**CHAPTER ONE: In the beginning…**

It was February 19th, 2005, and a steady rain had begun to fall in Los Angeles. It was cold for LA, only in the mid-50s, and the rain made it even worse for people not used to the colder weather. That was why there were no witnesses to see the curiously dressed gentleman, wearing a butler’s uniform from circa 1900, standing outside in the rain by Union Pacific Avenue. Or it could be that there were no witnesses because he was a demon, and invisible to most.

If they had been watching, though, and could see him, they would have seen a pretty sad state of affairs for a demon. His outfit, usually impeccable, was rumpled and showed a few rips and tears in places. His tie, usually a bowtie worn tight against his neck, was hanging loose off his shoulder. And he was leaning rather heavily on a cane with the silver head of a lion.

Another demon appeared on the street in front of him, a woman wearing a skin-tight black leather top tapering to a long series of leather skirts, designed to allow freedom of movement while concealing anything beneath the folds of the full-length skirts. Well, anything except the sword hilt conspicuously peeking out from the leather at her hip.

“I’ve been forbidden from seeing you again after tonight.” She let the words fall amongst the rain, not saying anything else, just studying the dignified butler’s face.

The stately demon looked at her feet, seeming weary with age for a moment. “I know,” he said. “The father felt I needed fewer distractions in the future. A further penance for tonight’s failures.”

“Aralfadorumdjangorax,” she said, addressing the butler figure. “I’m surprised you’re still alive after everything that happened. I see you had an ‘earnest’ conversation with the boy’s father?” she said, sarcastically, eyeing his bedraggled appearance up and down.

“I did,” he managed, pulling himself painfully erect and trying to maintain a dignified appearance in spite of his disheveled state. “And you called me, Ralph, once, as does the boy.”

She sighed. “This is no time for playing games ‘Ralph’. He nearly died tonight.” She seemed to be building up anger as she continued, “This experiment of yours needs to end now.”

“It would destroy him,” Ralph said, sounding like this was a tired argument he didn’t want to have again. “He has to grow into who he will become over time, not be thrust into it headlong at such a young age.”
They were in the familiar rhythms of the old argument now and Kat picked up her part with a fury, “Not embracing who he is almost destroyed him tonight, Ralph. He lost his mother! The boy’s father will kill you if anything happens to him, you know that.”

Ralph looked sadly at the demon, Kat. This was what they were really fighting over. When Ralph had agreed to take the job as the boy’s adviser, she had begged him not to do it. “Eventually, something will go wrong, and the boy’s father will blame you,” she had said. “And when that happens, he’ll kill you and I’ll lose you forever.” It was a valid point. The boy was mortal and, eventually, all mortals died. When this particular boy died, though, even if it was at home, in bed, at the ripe old age of ninety-eight, there was no chance his father would just accept it quietly. Ralph, as his chief adviser, would be the victim of his father’s wrath when that happened, no matter whether he was at fault or not.

“Please, Ralph,” she pleaded with him. “He could build a palace underground, away from human eyes. Let him grow up and learn there. Then he can emerge when he’s ready and fully trained. Having him amongst them when he’s so young is a mistake… they could ruin him, twist him into being someone he was never meant to be.”

“Or he will become someone more than just the part in the play that was written for him,” Ralph said. He looked up at the rain for a moment, as if gazing at the stars beyond the clouds and wondering what destiny was written in them. “Eternals who came before him have gained a great deal from being immersed in humanity rather than shielded from it. His father understands as much, that is the only reason he agreed to let me try this approach in the first place. And still agreed, after a bit of persuasion tonight.”

Kat has no illusions as to how much ‘persuasion’ the boy’s father had taken out on Ralph before deciding to give his approach another chance. “Where is the boy tonight?” Kat asked, switching tactics.

“Safe,” Ralph said. “He’s sleeping in the top floor of an abandoned house near here. He wanted me to stay with him as he slept, but I told him I needed to talk to a few people first.”

Kat snorted. “You call sleeping in abandoned houses safe? Ash is only five years old. How will he survive like that? Does he know what happened to his mother?” The questions came rapid-fire and with an accusing tone.

At the mention of Ash’s mother Ralph looked at the sidewalk where asphalt from the road was crumbling along the edges of the walkway. He seemed to take a long time forming his response, eventually the words came out in a sigh, “The boy doesn’t know for sure what happened, but he suspects. He asked me to help him go back to his mother several times, but I refused. I think that hurt worse than his father’s ‘admonitions’ to be more careful in the future,” he said the last with an involuntary wince, glancing at the leg he was still favoring with his cane. “In the morning, I will try to explain the situation to him truthfully and begin teaching him to survive in his new environment. It will be a difficult few days.” Difficult was an understatement. A five-year-old orphan being told his mother had died and that he now needed to learn to live on the streets? It was going to be a terrible time, and Ralph just hoped the boy didn’t blame him as much as his father did.

“How can he possibly live amongst the humans now?” Kat said. “Knowing what they did to his mother, what they tried to do to him? How do you think he will survive on the streets? If you insist on keeping him amongst the humans, at least take him to an orphanage or shelter where he can get regular meals and he’ll be kept safe.”

“An orphanage will be one of the first places they’ll look for him now,” Ralph said, watching Kat nod in frustration. “They know he’s so young and has no parents, no family. They’ll assume Ash will either be surrounding himself with followers or that he will be hiding in some foster home or orphanage while he nurses his strength. They will be searching those organizations for any clue as to his whereabouts.”

“But how will he live?” Kat burst out. She looked at Ralph pointedly. “He. Can’t. Lie. Eventually that will become a problem.”

It was true, and probably the toughest issue Ralph faced with trying to raise Ash. The boy couldn’t lie – not even for his own protection. Ash was an Eternal, and Eternals couldn’t lie. Too bad the truth might get the boy killed. “He’ll have to learn some of his father’s gift at an early age.” The boy’s father was notorious for twisting a truth so elegantly that it was almost a form of art.

“I hope he’s a fast learner,” was all Kat said in response before continuing. “Otherwise, he’ll be dead from insulting the wrong person while he’s living on the streets even before Deux te Voit can catch up to him.”

Ralph nodded. It was a problem, but worrying over it wouldn’t fix it. “How did it happen?” Kat finally asked, softening for the first time in their conversation.

“I don’t know,” Ralph said. “He hasn’t been able to talk about it yet, and I haven’t been able to piece together how Deux te Voit found him from anything I saw in their apartment. His mother was smart. She had them living mostly off the grid, with no outside contacts with her old life. I haven’t been able to piece it together yet, but I will – eventually.”

And Kat knew he would. When word of Ralph’s appointment to this position was first announced, most demons were shocked. A low-ranking demon given one of the most important assignments ever allotted? It was a scandal that shook their community. But Ralph was smart, reliable, dedicated, and, above all, loyal to a fault. Kat wasn’t surprised that Ralph was chosen for this critical role, only that the boy’s father had known enough about him to recognize the qualities that made him perfect for it. Ralph wouldn’t give up working at tonight’s failure until he found the hole in their defenses.

Kat’s body flashed once, wavering in and out of reality. “My cue that my time is up,” Kat said. “Be careful,” she called out to Ralph as she began fading away involuntarily. “And don’t let him eat too many sweets!” she added. “You know he has too much of a sweet tooth!” Then she was gone, her time with Ralph ended for now.

Ralph smiled, thinking about the cookies he had taught Ash to summon as one of his first uses of his powers. Ash’s mother had not approved of this skill and had read Ralph the riot act when she found out. All Ralph had said, for once breaking from his usually aloof butler’s mannerisms was, “A few sweets to indulge in should, on balance, be a fitting way to repay him for an entire world that wants to kill him.” It was one of the few times he ever challenged Ash’s mother, and he had expected her to put him in his place over it, but she had just sniffed and said, “Well, make sure you teach him to summon a few carrots and some broccoli as well, then.”

He missed Ash’s mother already. “Who betrayed you?” Ralph wondered, watching the rain continue to fall.