

Graduation Day

A hero's life isn't made only of magic and love.

Adrienne Rayne magically opens the door to her childhood bedroom, her dress in one hand, her cap and gown in the other. She hasn't been in this house in a whole decade. And yet she hasn't aged a day past twenty. Out of instinct, she closes the windows, draws the curtains, and locks the door, even though no one lives in the house anymore. She drops her towel, catching her naked reflection in the mirror. A mural of scars covers her petite body. She sighs. Vivid memories of her battle against that... monster... flash before her eyes. His eerily infatuating voice still echoes inside her mind, over and over and over.. She places her pale hands over her ears, shutting her eyes.

And so it begins... And so it begins... And so it begins...

Enough. You won, Adrienne. He's dead.

She absentmindedly runs her delicate fingers along the scar on her chest. Her heart still hasn't changed. She doubts that she shall ever truly collapse into darkness, no matter what. Once that last thought occurs, she opens her eyes and freezes upon seeing the ghostly figure that has manifested behind her. An old enemy of hers.

Diabulos.

"Aren't you lovely today?" He grins. Adrienne's expression darkens.

"Get out of my house." Her voice is pure venom and her dark blue eyes flare with rage.

"Come now, certainly you must realize you won't be rid of me so easily." He wraps a cold hand around her throat and squeezes, dragging her into his chest. She squirms, grabbing his hand with both of hers. Her heart races. He's not just choking her; he's forcing her to look at him.

I-Impossible! How is he here? I killed him. Could he have come back to life?

Her best friend had sealed him away once; does she have to do the same? All of these thoughts—and her restricted oxygen—make Adrienne dizzy. Once he is satisfied with her panic, Diabulos relaxes his grip, allowing Adrienne to speak.

“Our battle’s over. I... I defeated you.” She lowers her hands and crosses her arms, eyes locked on his reflection in the mirror. Although she maintains a cold facade, her heart pounds hard beneath her ribs.

“Oh, Adrienne, so naive!” He smiles wickedly. Leaning in close to her, he whispers in her ear, causing a chill to run along her spine. “You cannot escape your legacy, no matter how much you wish you could.”

Waving his free hand ever so slightly, Adrienne’s reflection changes. Her skin runs blood red, almost masking dozens of open wounds. A set of sharp horns protrude from her short, wavy black hair. A pair of dark angel wings unfold from her shoulderblades, spreading wide. Her void black eyes shoot daggers at him.

She appears beaten and bloody, fresh off the battlefield.

My Red Angel...

“...What do you want from me?” she finally asks.

“You summoned me here, Adrienne.”

“I am not playing this game. Answer me. Now.”

“Very well. I am here to give you one last warning. And a choice.”

“...Explain yourself.”

“I admire you, Adrienne. I do not often say this to my enemies. You, however, are my archnemesi. You are the only one I have battled who is worthy of such high praise. And yet, even after all these years, you still refuse to exploit your infinite magical potential. You carry

reality-shattering magic in your blood, Adrienne and you choose to be a hero. How pathetic. Your pacifism sickens me. With all of your trauma and inner demons, you are a broken woman. Although... if you were to allow me access to your psyche, you could become my companion and have everything you've ever wanted."

"Companion? How could I ever love you?"

"Not love, Adrienne. Romance is worthless."

"What, then? Go on, tell me what you'd force me to do, to be."

"You'd be my companion in the sense of a loyal dog; pampered, yet obedient."

"I am not your *pet*, you sick bastard. Listen to me. I will *never* let you exploit my body or my magic. You *murdered* my friends and family. If you were still alive, I'd *slaughter* you over and over for all eternity." Adrienne's voice shakes with rage, but she recomposes herself. "I have nothing more to say to you." She could scream until her throat tears at the seams, that's true, but she resists the temptation. She won't give him the satisfaction. Diabulos simply laughs.

"Heh heh heh... You act as though you had no part in their unfortunate end. Are you not responsible—if only accidentally—for the deaths of your parents? Of your childhood friends? Of Rus? Of Rain? Of Fey?"

"I did *not* kill them."

"You're lying."

"Am I?" Unfortunately, a genuine question.

...He could be right. I've murdered hundreds of people. Could I really have...?

"Maybe not. Oh, but how could I forget your Lover Boy, Lane? I remember how much you cared for him. I am certain you still do, though he is now an empty husk of a man."

Hearing Diabulos say his name with that vicious smile sets her blood ablaze.

“How *dare* you speak his name. You *ruined* him.”

“Would you desire to have his love again?” he offers. Adrienne’s throat closes up. Being with Lane is her heart’s greatest wish. Of course, she refuses to disclose this beloved dream to her worst enemy. He’d make everything worse. After encountering Lane that fateful day, seeing his personality completely erased, his mind plagued with eternal nightmares, and his heart corrupted with shadow...

Adrienne’s own heart squeezes violently. Her shard of the Red Eye, an object of demonic magic once embedded in her soul long ago, flares with ghostly fire as though the Red Eye remains and is crying out for her beloved Lane.

Yes. More than anything.

“No.” A single word spoken with absolute finality.

“As you wish. You could be a God, Adrienne. Why waste your life on love and light?”

“...I could be cruel and merciless.”

“Yes, Adrienne. What is stopping you?”

“Hope.”

“Hope is nothing. You *are* nothing; but not to me. Give in to your desires, Adrienne, and claim your throne by my side.” Diabulos’ magic, that intense black lightning, sparks in her blood. If she doesn’t act soon...

“*Die.*” She raises her hands to the heavens. A ring of glowing white orbs appears above her head, then rains down upon the mirror, shattering it. She looks down at her hands. Her skin is pale as the moon. She has returned to her original self. Diabulos has vanished. She sighs, tears sliding down her face, quiet broken sobs escaping her.

Of all days, why did you have to come to haunt me today?

Moments later, she recovers herself and dons her outfit: a blue and white chiffon and lace dress with black stars and ribbons. Over top, she wears her black graduation gown and cap, adjusting it over her short vibrant blue hair. She picks up the pieces of the mirror with her psychic magic and slowly restores the shards. After that, she applies her makeup: black eyeliner, dark blue eye shadow, and the lightest hint of sparkly lipgloss. A spritz of perfume here and there too. She finishes by whispering a concealing spell to hide her scars. Once she's ready, Adrienne glances at her reflection one last time. Only now, her smile is genuine, her dark blue eyes sparkling. She's made it through everything: college, intense bloody battles against Diabulos and his fanatics, her shattered relationship with Lane, the deaths of her friends and family...

She's a survivor.

Grabbing her keys and phone off her dresser, Adrienne leaves.

Within the auditorium, red and white ribbons, flowers, and artwork decorate the room, along with a slideshow of senior photos projected on a big screen. Her graduation ceremony is here at long last. All of the families and friends of the 720 graduating students sit in a raised circle around the main floor. Adrienne can't believe this is really happening. Suddenly, she remembers all of her dead loved ones and Diabulos' last words.

And so it begins...

She hugs herself. Her battle against Diabulos all those years ago had taken such a toll on her, physically and emotionally. She's lucky to be alive. And yet, she'd won. Or... had she? She doesn't understand. How did Diabulos find her? How did he manifest in her bedroom? Why did he want her to join him? Could he still be alive? No. No, that's impossible... right? She clutches her head. A residual spark of black lightning rips through her body, causing her heart to quiver.

He can't hurt you anymore, Adrienne.

One of Adrienne's closest friends, Miriam, a beautiful young woman with soft, brown hair in an undercut, large brown eyes, and clear-rimmed glasses, touches her, interrupting her thoughts.

"H-Hello."

"Hey, Adrienne. Are you excited?" Miriam gives her a warm smile.

"Yeah!" Adrienne gives one in return, but tears still threaten to fall. "Sorry, I-I..."

"What's wrong?" Miriam takes Adrienne's hands in hers.

"...I miss my friends. And my family."

"I'm sorry. I can only imagine how you must feel right now."

"No need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

"And neither did you. We're all still alive to celebrate today because of you. Never forget how much you mean to me, to all of your loved ones." She smiles sweetly at her sad friend.

You always have the perfect words to cheer me up...

"Thank you, Miriam. Although, I should tell you..."

"What is it?"

"Diabulos returned. Or rather, a ghost of him did."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted me to join him."

"And when you refused?"

"He vanished. I thought I killed him..."

"You did. I'm absolutely certain."

"Maybe... How did he manifest in my bedroom?"

“You told me once that you have nightmares and hallucinations from your heroine days. You must’ve seen one of those again. A vivid one at that. Trust me; he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Y-You’re right. I defeated him. He’s gone. I’m safe.”

“Exactly.” Miriam hugs Adrienne gently. Adrienne hugs back.

“I love you. I’m sorry for everything.”

“You’re all right. I understand.”

With hearts healed, Adrienne and Miriam break the hug, smiling at each other.

“Shall we?” Miriam asks. Adrienne nods.

Adrienne and Miriam enter the auditorium together, being members of the Liberal Arts and Sciences class, as the band plays. Adrienne carries the honorary banner of the school; her decorated cap, her black gown, and the graduation sashes of her highest accolades seem to shimmer with magic in the light.

She’ll make her family and friends proud. She’ll make them all proud.

A grand welcome and opening remarks are spoken, followed by the school’s anthem. Adrienne watches and listens diligently for her name; she is to be summoned for an inspirational speech. She’s keeping a set of notecards in her hands. She’s going to give the commencement address, and the student speech. Such a privilege comes with being a hero, she supposes.

“Would Adrienne Rayne please join me on stage?” the school president asks. She shyly walks down the aisle and onto the stage. “Adrienne here is one of our best students. She’s been involved in a number of on-campus organizations and received top grades in all of her classes. She is also Cobalt Phoenix, the leader of the heroes who defended Audria. I’ll now let her speak on her experiences and give the graduating class any words of advice for the future.”

Gripping her notecards, she stands behind the podium.

You can do this, Adrienne.

“Beloved Class of 2033, I stand before you as your sword, your shield, and your friend. I sense your relief, and especially your excitement upon realizing your hopes and dreams have been reached, as our days here draw to a close. All of you have fought unspoken battles: mental health issues, overwhelming classwork, romantic and platonic relationships, financial burdens, endless job searching... and I’m here to say that every single one of you has survived. Yes, you may have changed over these several years, but you are stronger, kinder, and hopefully even happier than you were before. I am proud of every single one of you, even if we have not openly met. Maybe you’ve heard of who I am: my name is Adrienne Rayne. Years before I enrolled here, I saved our planet Audria from complete annihilation. I never thought I’d see the light again, or be here now to celebrate. I have spent much of my life in battle against monsters who dare to threaten the lives of those I love. Most of my childhood friends and my parents are dead now... Survivor’s guilt is indeed real, and I’d never wish it on my worst enemy.”

She pauses, Diabulos’ last words still echoing in her mind.

“Yet... no matter how much I struggled, I’d remind myself who I fought for. My parents, my pets, my friends, and now, I am determined to protect all of you from anyone who’d dare to try and hurt you. Let today symbolize joy, love, and peace: three of life’s greatest virtues. I celebrate each of you for all of your achievements, no matter how small they may seem to you. You are alive, and that is the greatest gift I could ever hope to receive from my days as a hero. Congratulations, Class of 2033!”

Momentary silence meets her. Suddenly, the entire crowd bursts into wild applause and cheering. Once more, tears threaten to spill down her face.

Can you see me from up there? I made it. I have my degree at long last.

“Well spoken, Adrienne. We’d like to present you with one of the highest honors of our school: the Arcane Moon Prize.” Adrienne blushes, humbly accepting the award. “Now, by the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees, would the graduating students please stand as they are called and come up to receive their diplomas?”

Adrienne’s memory of the rest of commencement is a blur; before she has time to let everything sink in, the ceremony ends. Her friends and their parents snap dozens of pictures to celebrate the moment. Adrienne and Miriam and a few other friends of theirs decide to continue the festivities at her favorite restaurant, still dressed in their caps and gowns. For the first time in nearly twenty years, Adrienne laughs with pure joy. She cannot see her parents or her friends with her shiny, vibrant blue eyes, but her heart can sense them smiling down on her with love and admiration.

We’re so proud of you, Adrienne.