

## Saints and Sinners

### Chapter 7

The man stood tall, his hands behind his back. Regarding Jack with amusement and curiosity. At his feet, shadows twirled and writhed slowly. A monochrome man in a fancy black business suit, hair swept back neatly. Only his irises held colour.

Blood red.

The exact same shade as the symbols around the ring.

Jack glanced down at his finger, at the alien symbols slowly rotating around the base of it. His skin – his entire body – was coated black, just like always.

"Who..." Jack's head snapped up, locked eyes with the man. "No, *what* are you?"

"Good," the man smiled, flashing white teeth. "You're not running away this time. Very good."

A long moment of silence.

Jack remained motionless. Heart frozen between beats. Lungs filled with air he didn't need. He stared at this man made from shadows, at those glowing red eyes.

"I am," the man said at last, watching Jack intently, "beyond your comprehension. The best word to describe me, I suppose, would be 'demon'. The truth of what I am is far more complicated than that. But, for the time being, 'demon' is accurate enough."

"Demon," Jack repeated, feeling a stab of fear.

"That's what I said, yes."

"Wh- What do you want with me?"

The shadow man smiled.

"I want you to prove me right," he simply said.

Jack shut his eyes. Focused.

If the thing wanted to harm him, it would have done so already. That was, if Jack could even *be* harmed while he was wearing the ring. It didn't seem to want to attack him, didn't seem confrontational or aggressive in any way.

*Prove me right.*

What did *that* mean?

His eyes snapped open, took in the sight of the shadow thing – the 'demon' – again.

"Prove you right how?" He asked, relaxing.

"That's not something you need worry about, Jack," the shadow man smiled. "All you need to do is keep being you."

Jack took a step away from the shadow man, turned to look at Drake Damilio. A traditionally handsome guy. Tall, strong, smiling. An asshole, frozen in time, covered in an unnatural light.

"Why are you protecting him?" Jack demanded, turning back to the shadow man with a glare. "What's the deal with the light and the shock I got when I tried to touch him?"

The man's eyes flicked to Drake, his expression turning thoughtful.

"That is odd. Usually it takes months or even years for an encounter. For it to happen this soon? It's unprecedented."

"Huh?"

"That aura around your friend-"

"He's not my friend!" Jack snarled

The man smiled, continued. "That aura around your not-friend. The light that's protecting him. It's not *my* doing. Curious that she's chosen someone so close by. It's very unlike her to be so up front and confrontational."

"She *who*?" Jack snapped. "Enough with the ambiguous shit! Give me answers."

"Oh-ho!" The shadow man chuckled. "What happened to scaredy-cat Jack? You went from shitting yourself and running away to being bold and brave very quickly, didn't you? Do you hate your not-friend so much that you've forgotten to be afraid?"

Jack said nothing, just glared at the shadow man.

"Fine, fine. You want answers? So be it, Jack. Listen closely."

The amusement bled from the shadow man's face.

"I am darkness incarnate. A god, or demon, or monster – whichever you prefer. The personification of evil, if you will. I am primordial; as old as time itself. And that black ring of yours? I am the one who gave it to you."

Jack glanced down at his finger and those red symbols.

The ring. He'd found it in his bathroom. It'd fallen out of his own pocket, though how it'd gotten in there he couldn't have said.

"It, in a way, is me. And I am it," the shadow man continued. "It is my power. My ability to influence the world. Anyone who wears it may use my power to their heart's content – it is theirs to do with as they please. The power to touch minds, to alter them and play with them and warp them. You've only scratched the surface of what that ring can do. With it, you could wake someone from a coma or mend a demented mind. Likewise, you could turn a genius into a fool or make any woman yours. No cost. No price. Just raw, pure power. And it's all yours."

"Why?" Jack whispered. "Why me?"

"Because, Jack, you belong in the dark."

It was too much for Jack to take in at once. He began pacing in the small clearing. Frozen people all around. Curious and happy and awed faces. And, in the middle of that clearing, a man covered in unnatural brightness.

Drake Damilio. Who should've been in hospital, broken and crippled.

"What about *him*?" Jack nodded towards the frozen bully. "Why can't I touch Drake?"

"He's been claimed by another," the shadow man smiled.

"Another? What do you mean?"

"Yours isn't the only ring," the shadow man said, red eyes twinkling. "Every colour has its reflection, and for every shadow there must be a light."

He didn't go home after school. Nor did he go to the store Sally Saunders worked at, or to Alyssa's home. Instead, he wandered the streets without a destination in mind. Pretty soon, he was lost – had no idea where he was or where he was going. But that didn't matter.

Two rings. Black and white. Darkness and light.

There was a lot the shadow thing wasn't telling him. The demon had its secrets, that much Jack was certain of. But, from what it *had* told him, Jack had a vague idea what it all meant.

Two rings than granted supernatural powers to their wearers.

One could alter a person's mind, the other could alter a person's body. One 'evil', one 'good'.

The aura of light around Drake – that was the same as the dark shadows that passed over anyone Jack altered. It was the inverse. A sign that a person had been altered by the white ring. Which, given what Jack had been told about the other ring, made sense.

Whoever owned the white ring had used its powers to repair Drake's broken body.

*'Her chosen and mine have a tendency to kill each other.'*

A comment the shadow man had shared. Enlightening, but also concerning. On the one hand, Jack had a valuable piece of information. On the other, being murdered did *not* sound fun.

He frowned, focused on the information.

*'Tend to kill one another.'*

Meaning there had been people 'chosen' before Jack and whoever now possessed the white ring.

The shadow thing had called itself primordial. Ancient.

How many people had possessed the black and white rings before? From what he'd been told, Jack assumed both rings must be given out in unison – both the shadow man and his opposite choosing champions at the same time.

There was someone else out there. Someone with the white ring. Someone close by.

*'Tend to kill.'*

Surely, if the rings had been handed out to a lot of people in the past, there would be records of it. People using magical powers to heal the sick and injured and-

But there *were* records like that. Religious ones.

Saints and the like. Stories going back thousands of years. Entire faiths founded around the idea of magical healing.

Did the person who possessed the white ring think like that?

Did they see themselves as a saint?

What would that make Jack, in their eyes?

*Kill.*

Whoever the white ring holder was, they were not a friend.

They'd healed Drake Damilio.

That made them Jack's enemy. Pure and simple.

He had to find them. Remove them and their ring from the equation. End the threat before it could *become* a threat.

Easier said than done.

"I've only scratched the surface, huh?" He asked the empty air around him. "My ring can do a whole lot more than I've been using it for..."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out the black metal object.

"Demon, huh?"

The decision was instantaneous. The moment he stopped to think about it, he had his answer.

White rings and counterparts and Drake and being killed? All that shit could wait. For the time being, none of it mattered. At the end of the day, the black ring was Jack's main concern. He had to learn it. Master it. *Become* it.

He needed practice. And a lot of it.

Jack stared at the ring a moment longer. Then, knowing exactly who he wanted to test the ring on today, he slid it onto his finger.

Getting himself un-lost had proved simple enough. All he'd needed to do was touch the minds of a few random people, search through their recent memories for directions. True, he could have easily whipped out his phone and gotten directions that way. But where would've been the fun in that?

If time hadn't been frozen, it would've been a good forty-minute walk from where he'd been to his destination.

He looked up at the house, nodded his head, strode forward.

Alyssa was, just like the last time he'd visited, in her bedroom – hunched over a drawing tablet. Wearing a casual t-shirt that bulged outwards over her chest, hair tied back in a bushy ponytail. Her body was, just as he'd left it last time, coated in an unnatural shadow.

Jack stepped up to her, placed his hand on her arm.

A black cloud extended from her head.

"I wonder," Jack mused, looking up at it, "is this where 'thought clouds' in cartoons come from? Some previous Ring owner who also happened to be an artist starting the trend."

He reached up, touched it.

Concentration. Focus. And, deeper, a sense of uncertainty and of self-loathing. A

feeling of not being good enough.

New clouds spawned from the first.

"You said I can do other stuff. Make new memories 'n' all that. How? What do I have to do?"

He turned, looked at the darkest shadow he could find.

"I know you're here, demon. Come out."

The shadows moved, coalesced.

A moment later, the shadow man was standing there, head tilted to one side with a smile tugging his lips.

"How do I make new memories?" Jake asked, turning back to Alyssa.

"Creating new, purely artificial memories is time consuming and difficult," the shadow man said after a moment of silence. "For what you're planning, there is a better approach. Instead of fabricating memories from nothing, you'd be better off altering memories that already exist."

Jack shook his head. "I've already been doing that. Moving emotions from one memory to another. It's taking too long."

"No," the shadow man said, a smile clear in his voice. "All you've been doing, Jack, is re-contextualising memories. Changing what a memory means for a person while keeping said memory intact and unchanged. Truly altering memories is something different."

"How do I do it?" Jack asked, then he frowned. "No. Don't answer that. I'll figure it out myself."

He reached up, grasped one of the memories above Alyssa's head.

It played out in his head. He was looking down at a decent drawing of a man, though the drawing's eyes were uneven and not quite the right size. Other parts of the drawing were off too – lines that were slightly in the wrong places, parts of the body that were disproportionate. A decent, if imperfect, drawing.

Jack ignored the emotion clouds that extended out of the memory. He pulled it away, snapped its connection to the root cloud, focused on the memory itself.

An imperfect drawing.

"How..." He whispered to himself.

Uncertainty. Feeling like she wasn't good enough. A lack of confidence in her abilities.

To Jack, the imperfections of the memory drawing were insignificant. Barely worth noting. But to an artist, to a girl who was so unsure of herself and who so desperately wanted to be good at drawing, each flawed line must be an accusation. A voice in her head telling her how bad she was.

"How do I *change* it..."

The shadow thing had called itself a god. It'd also said that Jack, while he was wearing the ring, had access to its powers.

Which meant Jack had the powers of a god.

"How..."

He closed his eyes, let the memory play on repeat in his head.

The image of the drawing. The flaws. The imperfections.

It was a drawing of some anime boy. Jack wasn't familiar with the character, couldn't say who it was supposed to be.

He focused on the lines, the curves and angles. And he *moved* them. Nudged them around, inch by inch. In his mind, the image of the anime boy shifted and warped, became a tangled, formless mess of black lines.

And, as the memory played over and over in his head, it began to shift – mirroring Jack's mental image.

He grinned at the small victory.

But he didn't open his eyes. Didn't stop.

He could make a drawing into a mess. Alter the memory in that small, insubstantial way. But what did he *gain* from that?

Nothing.

He pictured a blank canvas. No lines. No mess.

And, slowly, the memory shifted to match his vision.

A memory of nothing. A white canvas. A blank slate.

"Forget anime boys and that bullshit," Jack said, forcing a new image into his mind. "I'm sure you'd much rather draw a *real* man, wouldn't you Alyssa?"

As the memory repeated over and over again, a new image took form on the blank white. A face – far more detailed and accurate than the drawing that'd been there before. Lines formed, a sketch of a face that Alyssa knew better than just about anyone else. Her father's face.

When he was done, the memory was the same; yet different.

Instead of an image of an anime character, the drawing was of Alyssa's father. Smiling, handsome, detailed, flawless.

Jack returned the memory to the root cloud.

He stared up at it, hummed thoughtfully.

"I'm going to need a 'pride' emotion cloud," he said to himself. "Gotta make her feel happy with herself for drawing him too. An 'affection' cloud too? What'd be best combination..."

Behind him, the shadow thing watched silently. Glowing red eyes filled with amusement.

"What's your name?" Jack asked as he walked home.

The shadows at his feet swirled, warped. In an instant, the shadow man was walking alongside him; hands behind his back, eyes forward.

"I don't have one," it said. "Or, I suppose, I've had many."

"Yeah, yeah," Jack grumbled. "You're old and you've been with a lot of people. Like a hooker granny. What do you want me to call you?"

"Whatever you'd like," the shadow man shrugged, smiling wide.

"Hmm..." Jack thought for a moment. "How about Damien?"

Again, the shadow man – Damien – shrugged.

"Is your counterpart a 'demon' like you?" Jack asked.

"In your terms," Damien smiled, "she would be more akin to an 'angel' than a 'demon'. She is the light to my darkness, the-"

"I'ma call her Angela then," Jack interrupted. "Damien and Angela. And your two magic rings. You said the person with the white ring is going to try to kill me."

"I implied they *might*," Damien smirked. "My chosen and *Angela's* chosen tend to have their disagreements. And those disagreements often end with one or both face-down in the dirt."

"There's a good chance, at least, that whoever has the white ring is going to try to stop me at some point, right?"

"Yes," Damien nodded. "I guarantee it."

"Then I need to know what I'm up against," Jack said. "Tell me about the white ring. What can it do? What's it capable of?"

"It is the opposite of your ring," Damien said, nodding to Jack's hand. "Where the black has absolute power over the mind, the white has equal power over the body. It can heal, or it can break. It can grow or shrink. It can strengthen or weaken. The most impressive thing one of her champions has ever done with the white ring was fake his own death."

Jack glanced at Damien, waited.

"He plucked a hair from his head," Damien grinned, white teeth shining. "And, using that strand of hair as a template, grew an entire replica of himself. A clone, so to say. A mindless vegetable – the white ring holds no power over minds. He rammed a spear into his replica's chest, fled into the night, and successfully tricked my champion into believing he was dead."

A thought occurred to Jack. An idea.

"Is it possible to wear both of the rings at once? Has anyone ever gained both powers at the same time?"

Damien looked at Jack, stared for a long moment.

"Yes," he said, no longer smiling.

Jack opened his mouth to ask another question – a follow-up. But before he could speak, Damien broke apart, collapsed into shadows once again.

"Guess that conversation's over," Jack sighed. "Oh well. Not too far from home anyway. Might as well take the ring off here, since *someone* doesn't want to be helpful right now."

Jack tugged the ring off his finger, took in a breath of fresh air as colour returned to the world. A flowery scent, the hum of an engine as a expensive, deep green sedan drove past, the jarring feeling of his heart resuming its beat, blood pumping through his veins.

He slid the ring into his pocket, continued walking.

Two rings with opposing - yet complementary - powers. And it was possible for one person to own and use both simultaneously. The ability to modify peoples' bodies as well as their minds...

Jack grinned.

Whoever had the white ring; they'd exposed themselves by helping Drake Damilio.

It was someone nearby. Someone who knew Drake. Cared about him.

The list of people that fit those two criteria couldn't be *too* long. All Jack had to do was make a list and tick names off one-by-one.

He'd find them.

And he'd claim the white ring for himself.