

DEMON'S  
REDEMPTION



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*Dedicated to those who share their courage  
and inspire others to venture beyond the border.*

–Sandy Samson

*Dedicated to one of my favorite writing buddies of all time.  
He always makes me laugh. Cheers Sandy!*

–Anastasia Rabiyah



## CHAPTER ONE

“**M**ommy! Look! Come on, hurry. There’s a giant green butterfly trying to get in!”

Beliana wiggled her antennae in concern as the boy pointed at her, shouting for his mother. Only an ancient, battered screen door separated them. She loosened her grip on the wire mesh, ready to swoop off into the night if it came to that. A young woman holding a dripping pan in one hand and a dish towel in the other appeared from a nearby room and knelt down beside the child.

“It’s a luna moth,” she said, grabbing his wrist just as he reached out to poke at the screen. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Beliana stretched luxuriously, pulling her wings far behind her slim body, and let go, taking to the cool night air with long, slow sweeps. She turned a circle, saw the mother and child watching wide-eyed, and gave them a graceful dip before heading toward the forest.

The moon was so bright that she caught glimpses of her shadow skimming across the ground. The warm but not yet muggy air made for one of those delicious early summer evenings that demands adventure. So when she reached the brook that bordered the forest, instead

of crossing it, she turned downstream and flitted above the shimmering water, watching her reflection dance in every ripple. The swamp critters were coming to life, calling one another to meet and greet and make new swamp life.

She passed over a particularly large and ugly toad, and circled back for a closer look. This was no ordinary toad. It was ancient, misshapen, with one crooked leg, a twisted head, and huge gray warts covering its back. It glanced up at her as she dipped low, and let out a pathetic “Harrup.”

She stopped in mid-flight and landed on a clump of marsh grass. “Is that you, Malarak?”

The toad harrapped again and lowered its head until its chin touched the wet ground.

“Come on, talk to me. What’s up?”

The toad rocked from side to side, pushing with its good leg, turning away until its back was to her.

She glanced around, sniffing the air. Another toad, smaller and healthier looking, sat on a tiny island a few feet away. After making sure no owl or other terrible beast was watching, she leapt out of the luna moth and into the young toad. The moth paused a few seconds before taking to the sky.

Beliana flexed her new muscles, getting a feel for the toad’s body while she studied her friend. Malarak seemed oblivious to the world. She slipped into the shallow water, swam silently until she was behind the old toad, and jumped, landing on top of the warty creature. Hooking her back legs under his behind, she tucked her head down and rolled into the water, dragging him along in a ball of flailing limbs.

A few powerful kicks brought them to shore. “That’ll teach you to ignore me,” she said, snorting water out of her nose.

He didn't answer, didn't pounce on her in retaliation, didn't scream, didn't laugh, didn't do anything but sit motionless, his eyes cast down.

A mosquito buzzed past, and before she knew what was happening, her tongue shot out, wrapped itself around the tiny insect, and pulled it into her mouth. She swallowed fast so she wouldn't have to taste it, and sidled up to Malarak. "Come on, what's wrong?" she asked, rubbing her head against his.

A sack beneath his chin blew itself up to enormous proportions and then collapsed, rending the air with a mighty croak that set a hundred other toads in the swamp trying to match it. "You wouldn't understand. You angels have no idea."

"And you demons have too many ideas. That's your problem. Trust me, Malarak. You don't need to plot and plan everything you do. Just take what comes along and be happy. Life's a lot better that way."

"Easy for you to say. You angels, you get everything handed to you on a silver platter. But us, we got to work for every damn thing in our lives. Nothin' comes free, and nothin's easy." A fat mosquito drifted past, so heavy that it's wildly beating wings barely kept it in the air, and Malarak's tongue zapped it. His jaw worked, and he shook his head in disgust. "Bloody beast. It just ate. I hate it when they just ate. Skunk, I think."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Poor you. I know the story. Just because you were born a demon, you think the whole universe is out to get you. That's rubbish. And enough with the silver platter stuff, already. I've been an angel for five thousand years, and I've never even seen a silver platter. I don't fit in with high society. But quit changing the subject. What's with you?"

She followed his upward gaze and saw a great horned owl watching them with hunger in its eyes. She was about to plunge into the swamp for cover when the owl's expression suddenly changed. Its

head drooped and it blinked its eyes as if fighting back tears. After a few somber seconds it spread its wings and circled to the ground, stopping in front of her while the ancient toad that had hosted Malarak a moment ago gave a terrified croak and hopped into the water.

“That’s better,” she said to the owl. “Nothing personal, Malarak, but I never did understand why you take up residence in toads. They’re ugly as sin, and besides, flies and mosquitoes taste awful.”

The owl cocked its head to the side. “Let me tell you, mice are no better. Now leave me alone. I don’t feel like talking.”

“That’s too bad. You’re gonna talk to me anyway. What happened?”

The owl hung his head for a minute before whispering. “I got a warning from On High. I must have made somebody important mad, because a prissy little angel who couldn’t have been more than a hundred years old just told me that what I did last week was going to cost me. Now the room they have reserved for me is two levels deeper. Damn.”

“What?” Beliana hopped back a step. Even though her friend was in control of the owl for the moment, being so close to that enormous curved beak would make anyone nervous. She met his sad gaze. “Malarak, you’ve been good lately. You were almost out of hell and up into purgatory. What did you do that was so bad?”

Swiveling his head from side to side, he looked everywhere but at her.

“Well?”

“Not telling. It must have been really bad, though, so I guess I’m ashamed. Why do you even like me? Angels aren’t supposed to like demons. Not good angels, anyway.”

She almost told him the truth, that befriending demons earned angels extra points, and their long relationship had already built up an enviable stash in her celestial account. But she stopped herself just in

time. He wouldn't understand. No demon would. Besides, she wasn't doing it for the points. She really liked him. Even though he was a demon, he had good intentions. Mostly. And he was far from the worst. She'd met countless demons she could never be friends with.

"I know what I'm going to do, though. I can redeem my bad thing. I've got a plan."

She tried to stop the muscle spasm that started deep in her gut, but an impertinent croak escaped her throat anyway.

"You don't believe me?"

"Oh I believe you, all right. Malarak, you just don't get it. Every time you come up with a plan, it goes wrong. I've seen it a hundred times. I know you can't help it. It's a demon thing. But you've got to try! Stop planning. Just hang out. Let life come to you. I bet if you can stay out of trouble, you'll make purgatory in a couple hundred years, tops. So forget your plan. It'll only get you in deeper."

"You haven't even heard it."

"I don't want to hear it."

The owl's head turned around until it was pointing straight backwards. "Look," he said. "There's two otters peeking out a hole in the bank. Let's go where we can have some privacy."

Beliana stared at the owl, who peered back down at her with suddenly renewed interest. Its beak opened wide. She leapt into the water just as it pounced. Swimming frantically to the deepest part of the stream, she held still until she was sure the owl was not following with outstretched talons. Satisfied, she left the toad and found the otters Malarak had discovered.

"Sorry about that," he said when she joined him.

"Like hell you are."

"I swear." He slid his soft, furry body against hers, rubbing back and forth until the electricity building between them crackled and made their whiskers twitch. "Ready?" he asked.

She noted the way those beady little eyes were ogling her sleek body. Snuggling was fine, but an angel has her limits. With a sigh, she turned so her butt hugged the wall. Malarak knew very well that jumping on her back and humping would be a grave breach of etiquette, but even the nicest demons can't always control their basic nature.

“Ready for what?”

“To hear my plan.”