Damned.

However, neutral territory didn't mean that deals didn't go down around the darkened corners. Aden's right hand rested comfortably against the grip of his revolver as he faced the Landrian politician before him, Zachariah Mailon.

The middle-aged man clearly had no business in the lawless deals he was attempting to engage in, judging from the way he shifted his weight back and forth. There was a pistol in his hand, pointing towards the ground with a lack of steadiness. It was a flashy, big weapon, the kind that someone chose when they had no experience with artillery.

Aden's crimson eyes reflected the moonlight as he studied Mailon, never once breaking his intent eye contact. Mailon was less steady with his eye contact, frequently glancing towards the gun in his hand.

Aden eyed the gun before moving his gaze back to Mailon, daring him to try to use the weapon.

"Well?" Aden prompted, his dry rasp cutting through the cold night air. Mailon cleared his throat and then reached beneath his jacket to pull out a neat file, secured closed by a thin piece of twine.

Something then took over Mailon and he raised his pistol at Aden. The young man didn't bat an eye, never even moving his gaze from Mailon's face to the weapon that threatened him.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"I keep my promises. Can you say the same to your wife?" Aden asked coolly, dropping a bomb without blinking an eye. Mailon flushed bright red and began to stutter uncomfortably, forming the beginnings of a dozen different sentences without ever completing one.

He can't know that I go to the Doves. They're discreet. They vow they are. To someone like Aden, thoughts were just as loud as words, maybe even more so. It let him in on secrets that not even those with the best of poker faces could hide.

The Doves were from a brothel deep in the Den of Astrakhan. They were, in fact, discreet, to everyone that couldn't read minds.

All that said, Mailon's poker face left something to be desired.

Aden held out one hand. His fingers were long and nimble, remarkably smooth for a young man who was supposed to have lived such a rough life. Mailon drew the folder back one more time, still hesitating.

"What do you even get with this information?"

"That's not part of our deal."

Finally, Mailon places the folder in Aden's hand and steps back, about to leave. Aden watches the councilman twitch and then speaks again,

"Wait. I'd like to see how good this information is first."

"That wasn't part of our deal," Mailon says nervously, looking at the gun that he raised. In an attempt to seem more threatening, Mailon took the safety off of his gun. The look in Aden's eyes grew lazy, almost tired by the silent threat.

"I've been quite cordial. Now, I suggest you put down the gun."

"No, I walk away now. Our dealings are done."

Aden's gaze flickers away for Mailon for the first time since their meeting started, just past the older man's shoulder. Mailon tensed as he heard a low growl.

Standing behind Mailon was the Red Wolf, one of Aden's...assets.

The Red Wolf was a magical wolf twice the size of its brothers and sisters. Its coat is immune to any known weapon, making it near indestructible. If that wasn't intimidating enough, the Red Wolf did work with the Undead as a whole, but rather dealt with Aden alone, which led to a whole new myriad of stories.

Stories that Aden was gifted enough with his magic that he'd turned a wolf pup into the Red Wolf, training the wolf to be loyal only to him. As flattering as the stories were, the only magic capable of something like that couldn't be replicated. Becoming a creature like that, nearly indestructible, could only be achieved by a shapeshifter. Someone born blessed by the divine.

The councilman boxed between the massive wolf and one of the most terrifying people in the city (possibly the country) started to sweat profusely. Aden raised an eyebrow, making a big show of opening

the folder. His eyes drifted to the words on the pages, skimming through to make sure it was all there.

Aden closed the folder, his face never shifting from its neutral expression. Mailon swallowed hard, looking like he was either going to cry or pass out. Aden stared at the older man for a moment longer, making sure that he left his mark on the man's psyche.

"Consider your debts forgiven."

"And my wife?"

"What about her?"

"Well, you-I-"

Aden's casual drop about him cheating on his wife was definitely still throwing him for a loop.

"You have nothing more for me, Mailon," Aden said, the folder now tucked under his arm. The councilman looked like he wanted to protest some more, but then the Red Wolf snarled. It was a short sound, a simple warning which was then followed by a guttural growl.

Mailon gulped and practically ran away. Aden nodded at the Red Wolf who seemed to acknowledge the gesture before turning away, disappearing down dark, abandoned roads. Aden didn't move for a moment, turning his face up to the starry, night sky.

Silently, he located a constellation, tracing its shape with his eyes before taking a slow, deep breath. Then he left where he'd met Mailon, heading to the place that he'd called home longer than he'd cared to admit.



The locals knew well to not cross Aden, and that meant literally as well as figuratively. As he walked the slanted, cracked sidewalks, people parted before they had the chance to reach him. Young lovers clutched each other close as they chose the open road rather than going anywhere near the young man.

The whispers and sharp inhales of breath always managed to reach Aden's ears.

Demon. Devil. Curst. Diabolus.

Every word that could apply to the criminal and his reputation was spoken. However, there was only one word that truly got under his skin. One word that he would never claim to his reputation.

Wicked.

The area of Astrakhan that Aden had grown familiar with was not-so-affectionately named the Den. It also happened to be the area with the highest rates of criminal activity which could probably be blamed on the impressive amount of gambling dens, brothels and other various dens of iniquity.

The only thing that the Den didn't have in abundance was magic. Not for lack of trying by other power-hungry criminals, but because the Arcane was not something that a single person could learn. They needed resources, books, talismans, all of which Aden had a massive monopoly on.

The only group that could dare to rival them were the Forsaken and even then, they were no longer a gang to brag about. Not since Aden's new nickname was coined.

The Demon of Astrakhan.

A demon making deals in the City of the Damned. It was almost...poetic.

Aden pushed open the front doors of the building that he called home.

For a moment, Aden went unnoticed as the patrons were all consumed by their winnings and losings, hypnotized by the cards smoothly dealt. However, as he took steps into the gambling den, customers tapped one another to take notice of him.

He heard the whispers...he was just used to them.

And usually, the novelty of looking at the sociopathic local mage and criminal had worn off, but tonight, he supposed he could blame the blood spatter staining his grey shirt.

"Aden, busy night?" A scratchy voice asked. Aden's gaze fell on Viper, long-time member of the Undead and recently appointed owner of the very building they stood in. Viper sat back at a table, playing cards with a few of his patrons.

"I wonder what gave you that impression," Aden answered dryly, still holding the folder against his side. The conversation went no further, just a nod of acknowledgement and then Aden was heading to the back room. He found the thin creaky set of stairs that led to the top of the building.

His home.

The top floor was secured closed by a door that Aden slid a bronze key into its lock. He twisted it once, gave the old door a kick and pushed it open. Unfortunately, Aden's rooms were not vacant entirely. It was a break-in of sorts, but it was complicated. Mostly by the fact that the intruder lived there and can one really break into a place that they live?

Well, Rory O'Connor could because in the eight months that Aden had known him, it seemed that Rory wasn't much a fan of doors.

Rory stood by the fireplace, poking at some logs before tossing in another feeding the orange flames. At the sound of the door, Rory glanced towards Aden, an intense look in his startling cobalt eyes. Rory adjusted the red cloak resting around his shoulders, stepping back from the fire. He seemed to have a permanent frown etched into what were probably once soft features, only hardened by the deep, old scars that were carved across his face.

Rory O'Connor had hated Aden since the moment that they'd laid eyes on each other. Aden didn't quite reciprocate the intensity of his feelings, probably because he didn't have the moral superiority complex that Rory did.

Rory stood up and yanked down his hood, glaring at Aden the way most would never dare to. If it had come from anyone else, they'd be wishing they could no longer see, but it was just...Rory.

The boy still had a healthy dose of fear regarding Aden, but the mage found it easier to let Rory question him. Sometimes, it felt like an experiment. Like Aden was testing what might happen if he stopped holding everyone at a distance.

If he pretended to be a normal 20-year-old.

"What the hell is that?!" Rory demanded, eyeing the dark blood that splattered over Aden's shirt.

"What?"

"Who did you..." Rory gestured up and down indignantly at the bloodstains. "...murder tonight?" It was an errand that he'd taken care of on the way home. A rather violent one, but an errand nonetheless.

"I'm sure you don't want to hear the answer," Aden said wryly, taking off his jacket and hanging it on a coat hook.

"Look, I met you where you wanted me to. I scared the shit out of Mailon. Did you go back and murder him anyway?"

"As I said, you don't want to know." Aden then walked to another room, already unbuttoning his shirt. Rory followed angrily and only stopped short when Aden slid the shirt down his shoulders, grimacing as he did so.

There was an angry, bloody hole in Aden's shoulder.

"And you got shot?!"

"I'm sure you know by now, Rory. Getting shot happens in this line of business." Aden asked, masking his pain again as he reached into a cabinet to pull out a basket of loose medical supplies. Rory stood back, angrily shaking his head as he glared at the young mage.

"The hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh, you don't want to go down that rabbit hole," Aden answered dryly, sitting down on a chair with his supplies. He then looked pointedly at Rory. "Care to help or...?"

"Why should I? You've been using me for months and you have nothing for me."

Aden sighed. At the moment that he turned, Aden's face went from grimacing in pain to a facade of serenity.

"That's fair, but without me, it'll take a lot longer to find other shapeshifters."

"Oh, you won't die from that bullet," Rory spat, seeming to think that Aden was overdramatizing. Aden plucked a pair of tweezers out of the medical basket and then produced a flask from his pocket.

The mage then doused the tweezers in the clear alcohol which made Rory grimace this time.

“No, I won’t.” Aden agreed before turning back to Rory. “I was indicating if you were to walk away from this.”

“Oh, the Great Aden Livingston would let me?”

“If you were a normal human? No. But people like us have to have each other’s backs.”

Aden then twisted in his seat to deal with the bullet himself. Before the tweezers could enter the bloodied wound, Rory grabbed them away.

“Now, you’re just pissing me off. Were you raised by wolves?” Rory asked bitterly, putting the tweezers down and leaving the room momentarily. He came back with different medical supplies, not the bare minimum that Aden was trying to work with.

Rory washed his hands in the sink, making sure to thoroughly clean before he pulled up a chair to sit behind Aden. Rory pulled out a jar of paste that he put around the bullet hole. Aden’s tense shoulders relaxed, the paste’s numbing properties already taking effect. It soaked into Aden’s otherwise smooth skin and Rory had a new pair of tweezers that presumably he’d sanitized in a way that he’d felt were much more adequate.

Rory stuck the tweezers into the bullet hole, which caused Aden to bite back another grimace of pain. Aden could sense the slightest bit of glee coming off of Rory for the pain he was causing in the quest to heal Aden’s injury.

“It was an abusive mother,” Aden began, trying to distract himself from the poking and prodding inside his back. “Then an assassin. So yes, raised by wolves.”

Aden pressed his teeth into his lower lip, stiffening as he felt Rory drive the tweezers in deeper. Thin streams of warm blood slid down Aden’s back as Rory seemingly struggled to find the bullet.

“Got it,” Rory finally said, dropping the tweezers and the bullet on the counter. Aden lifted the bullet, turning it over with his thumb as Rory cleaned the blood on Aden’s back. He picked up a new jar of paste and began to carefully apply it over Aden’s wound.

“What about your father?”

“What about yours?” Aden countered which caused Rory to stiffen up.

“Go fuck yourself.”

Rory covered the wound with a bandage, wishing he hadn’t numbed the area. When it was over, Aden opened his wardrobe and pulled out a new shirt. He buttoned it steadily and then looked back over to Rory.

“Speaking of, I’ve got something about him.”

“Is it another empty house? ‘Cause I’ve gotta say, that novelty’s been wearing off.”

Aden walked over to his desk and picked up the folder he took from Mailon. He grimaced as he held it out to Rory, stupidly doing so with his injured shoulder. Rory eyed him with a frown before snatching it back. Rory opened it and began flipping through the pages.

“What are these?”

“You can read, can you not, Rory?”

“Every day spent with you makes me wish I couldn’t hear.”

“Your father’s arrest records.”

“These are a bunch of random names, none of which are my father’s!”

Aden pointed to the bottom right corner of the top paper. A sketch of a bearded man that Rory couldn’t recognize from a hole in the wall.

“These names all belong to one man. From the description and from this name—” Aden pointed to a name that read Kingston Graham. “Kingston had dealings with the Undead, matters regarding Celestial and Arcane magic. So, I would say these records are reasonable assumption.”

“It doesn’t say where he was sent after he was convicted,” Rory observed with a frown. “Does that mean he’s—”

“—not dead,” Aden supplied flatly. His eyes traced over the documents thoughtfully before looking back at Rory. “How else could a person disappear in the legal system?”

“Are you implying Blackstorm?”

“Was I?” It was entirely speculation, of course, but even Aden’s intuitive leaps, he usually turned out correct. It was a combination of private thoughts being visible to him and his perpetual paranoid distrust that resulted in chronic over preparedness. Regardless, the reasons for why Aden was the way he was was something that the Demon of Astrakhan would never care to reveal, which meant all that resulted in this conversation is Rory O’Connor feeling like a rat in an endless maze.

“Would it kill you to finish one damn conversation where you just...answer things?!” Rory exclaimed, an animalistic edge to his words. Aden noticed Rory’s eyes flash bronze...even with his Arcane-embedded cloak. Strange. “Gods, Aden, I—I wish I’d never come to this fucking city.”

“If you’d had another option, you wouldn’t be one of the Damned, now would you?”

The shapeshifter let out a huff of disbelief, taking off his cloak and tossing it on a nearby chair. He threw the papers carelessly on top and then charged towards the window. Rory put a hand on the window ledge and in the blink of an eye, a crow had taken his place. The crow in question flew off.

Aden didn’t have to make that comment, no, but as previously stated, Aden Livingston had a reputation. Lord of the Undead, the Demon of Astrakhan, which meant he couldn’t be kind. He couldn’t show mercy, not even in the privacy of his own damn home.