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By Amber V. Nicole

The Book of Azrael

The Throne of Broken Gods

THE BOOK OF AZRAEL

GODS & MONSTERS

BOOK ONE

AMBER V. NICOLE



HEADLINE
ETERNAL

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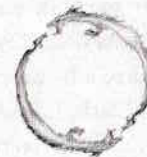
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book explores some potentially triggering themes. A list of
content warnings can be found on the Rose & Star Website.

ONE

DIANNA



“S eriously? You’re supposed to be these ancient warriors, feared by all, and you flinch? The worst part hasn’t even happened yet.”

I raised my fist once more, and it connected with his cheek this time. His head whipped to the side, the bones crunching beneath the force of my knuckles. Cobalt-blue blood splattered across the hardwood floor of the upstairs office in this oversized mansion. The bound celestial in the center of the room shook his head once more before correcting himself. He stared at me, his face bloody and his brow furrowed with pain.

“Your eyes,” he said from between split and swollen lips, pausing to spit blood at my feet. “I know what you are.” He had fought hard, his hair matted to his head with sweat and blood. His hands were bound behind his back, and his muscles bunched beneath the torn fabric of a once decent suit. He slumped in the chair at the center of the once prestigious room. “But it’s impossible. You cannot exist. The Ig’Morruthens died in the Gods War.”

I hadn’t started my life as an Ig’Morruthen, but it is what I had become, and my eyes would always give me away. When I was mad, hungry, or anything but mortal, they burned like two fiery embers—one identifier among many that proved I was no longer mortal.

"Ah, yes, the Gods War." I tilted my head to the side as I regarded him. "How did that go again? Oh, right: thousands of years ago, your world crashed, burned, and fell into our world, disrupting lives and technology. Now you and your kind pretty much make the rules, right? Now the world knows about gods and monsters, and you are the great do-gooders who keep all the bad guys under lock and key."

I moved closer, grabbing the back of the chair as he tried to tilt his head away from me. "Do you know what your fall did to my world? While you all rebuilt, a plague swept through my home in the deserts of Eoria. Do you know how many died? Do you care?"

He didn't answer as I pushed off the chair. I raised my hand, my knuckles wet with his blood. "Yeah, I didn't think so. Well, you bleed blue, so I guess everything isn't what it seems after all."

I crouched in front of him, pieces of glass crunching beneath my heels. The only light came from the hallway, spilling through the door and illuminating the disaster of an office. Several pages from books and other debris littered the floor, along with the broken desk I'd thrown him through.

The celestial was the reason we'd come, and it was a long shot that the one artifact Kaden was looking for would be here, but I checked nonetheless. My bound and beaten celestial said nothing as he watched me search through the ruins of the room. The stoic face he put on was a shield, disguising what he was actually feeling.

Noise flooded the floors beneath us as the others living here screamed their last screams. Gunshots rang out, and a menacing laugh followed. His eyes flickered with rage as I walked back to him and placed my hands on his shoulders. In one fluid motion, I threw one leg over his lap and straddled him.

He whipped his head toward me, a look of pure disgust and confusion edging into his features. "Are you going to kill me?"

I shook my head. "No, not yet." He tried to recoil, but I grabbed his chin, forcing him to face me. "Don't worry. It's not going to hurt. I just need to make sure you are the one we're after. Bear with me. I need to concentrate for this to work."

Blood trickled from one of the several gashes littering his face. I gripped his chin and angled his head before leaning forward to slide

my tongue over the cut. I was then tossed out of this office and thrown into his memories between one heartbeat and the next.

Blue light flashed across my subconscious as rooms I'd never been to appeared and disappeared. Laughter from a woman years older than him rang in my ears as she brought a tray of food into a small living room. She was his mother. Images converged, and I saw two gentlemen talking about sports and yelling in a crowded bar. Glasses clinked, and people laughed, trying to be heard over several large flat-screen televisions hanging on the walls. My head throbbed as I probed deeper. The scene changed, and I was in a darkened room. Waves of golden-brown hair danced around the edges of a woman's small frame. Her moans grew louder, and her back arched off the bed as she squeezed her breasts.

Good for you, but not what I need. I closed my eyes tighter, trying to focus. I needed more.

I was traveling the cobblestone streets of Arariel in a large vehicle with blacked-out windows. Sunlight darted behind the buildings, the shimmering yellows and golds enhancing the beauty of the scenery. People hurried along the sidewalks, and bicyclists wove through the traffic. Sunglasses shifted against the brim of my nose as I turned my head, looking at my companions. Three men sat with me in the back, the inside of the truck larger than I expected. Two others were in front, one driving and the other speaking on a phone in the passenger seat. They were young, clean-shaven, and wearing the same fitted black clothes as the celestial whose mind I was currently in.

"Have they heard anything else?" I asked, my voice no longer feminine, but his.

"No," the man across from me said. His hair was swept to the side and held there with so much gel that I could smell it even in the blooddream. He was lean compared to the guy next to him, but I knew he was just as powerful. "Vincent is very tight-lipped. I think they know the attacks are not just frequent. They have a target. We just don't know what it is."

"We have lost a lot of celestials—too many too soon. It is happening again, isn't it? What they taught us?" the man next to me said. His voice was quiet, but I could hear his apprehension. He was a

large mountain of a man, but the way he twitched when he asked told me he was scared despite all that muscle. His fingers intertwined and unclasped several times over before he turned toward me. "If it is—if it does—he will come back."

Before I could answer, a short laugh caught me off guard. I turned to look at the man in front of me. He had his arms tightly folded as he stared out the window. "I think *him* coming back scares me more than facing them." This guy seemed young, too. Gods, how many celestials looked like college frat boys? This was what we were up against?

"Why?" I asked. "He is a legend, a myth at best. We already have three of The Hand of Rashearim here. Anything that could kill them either died in the war or has been sealed away for centuries. It's just another run-of-the-mill monster who thinks they have power." I paused, looking each one of them in the eyes. "We're fine."

The man in front opened his mouth to respond, but closed it as the car came to an abrupt halt. The sun glared down at us as we got out, closing the door behind us. Vehicles filled the curved driveway, and more continued to arrive. Celestials crowded the entry. Some gathered in small groups, others hurrying from place to place.

I adjusted my jacket and smoothed the edges down once, then twice, the nervousness seeping into my very core as I took the steps to the entrance. A large marble-and-limestone building greeted me, the golds, whites, and creams almost gaudy. Several large domed wings swept out on either side, with large arched windows lining every floor. I saw people walking across the stone bridges that connected the various buildings. They all wore similar business clothing and carried folders and briefcases. As I watched, several people exited the building, talking and laughing. They headed down the street as if a fortress did not sit in the middle of the city.

The city of Arariel.

My vision blurred as I pulled myself from the memory. The beautiful streets of Arariel faded, and I was back in the wrecked and dimly lit office. I had everything I needed now. A small smile curved my lips as I turned his face toward me.

"See, I told you it wouldn't hurt ... but this next part will."

His throat bobbed once as he swallowed, the smell of fear clouding the room.

"What did you see?" The voice, thick and heavy, came from behind me. A small thud sounded as he dropped something fleshy on the floor. He strode into the room, his presence almost as encompassing as my own.

"Everything we need," I murmured as I stood from the chair. I spun it around in one fluid motion so that Peter faced Alistair.

"He is a celestial? We have seen plenty of them, Dianna," Alistair said as he rubbed one hand across his face. Blood stained his skin and clothing from the destruction he'd wreaked downstairs. His normally perfectly combed silver hair had a few strands out of place and was streaked with crimson.

"I saw Arariel. He was there. They spoke of Vincent, which means *he*," I shook the chair with our bound friend slightly, "works with The Hand."

A grin, sharp and deadly, caressed his features. "You're lying."

"I'm not," I said, shaking my head and pushing the chair toward him. "I've tasted it. This is Peter McBride, twenty-seven, second-tier celestial. His parents are retired, and he has no other connections to the mortal world. The fortress is in Arariel. His colleagues talked about us and what we've done so far. They spoke about The Hand of Rashearim and even mentioned Vincent."

The guy in the chair stuttered as he craned his head, looking from me to Alistair and back. "How did you see that? How can you know?"

We paused, looking at Peter as his eyes bounced between us. I crouched and leaned in closer. "Well, you see, Peter, every Ig'Mor-ruthen has a little quirk. That was just one of mine."

I patted Peter's face as he continued to look at us in horror before I met Alistair's gaze again. He gave me a slow, mischievous smile and said, "If what you say is true, then Kaden is going to be very, very happy."

I nodded once more. "I found our way in. The rest is up to you."

I stepped back from the chair as Alistair stepped forward.

"Now, Peter, do you want to see what Alistair can do?"

The celestial struggled, trying to break his bonds, but he was too

weak, too beaten to muster the strength. I scoffed. Some warriors these were! Taking this world for Kaden would be a piece of cake.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Alistair stepped forward, standing in front of Peter. He raised his hands, his palms hovering inches from either side of Peter's head. "Just relax. The more you struggle, the more it hurts," Alistair murmured.

Alistair's eyes glowed the same blood red as mine as a black mist formed between his hands, connecting his palms. It rippled and danced between his fingers, passing through the celestial's head. The screams were my least favorite part; they were always so loud. But I guess it was to be expected when someone was having their brain ripped apart and put back together again. Granted, Alistair had a few celestials under his control, but none with a rank as high as this, and none that had been this close to that damned city. Kaden would be happy for once.

The screams abruptly stopped, and I raised my head.

"You always look away," Alistair said, a smirk twisting his lips.

"I don't like it."

I didn't mean for that to slip. Kaden did not accept weakness, but I had been mortal before I had given up my life. I had been mortal, with mortal feelings, mortal views, and a mortal life. No matter how far I'd gone or what I'd done, my mortality sometimes snuck back in. Many would say it was a failing of my mortal heart. It was just another reason I had to be stronger, faster, meaner. There is a line you cross for survival—one I'd crossed centuries ago.

"After everything you've done, this," he pointed to the now silent celestial, "disturbs you?"

"It's annoying." My hands flew to my hips, and I let out an exasperated sigh. "Are we done?"

He shrugged. "Depends. Did you happen to see anything about the book?"

Ah, yes, the book. The reason we were running all over, searching Onuna.

I shook my head. "No, but if he can get close enough to The Hand, then that's something. A start."

His jaw clenched, and he shook his head. "Won't be good enough."

"I know." I raised my hand, cutting off whatever else he was about to say. "Just get on with it."

A smile, cold and deadly, lit up his face. Alistair reminded me of ice, from his hard, chiseled cheekbones to his empty stare. He had never been mortal, and serving Kaden was all he knew. He raised his hand in a silent demand, and the celestial stood. No words were needed. Alistair owned his mind and body.

"You will remember nothing that happened here today. You belong to me now. You will be my eyes and ears. What you see, I see. What you hear, I hear. What you speak, I speak."

Peter mimicked the words Alistair spoke verbatim. The only difference was the tone.

"Now, clean up this mess before you have company."

Peter said nothing as he stepped around Alistair and started to straighten up the office. Alistair came to my side as we watched him. We weren't even here to him anymore; he was a mindless puppet that Alistair controlled. I fought the urge to shift uncomfortably, knowing I was the same to Kaden. The only difference was that I knew it. Peter was long gone now that Alistair held his mind, and no power on Onuna could break that hold. As soon as he wasn't useful anymore, Alistair would discard him, just like the others before him. I had helped, just as I had for centuries. A part of me ached as I watched him go about the tasks he had no choice but to perform.

Damn mortal heart.

Alistair's clap shook me from my thoughts as he turned toward me. "Now help me clean up the bodies downstairs." He stepped past me, heading for the door as he shouted over his shoulder, "Peter, tell me where you keep those heavy-duty trash bags."

"Kitchen. In the third cabinet on the bottom shelf."

I turned on my heel, following Alistair out of the room and down the stairs. "What are we going to do with them?"

The smile he threw over his shoulder was purely wicked. "There are plenty of Ig'Morruthens at home who are probably starving."

TWO

DIANNA



Shadows separated in waves around Alistair and me as we portaled home to Novas. The warm salt air and an eerie quiet greeted us. Novas was an island off the coast of Kashuena, but it wasn't just any island. It jutted out of the vast ocean like a ferocious beast threatening to claim the surrounding sea. I'd always assumed it was another fragment that fell to our world during the Gods War. Kaden had claimed it, shaped it, and made it his own. I suppose it was our home, although *home* was a latent term. Novas never felt like home to me. Home was with my sister, and oh, how I missed her.

I heaved several thick black trash bags across my shoulder and followed Alistair. The sand stuck to our blood-soaked shoes, making the trek even more cumbersome. Trees lined the vast landscape, the sun peeking through the many branches, creating a soft, peaceful glow. It was deceptive. Soft and peaceful were things not known here. The beach itself seemed welcoming. Salt scented the air as gentle waves lapped at the shore. The crystal-blue water was inviting ... if you didn't consider what lurked beneath the surface.

"It's quiet," I said as our feet hit the pebbled lava rock path. "It's never quiet."

"Securing Peter took longer than we thought, I guess," Alistair said, glancing around as if just now noticing.

I shook my head and sighed, knowing he was right. If we were late, Kaden would be pissed, regardless of the information we'd secured. Unfortunately, the unnatural silence of the island was not a good indicator of his mood.

We kept going, our pace slowing as the large structure came into view. Several wide steps led up to the twin double doors. Iron fences encompassed the front, adding a modern twist to the massive home Kaden had carved out of the active volcano that kept adding to Novas island. We pushed the doors open and entered, heat embracing us as we stepped into the entryway. It was warm and dry inside the house, but not overbearing. Kaden's home realm was long forgotten, sealed after the Gods War. Where he came from was much warmer than Onuna, and the volcanic island was the closest he could get to the feel of home.

I dropped the heavy bags on the floor and placed my hands on my hips, calling out, "Honey, I'm home!" My voice rang out through the vast open-ended entryway.

Alistair scoffed and rolled his eyes, dropping the large bags he carried next to mine.

"Childish." The word echoed from above us, and I looked up. Tobias watched us from the large balcony that lined the second floor. Sunlight streamed through the skylights, bronzing his rich ebony skin. He adjusted the cuff links on his dark blue button-up as he regarded us.

Alistair let out a low whistle. "All dressed up, are we? Has it started already?"

Tobias shot Alistair a quick smile that reached his eyes. It was one I never received from Kaden's third-in-command "You're late." His eyes cut to mine, quick as a viper's and just as venomous. "You both are."

I blew him a kiss. "Did you miss me?" I had grown used to Tobias's less-than-friendly demeanor. He had never said so, but I assumed his antipathy toward me was a result of me becoming Kaden's second-in-command when I was made. That had made Tobias third and Alistair fourth—not that Alistair cared. As long as Alistair had a home and food, he didn't care who Kaden preferred.

“Oh, but just wait until you hear why,” Alistair said. “Also, we brought dinner for the beasts.”

The beasts.

Tobias’s lips turned up as he looked at the bags surrounding us and back. “They will be grateful, but you two need to get ready. Have someone else bring it to them. We don’t have time.”

As if on cue, the creatures started to sing, and my gaze dropped to the stone floor. A chill ran up my spine at the chorus of laughter. It always reminded me of hyenas, and it freaked me out. I knew how far down they were, and it always astounded me how the acoustics worked such that we could still hear them. Miles of tunnels snaked their way into the mountain, connecting rooms, chambers, and dungeons through numerous levels.

“Is he locking them up while we have guests?” I asked, raising a brow.

Alistair and Tobias shared a grin before Alistair shook his head at me and moved toward the back of the house. Tobias pushed off the banister, disappearing upstairs as I stood there. I wrapped my arms around myself, staring at the floor as if I could see through it.

“Guess that answered that question.” I sighed.

It wasn’t like I was scared of them. Kaden had made plenty of Ig’Morruthens since his time here, but they weren’t like me, Alistair, or Tobias. They looked more like the horned gargoyles mortals plastered on their buildings. I often wondered if they had seen the Ig’Morruthen beasts and copied them in their art, trying to banish their instinctual fear of the monsters. The beasts were powerful and vicious, craving blood and flesh. They could communicate, but saying they could talk was giving them too much credit. They could mimic, but their speech was limited.

Footsteps came from the outer hall as a few of Kaden’s lackeys approached and stopped near me. I kicked the bag closest to me. “Take these downstairs and make sure they eat. I have to get ready for a meeting with the who’s who of the Otherworld.”



THE CLICKING OF MY HEELS ECHOED AS I MADE MY WAY DOWN THE winding obsidian staircase to Kaden’s main hall. I always referred to it as his “ego feeder.” It screamed megalomaniac, from the tapestries to the extravagant furniture.

Voices filled the hallway as lights flickered against the stone walls. I picked up my pace, smoothing the edges of the sleek black dress I’d thrown on. I had known I was going to be late, but I’d had to take the time to wash the blood off of me. The voices grew louder as I got closer. Fuck, it sounded like a full house.

Two more of Kaden’s lackeys stood outside the double doors of the meeting hall. They wore suits I knew they couldn’t afford, but were a part of their uniform for tonight. Kaden had promised eternal life to those that pleased him and bent to his will, but I knew they would likely be reduced to mindless beasts rather than end up as Alistair, Tobias, or I. They bowed as I drew near, and I swallowed a breath to calm my nerves. Without breaking stride, I donned the face of the Bloodthirsty Queen. It was who they were expecting, who they feared—and rightly so. She had earned her reputation over the centuries.

Voices died as soon as I stepped over the threshold and entered the massive meeting hall. There were way more Otherworld creatures here than I had expected.

Double fuck.

The dark waves of my hair draped over my shoulders and back as I held my head high. I strode toward the long obsidian table that dominated the room. It was lined with chairs formed of the same sharp stone that made up this volcanic cavern. Tall cauldrons stood against the walls, each of them holding a small flame.

Eyes bore into every inch of me, but the ones that made me hesitate were the ones that burned crimson: Kaden. My maker, my lover, and the only reason my sister lived. She was why I did every single thing he asked.

Kaden stood at the helm of the table, his hands behind his back.