

HELLBOUND

Hidden from the world we know exists the mythos. Mythical creatures we believe in as children, only to be forgotten as we age. But that doesn't make them any less real. They are, simply, Hidden.

A dark angel with a superiority complex believes angels should rule over mankind, not serve it. And so he and his Dominion have started a war that has raged for centuries.

The Seven Seals, as referenced in the Book of Revelation, are said to be all that stands between our survival and the end of days. Led by a reclusive angel, the Seven are powerful immortals, enhanced by the marks they bear. Throughout history, the Seven have guided the Hidden, dedicating their lives to keep the world of the mythos obscured from human eyes.

It is the Guardians—knights, shifters and other men of the mythos—who have defended the Seven and protected the Hidden against the power-hungry Dominion. Because of the Guardians' protection, the world has not been lost, but rather held in a fragile balance of good and evil.

The Guardians have dealt the first great blow. The Dominion has splintered, but new leaders have emerged, each with their own nefarious plans. The Hidden are no safer than before. As bloodshed spills over to claim human lives, the forces that balance against each other begin to unravel.

One thing is known.

When the dust settles, nothing will ever be the same.

Chapter 1

AN OLD FARMHOUSE IN THE MIDWEST, PRESENT DAY

Orion Benandanti sat on the porch steps, a can of beer in one hand, and waited like he had every night for the past month. Waited for *her*. Each time brought her a few steps closer. Every time he grew more anxious. Last night, she'd drawn close enough he could hear the rustle of her fur, could sense her pounding heartbeat.

The sun had nearly set, splaying a warm, reddish glow over the trees as the horizon swallowed the last sliver of the golden orb. Twilight fell.

It was time.

He scanned the tree line. Seconds ticked into minutes. Then he saw it. The slightest movement as she stepped out from behind a large pine tree. Tension vanished from his muscles. *She came*.

The wolf-like creature stopped, her ears forward, listening. She shouldn't exist. He'd heard the legends, but never believed that female hellhounds had survived. Yet, this creature was very real and was making a very real impact on Orion.

She took a tentative step forward. Then another. A beautiful hellhound, more beautiful than the most exquisite of wolves. Her fur was tan with burnished streaks, as if the gods had bathed her in gold and failed to fully rinse the shimmer from the pelt. Even though she was the deadliest of shifters, she reminded him more of a playful calico kitten.

Here, kitty, kitty.

Gods. Her very presence triggered the beast that lived inside him. How he craved to change forms and run through the night with her at his side. Craved to touch her. He yearned to free himself from the constraints of his human form. But he refused to change. His beast would stand half again her size. He would frighten her. At well over six feet tall in this form, he would already be intimidating enough to the petite creature.

Petite. He chuckled. He'd been around male hellhounds for far too long. Compared to the other members in his pack, she was small. Larger than a wolf, she

would still be terrifying compared to any other beast. Except Orion was neither any other beast nor just a hellhound.

He was Alpha.

Even more, he was one of the Seven, host to the Third Seal. Between leading the hellhounds and being one of the Seven, he tended to radiate something that either intimidated the shit out of people or pissed them off. And so he remained a man, watching the hellhound approach, waiting for the female to come to him.

Skittish, she started forward, down the gentle slope into the valley below. She paused every dozen steps or so, her ears twitching—one gold, the other white, as though listening for a reason to run off. If he was in her place, he'd do the exact same thing. He understood the courage it took for the wary female to approach an alpha hellhound on his own territory, especially to approach the Alpha of all hellhounds.

And that was the same reason she came to him in the first place. It was known as the Call of the Alpha. A sixth sense of sorts all hellhounds had that, like a magnet, tugged them to their Alpha. He'd had his share of strays show up at his doorsteps over the years. But this one was by far the most pleasant stray to attract. His beast had laid claim to the female the first night he'd laid eyes on her.

She continued toward him, stopping a distance several feet away to rest on her haunches. Safely out of his reach. So close. Too damn far away. Despair burned his veins. His beast wanted to lunge for her, to dominate, to possess. Thank the gods his human side refused to surrender control. He knew the risk. If he frightened her now, she might never return.

They stared at each other for several minutes. For the first time he noticed the flecks of gold in her amber eyes. Her gaze pierced him as if she could see straight into his soul. She blinked, stood, and lifted a paw.

His breath hitched. Hell, even the Seal on his shoulder tingled in anticipation. He leaned forward, muscles tense. He set his beer down and clasped his hands together to keep himself from reaching out to her. Against his nature, he waited.

Her paw brought her one step closer. No more than a few strides separated them. He fought back the urge to reach out to her. He'd waited too long for this. Now was not the time for haste.

He'd forgotten how much smaller female hellhounds were to their male counterparts. Looked more like a plaything rather than a predator.

Here, kitty, kitty.

The hellhound's pace picked up like she was afraid she'd change her mind, then she closed the last few steps that separated them. Her warm breath tickled the hair on his forearms as she scented his skin. Orion grimaced, thinking he should've worn long sleeves. The years hadn't been kind. He'd picked up enough scars over the centuries that the ugly reminders overlapped in Escher-like designs across his skin. Would his scars scare her?

He reached out as slowly as he could manage and ran a hand across her shoulder, finding the skin-to-fur contact more fulfilling than he ever could have imagined. A smile tugged at his lips, which he did nothing to hold back. She had come to him. After so long. He grinned, not giving one whit about hiding his pleasure from the guest in his territory.

"Nice to meet you, kitten. Name's Orion," he murmured as softly as possible, nearly wincing at the sandpaper bass of his voice, wishing for the first time in his life he didn't sound—and look—like a beast. He'd never cared about any of that shit before. Until now. He couldn't risk this rarity running away. She was too valuable.

She cocked an ear at his words, seemingly more curious than timid.

Orion realized both of his hands were now in her fur, scratching her neck. Against his nature, he pulled one away so he wouldn't intimidate her. Instead of backing from him, she glanced down and gave his hand a quick lick. That move brought forth a chuckle from him, which she responded to by nudging his hand with her head.

He scratched behind her ear while his gaze traveled over her fur. She had scars, too. Hairline marks from razor-sharp claws or teeth were scattered across her rib cage and haunches where fur could no longer grow. So many scars for a female. Signs that life had not been kind. Hellhounds didn't get those kinds of scars from fighting wolves and other natural beasts that roamed the night—hellhounds were far stronger and could snap a wolf's neck without breaking into a pant. She obviously had fought other hellhounds, and often. But why? Who would dare attack a female?

Anger bubbled up from his chest. Females of his species were so rare they had become nothing more than legend centuries ago. They were a priceless gift to be

cherished, not abused. He never thought he'd see one again. The hellhound population had diminished over the centuries, and females had been the first to disappear.

She tensed under his touch. The hellhound raised her nose, sniffed the air, and then lifted her upper lip, revealing a sharp set of white canines. As she started to growl, Orion scowled. He already knew what had set her off. He'd always been able to sense his younger brother, even in this form. "At ease, kitten. You're safe. Ben won't hurt you."

But his words came too late.

With a snarl, she jerked away and ran off, disappearing into the night.

He wanted to punch something, or *someone*, to be more accurate. Instead, Orion closed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. Then he leaned back, resting his elbows on the step behind him, and scanned the woods for her, already knowing she was gone for tonight.

Tomorrow. She'd be back tomorrow. Or else he'd track her. He'd touched her tonight. One touch was all it took, and the Seal of Understanding could track her anywhere in the world. His fingers brushed over the tattoo-like scion that covered his shoulder, and it tingled in response. Thanks to the power of the Seal, she would never be able to hide from him again. No more games.

Orion closed his eyes and cracked his neck from side to side. Then he let out a long, drawn out sigh, more to get his point across than anything, and turned to glare at his brother. "I thought I told you to steer clear."

Ben shrugged before unrepentantly taking the step next to him, the old wood creaking under his weight. "What can I say? Curiosity killed the hellhound."

Like Orion, Ben's heightened senses would've caught her scent a hundred feet away. That reminder didn't make Orion one bit happier to see Ben right now. "You scared her off."

"She'll be back. She always comes back."

"Not tonight."

"Then put a leash on her."

Orion snapped a glare at Ben.

Ignoring him, his brother came to his feet, blocking his view of the woods. "We need supplies."

Orion growled.

Ben patted his shoulder. “We’re out of beer. I’m thirsty. Tomorrow you can chase your little girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Orion mumbled.

Ben’s smirk showed his brother had heard him just fine. Ben had made it clear he knew Orion was letting the female get in the way of hunting the rogue hellhound Cellach but was smart enough to say nothing.

Orion looked out over the now empty pasture. He liked Iowa. It was one of the quieter states in the new world. He’d had a good setup here for over a century. The old farmhouse stood alone in the country, backing up to acres and acres of woods. Plenty of room for his beast to run when he needed to get away from the bureaucracy back on the Island of the Seven Cities. He could only handle being crammed onto the confining island with the other members of the Seven for so long before his beast demanded space. Even now, he craved to change and rule the night, starting with tracking one wary female hellhound.

He continued sitting on the steps of his back porch, picking at the chipped paint. Maybe next week he’d get around to getting a fresh coat of paint on the porch. The old house had character. She’d be a beauty once he finished restoring her. Some day. He needed a longer vacation.

Ever since he first found the female in his territory, she had become his obsession. But he hadn’t returned to his farmhouse for vacation or to obsess over a particular pale-furred hellhound.

No. He was here on a mission to hunt an outlaw hellhound rumored to be building his own pack of mongrels.

To make matters worse, the outlaw hellhound happened to be Cellach, the bane of Orion’s existence. Cellach had emerged as leader of one of two factions that sprouted when the Guardians took down the head of the Dominion a couple months back. The second leader, a witch named Tatiana, was missing in action. Orion hoped she stayed that way.

Orion looked forward to putting an end to the Dominion once and for all. A terrorist organization, the Doms had broken off from the Hidden world. They wanted to bring the Hidden public, and with that, take over the world. They were convinced humans were subservient beasts, whose place were as slaves, not at equals. Orion and

the rest of the Seven disagreed. Taking down the Dominion had been Orion's priority. Until this month when *she* showed up.

She couldn't be far away, to come to him every night. Within fifty miles. He smiled. He wouldn't use his Seal to track her, even though now that he'd touched her, he easily could draw upon the scion's power. No, he'd stick with his hellhound senses. It had been too long since he'd had a good hunt. Orion had half-heartedly tracked her already. But she was smart. The hellhound had used the creek to hide her trail. She'd slip up. And when she did, he'd find her. There'd be no more running.

Ben cracked his knuckles. "I could sure use a beer. Ice. Cold. Refreshing..."

Orion cocked his head to find his brother smirking. "Then go get it."

"You know the rules."

Rules. Yeah, he knew them. And hated the fact that he couldn't go anywhere without a Guardian. Made him feel like he was on a damn leash.

"Quit scowling, old man, and get over it already. She'll be back tomorrow." Ben stuck out his chest like a rooster. "Although I can't say she's got the best taste, going for age instead of beauty."

"I'm less than a decade older than you," Orion retorted as he pulled himself to his feet, his stiff joints reminding him that he was no young hellhound anymore. Hell, he'd even noticed a few grays the other week. Fuck.

Ben's shit-ass grin showed him that the minor age gap didn't bother his brother. Not one bit. "You also got a birthday coming up. So any time you want to start dropping ideas for gifts and shit, knock yourself out."

"How about some peace and quiet."

Ben cracked his knuckles. "You're lucky you got me assigned as your Guardian. You could've gotten Rafe." Then his brother gave an overly dramatic shiver in an Oscar-winning act.

Orion raised a brow, but couldn't deny his brother's words. As long as he had a Seal—well, *the* Seal to be more accurate—he had to be protected. Whenever one of the Seven weren't on the island where they were safe from the Dominion, they were required to have at least one Guardian assigned.

Because if the Dominion took the Seven Seals for themselves, nothing could stand in the Dom's way for world domination. A possibility that sat like an acid-filled

cannonball in his gut. For that same possibility, he'd formed, trained, and still led the Guardians.

More centuries than he could count on one hand had passed since he'd had the freedom to roam the world in peace. Being one of the Seven, leading the Guardians, and serving as the Alpha had all but eliminated his freedom. He'd had only a few brief years between the time he'd spent in the Night Wind—his predecessor's—pack and when the Seal had called to him. A few years out of *centuries*. The power that came with being one of the Seven came at a high price.

"Let's go." Without even a glance in his brother's direction, Orion headed around the house and to the SUV parked in the driveway.

"Be right there. Forgot the list."

Orion smirked. Ben and his lists. The guy had a list for everything. His OCD came in handy traveling, but it could also be a real pain in the ass.

The engine purred to life, and he waited for his brother, who by now was no doubt double checking the pantry. He leaned forward over the wheel. His eyes narrowed. Movement in the tree line. Was she coming back?

He shut off the engine and stepped out. He peered into the dark woods, watching for her. He didn't have to wait long before a hellhound stepped out. Only this one had no fur and bore no golden shimmer from the gods. Covered with lizard skin, the beast was nearly as large as Ben's beast, which meant it had at least another fifty pounds on Orion. The creature looked more like an unfortunate mating of a hellhound with a crocodile. He'd never seen anything like it before.

What the fuck?

Leaves rustled to his right. Orion jerked around to block a second mutated hellhound that jumped at him from behind. The beast clamped onto his forearm, and he clenched his jaw in pain. Rather than jerking back, he punched it in the eye. It screeched and released its hold a fraction of a second. Enough. Using the bare instant to his advantage, he kicked the mongrel in the gut, knocking it several feet away.

He vaguely felt his skin tear as teeth were wrenched from his arm when the mongrel went flying. But Orion thrived on pain. Pain amped up his adrenaline, teased his hellhound into blood thirst.

With a roar, he leapt through the air, torpedoing the mongrel as it climbed to its feet. The creature fell onto its back, all four claws gouging at Orion's chest as the hellhound tried to get away from its victim-turned-attacker.

The beast snarled and snapped its jaws but couldn't get a clear shot. Orion grabbed the mongrel's head and twisted with all his strength. A loud crack echoed through the night air.

When silence returned, the hellhound's head hung limply at an unnatural angle. Orion dropped the hairless carcass to the ground and scanned the area for any other mongrels.

All clear.

He wiped blood away from his forearm, and crimson droplets instantly formed where razor-sharp teeth had pierced the skin. Giving a mental shrug, he dropped his hands down to his side. Only a flesh wound. Another scar for his collection.

Kneeling by the lifeless monstrosity, he couldn't miss that acrid, sulfuric scent. Lead filled his gut. *Wraith*. He dipped a finger in the dead creature's blood and sniffed. Under the stench, he could make out the faintest hint of the hellhound's maker.

Cellach.

Orion's heart pounded. For the preservation of the Hidden World, creating new hellhounds was forbidden, which resulted in fewer than a couple hundred spread across the globe. Most of them were pure-bloods. That was, until the Dominion splintered and rumors began circulating that Cellach was building his own pack of mongrels. Rumor had it that Cellach no doubt planned to go after the Seven himself, starting with his least favorite hellhound—the Alpha.

Orion had discounted the rumors, never believing for a minute Cellach would do something that insane. But he'd come out to his farmhouse—to the Midwest, where Cellach was last seen—to verify. Fuck. His mistake, because what he saw lying dead on the ground told him Cellach hadn't been creating just a pack of hellhounds.

He'd been creating a pack of wraith hellhounds.

Bile rose in Orion's throat. Wraiths may be dumb as shit, but they were ruthless and more powerful than any human. Worse, they had a well-deserved reputation for being way too hard to kill.

No one would be dumb enough to think they'd get away with building a pack of mongrels, especially in Orion's territory. Cellach was quite aware of the Alpha's territory, which meant the hellhound had clearly wanted Orion to notice what he was doing. What the hell was that mongrel up to?

He clenched his teeth. And where did the female fit in? Had Cellach found a way to have females survive the Change? It was an uncanny coincidence to find a female hellhound in the same area where Cellach was skulking around. Except Orion didn't believe in coincidences. Somehow, he knew his kitten was in deep with Cellach's FUBAR mess.

Cellach had gone too far this time. Orion nudged the carcass with his foot. Fortunately, this one had recently gone through the Change; its actions had been awkward and its moves clumsy. But what the fuck? Wraith mongrels were too unpredictable, the risk of humans discovering the Hidden World too great. It was almost like Cellach *wanted* the humans to find out about them.

The sound of a scuffle yanked his attention back. More wraiths.

Ben. No.

Orion sprinted back around the house to find several more of those creatures huddled together as if they were a football team planning the next play. One of them must've sensed him coming, because they suddenly spread out to face the newcomer. That was when Orion found his brother.

Ben lay on the ground, bloodied but cussing up a storm. Fueled by the sight of his injured brother, Orion's hellhound took over. After so many years, it took barely a thought to morph from man into hellhound. The change happened so fast that even a high-speed camera couldn't capture the magic. Fur emerged from his skin and he went from two legs to four without a pause in his stride. The mongrels would no longer have the benefit of fighting a man. Now they'd face a huge black hellhound. They would soon learn why he was the Alpha.

The Seal that covered his arm tingled in anticipation. It, too, was ready.

Fucks wanted a fight?

Good.

'Cause that was exactly what they were going to get.

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