



Darkness Unbound

By Keri Arthur

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The fight against darkness rages on for the next generation—in *New York Times* bestselling author Keri Arthur’s exciting new series set in the world of the Guardians.

Being half werewolf and half Aedh, Risa Jones can enter the twilight realms between life and death and see the reapers, supernatural beings that collect the souls of the dead. But she soon makes a terrifying discovery: Some sinister force is stealing souls, preventing the dead from ever knowing the afterlife.

Reapers escort souls—not snatch them—but Risa is still unnerved when a reaper shadows her in search of someone Risa has never met: her own father, an Aedh priest, who is rumored to be tampering with the gates of hell for a dark purpose. With the help of her “aunt”—half-werewolf, half-vampire Riley Jenson—and an Aedh named Lucian who may have lost his wings but none of his sex appeal, Risa must pursue whatever shadowy practitioner of blood magic is seizing souls, and somehow stop her father . . . before all hell breaks loose.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Keri Arthur, author of the *New York Times* bestselling Riley Jenson Guardian series, has now written more than twenty-five books. She's received several nominations in the Best Contemporary Paranormal category of the *Romantic Times* Reviewers' Choice Awards and recently won *RT's* Career Achievement Award for urban fantasy. She lives with her daughter in Melbourne, Australia.

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Chapter One

The house still smelled of death.

Two months had passed since Mom's murder, but the air still echoed with her agony and I knew if I breathed deep enough, I'd catch the hint of old blood.

But at least there were no visible reminders. The Directorate's cleanup team had done a good job of removing the evidence.

Bile rose up my throat, and I briefly closed my eyes. I'd seen her—had seen what had been done to her—and it haunted me every night in my dreams. But in many ways, those dreams were also responsible for me finally being able to walk through the front door today.

I'd done enough remembering, and shed enough tears. Now I wanted revenge, and that wasn't going to happen if I waited for others to hunt down the killers. No, I needed to be a part of it. I needed to do something to help ease the ferocity of the dreams—dreams that came from the guilty knowledge that I should have been there for her. That if I had, I might have been able to prevent this.

I drew in a deep breath that did little to steady the almost automatic wash of fury, and discovered something else. Her scent still lingered.

And not just her scent. Everything she'd been, and everything she'd done—all her love and energy and compassion—filled this place with a warmth that still radiated from the very walls.

For the first time since I'd scattered her ashes in the hills that she'd loved, I smiled.

She would never entirely be gone from this world. She'd done too much, and helped too many people, for her memory to be erased completely.

And that was one hell of a legacy.

Still, despite the echoes of the warmth and love that had once filled these rooms, I had no intention of keeping the house. Not when all I had to do was step into the kitchen to be reminded of everything that had happened.

I walked along the hallway, my boots echoing on the polished marble floor. Aside from the few items of furniture placed to give prospective buyers an idea of each room's size and purpose, the house was empty. Mike—who'd been Mom's financial adviser and was still mine—had made all the arrangements, talking to the real estate people on my behalf and shifting most of the furniture into storage so I could deal with it later. Only the items in the two safes remained untouched, and that was a task only I could handle—although it was the one thing I'd been avoiding until now.

I drew in a shuddery breath, then slowly climbed the carpeted stairs. Once I reached the landing, I headed for Mom's bedroom down at the far end of the hall. The air had a disused smell. Maybe the people employed to keep the house spotless until it sold hadn't been as generous with the deodorizer up here.

But the soft hint of oranges and sunshine teased my nostrils as I walked into Mom's bedroom, and just for a moment it felt like she was standing beside me.

Which was silly, because she'd long since moved on, but my fingers still twitched with the urge to reach for her.

I walked across the thick carpet and opened the double doors to her wardrobe. Her clothes had already been donated to charity, but somehow seeing this emptiness hit me in a way that the emptiness of the other rooms had not. I'd often played in here as a kid, dressing up in her silkiest gowns and smearing my face—and no doubt said gowns—with her makeup.

She'd never once been angry. She'd always laughed and joined the fun, even letting me do her face.

I swiped at the tear that appeared on my cheek and resolutely walked into the bathroom. Most people wouldn't think of looking for a safe in an ensuite, which is exactly why Mom had installed her second one here. This was where she'd stored her most precious jewelry.

I opened the double doors under the basin and ducked down. The safe was embedded in the wall and visible only because all of Mom's makeup had been cleared away.

After typing in the code, I pressed my hand against the reader. Red light flickered across my fingertips; then there was a soft click as the safe opened.

I took a deep breath, then sat and pulled the door all the way open. Inside were all her favorite items, including the chunky jade bracelet she'd bought the last time she was in New Zealand, only a few weeks before her death. There was also a stack of microdrive photo disks and, finally, an envelope.

There was nothing written on the front of the envelope, but faint wisps of orange teased my nostrils as I flipped it over and slid a nail along the edge to open it. Inside was a folded piece of paper that smelled of Mom. I took another, somewhat shaky breath and opened it.

I'm sorry that I had to leave you in the dark, my darling daughter, it said, and I could almost imagine her saying the words as I read them. Could almost feel her warm breath stirring the hair near my cheek. But I was given little other choice. Besides, I saw my death long ago and knew it was the price I had to pay for having you. I never regretted my choice—not then, and most certainly not now, when that death is at my doorstep. Don't ever think I accepted my fate placidly. I didn't. But the cosmos could show me no way out that didn't also involve your death or Riley's. Or worse, both of you. In the end, it just had to be.

Live long, love well, and I will see you in the next life. I love you always. Mom.

I closed my eyes against the sting of tears. Damn it, I wouldn't cry again. I wouldn't.

But my tear ducts weren't taking any notice.

I swiped at the moisture, then sat back on my heels. Oddly enough, I almost felt better. At least now I knew why she'd refused to tell me what was going on. She'd seen my death—and Riley's—if we'd intervened. And I would have intervened. I mean, she was my mother.

And as a result, I'd have died.

Her death still hurt—would always hurt—but a tiny weight seemed to have lifted from my soul.

I glanced down at the letter in my hand, smiling slightly as her scent spun around me, then folded it up again and tucked it into my pocket. That one piece of paper was worth more than anything else in her safe.

I scooped up the remainder of the jewels, but as I rose, awareness washed over me. Someone—or something—was in the house.

I was half werewolf, and my senses were keen. Though I hadn't actually locked the front door, I doubted any humans could have entered without me hearing. Humans tended to walk heavily, even when they were trying to sneak, and with the house almost empty the sound would have echoed. But this invader was as silent as a ghost. And it wasn't nonhuman, either, because in the midst of awareness came a wash of heat—not body heat, but rather the heat of a powerful presence.

An Aedh.

And he was in spirit form rather than physical.

My pulse skipped, then raced. The last time I'd felt something like this, I'd been in the presence of my father. Of course, that meeting had ended when two Aedh priests had gate-crashed the party in an effort to capture my father—who'd fled and left me to fight the priests off alone. Needless to say, the odds had been on their side, and I'd been taken and tortured for information. And while my father might not have led me into the trap, he still bore some responsibility for it. It was him they wanted, not me.

Hell, everyone wanted him. The Directorate of Other Races, the vampire council, and the reapers.

And they all were intent on using me to get to him.

Which pissed me off no end, but there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. Especially given the deal I'd made with Madeline Hunter—the woman who was not only in charge of the Directorate, but also one of the highest-ranking members of the vampire council. Of course, she had managed to catch me at a vulnerable moment. She'd arrived uninvited as I said my final good-bye to Mom, had heard my vow for vengeance, and had all but blackmailed me into becoming an adviser to the council. In exchange, they would throw their full resources behind finding Mom's killer.

I hadn't walked away from the deal yet—not when finding Mom's killer might well depend on the information the council could give me. They might be using me to get to my dad, but I sure as hell intended

to return the favor.

Not that they'd given me a whole lot so far, but then I hadn't done a whole lot for them, either.

Still, instinct said that would change quickly now that I'd set my sights on finding the killer.

Sometimes, having psychic skills like my mom totally sucked. Although I guess I had to be thankful that mine were nowhere near as strong as hers had been.

The sensation of power coming up from the floor below was growing stronger. Whoever it was, they were closing in fast. I needed help, and I needed it now. And the only person I could call on so quickly was the one person I was trying to avoid. Azriel—the reaper who was linked to my Chi. I hadn't heard or seen him since Mom's death, and part of me had been hoping to keep it that way.

I should have known fate would have other ideas.

Of course, Azriel wasn't just a reaper. He was a Mijai, a dark angel who hunted and killed the things that returned from the depths of hell—or the dark path, as the reapers preferred to call it—to steal from this world.

But what he hunted now wasn't a soul-stealer or even my soul.

He—like everyone else—was looking for my father.

And all because my father and his fellow Raziq— a secret subgroup of Aedh priests dedicated to finding a way of preventing demons from being summoned—had created three keys that would override the magic controlling the gates, allowing them to be permanently closed. And if the gates of hell were permanently locked, no souls would be able to move on and be reborn. A good percentage of the babies currently born into this world contained reborn souls, so it was a possibility that terrified me. Because without a soul, they would be little more than lumps of flesh, incapable of thought, emotion, or feeling.

Of course, what could be closed could also be permanently opened, and I had no doubt there were those who would also welcome the hordes of hell being set free.

The one good thing that had come out of this mess so far was the fact that my father had apparently come to his senses late in the development of the keys. He'd arranged for them to be stolen and hidden, but he'd been caught in the process and punished by his fellow Raziq, and the people who'd hidden the keys had offed themselves before they could tell anyone where they were.

Hence everyone's interest in me. I was currently the only link to my father and—according to my father—the only person capable of not only finding the keys, but also destroying them.

Although he had yet to explain just how.

Azriel, I thought silently, not wanting to alert whoever was approaching that I was calling for help. I knew from past experience that Azriel could hear thoughts as well as spoken words. If you're out there, come fast. There's an Aedh in the house and it could be my father.

He didn't answer; nor did the heat of his presence sting the air. Either he had given up following me or

something else was going on.

Which was typical. There was never a fucking reaper around when you wanted one. I took a deep breath that did little to calm the sudden flare of nerves, and said, “Whoever you are, reveal yourself.”

“That, as I have said before, is impossible, as I can no longer attain flesh.” The reply was measured, cultured, and very familiar.

Because it sounded like me. A male version of me.

My father.

“The last time you and I met, the Raziq came running. And that was your fault, by the way, not mine.” I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall. The pose might appear casual, but every muscle quivered, ready to launch into action should the need arise. Not that I’d have any hope against a full Aedh—I knew that from experience.

“I have taken precautions this time.” His cultured tones reverberated around the small room, and his presence—or rather the energy of it—was almost smothering. “They will not sense me in this house just yet.”

“Why not? What have you done this time that’s any different?”

He paused, as if considering his reply. “Because I was once a priest, I emit a certain type of energy. If I remain stationary for too long, they can trace me.”

Facts I knew, thanks to Azriel. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Wards have been set. They not only give misinformation as to my whereabouts, but they will prevent any beings such as myself from entering.”

Hence Azriel’s failure to appear. Reapers were energy beings, the same as the Aedh.

I didn’t bother asking how’d he’d actually set the wards when he couldn’t interact with this world, simply because he’d undoubtedly had his slaves do it. Or rather, his Razan, as the Aedh tended to call them. “And are you sure these wards will work?”

“Yes. I have no wish for you to be captured a second time.”

So he knew about that—and it meant he was keeping a closer eye on me than I’d assumed. “So why are you here? What do you want?”

“I want what I have always wanted—for you to find the keys.”

“And destroy them?”

“That goes without saying.”

Did it? I really wasn’t so sure. “You haven’t yet told me what will happen when the keys are destroyed, and

I'd prefer to know that before I do anything rash." Like endanger the very fabric of my world.

The heat of him drew closer. It spun around me—an almost threatening presence that made my skin crawl. And it wasn't just the sheer sense of power he was exuding, but the lack of any sense of humanity. This was a being who'd worn flesh rarely even when he was capable of it, and who had no love or understanding for those of us who did.

Which made his desire to find and destroy the keys even more puzzling. Why would he care what would happen to this world if the keys were used? He wouldn't. Which meant something else was going on. Something he wasn't telling me.

Although I wasn't surprised that he was keeping secrets. That seemed to be par for the course for everyone searching for these damn keys.

"I am sure that when the keys are destroyed, everything will remain as it currently is."

"But aren't the keys now tuned to the power of the gates?"

Or the portals, as the reapers preferred to call them. Apparently there was only one gate into heaven or hell, with each gate consisting of three interlocked portals. Each portal had to be locked behind a soul before the next one opened. It was a system that prevented those in hell from escaping—although it wasn't infallible. Things still escaped when enough magic was used either in this world or the other.

"They are," my father said. "Destroying them should sever the link, and the gates should remain intact."

It was those shoulds that were worrying me. "You know," I said slowly, "it seems that it would be a whole lot safer for everyone if these keys were to remain as they are—indefinitely hidden."

Energy surged, making the hairs along my arms and the back of my neck rise. "Do you honestly think the Raziq will let matters lie?"

"Honestly? No. But they can't kill me if they need me to find the keys."

"Then what about your friends? Such a move could place them in peril."

"Not if I let the Raziq grab me. Once they realize I can't help them, I'm guessing they'll forget me and start concentrating on you again." After all, he might not know where the keys actually were, but he had some general knowledge of where they'd been sent, and he knew what they'd been disguised as.

Although admittedly, handing myself over to the Raziq wasn't at the top of my list. I'd barely survived their interrogation the last time.

The threat in the air was growing stronger. My father's energy was so sharp and strong that it hit with almost physical force. Part of me wanted to cower, but the more stubborn part refused to give in.

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