

DUSK OF DEATH

AN ARMEN LEZA, DEMON HUNTER NOVEL
BOOK I OF THE ARMAGEDDON TRILOGY

BY

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Dusk of Death: an Armen Leza, Demon Hunter novel
Book I of the Armageddon Trilogy

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*Demons, detectives, and a forensic scientist who has fallen from Hell. Hell
wants her back. Let the demon hunt begin.*

All hope is not lost.

—Origen



CHAPTER ONE

Evil Things

Armen Leza should be dead.

A hazy cloud of nothingness fogged her mind from when she had become flesh a few years ago. One moment she'd been a demon; the next, human skin graced her ancient bones. All that had been in between was missing.

When she'd fallen from Heaven, cast out by her Father, her memories hadn't faltered.

Not.

One.

Moment.

She had fallen into the Darkness while screaming for her murdered child.

The Darkness changes people, makes them go cold inside. She had forgotten about her child. She'd forgotten about everything. One day, someone pulled her from the dark and gave her purpose.

Being a demon had taken some getting used to. Growing accustomed to her human shell was slow-going at best, but she'd get there. That wasn't to say she liked it very much. Something about being human didn't feel . . . right. Of course, neither had the demon form.

She sat in her usual spot on the sofa staring at one of the decades-old paintings, ruminating on events she could never change, clawing after the past and holding onto the memories that stirred the fire within her, until the phone's ring scattered her thoughts like dust particles escaping a ray of light.

Several moments later, dusk settled as the last few beams of daylight snaked their way through the edges of worn shades. Terry Armstrong had hung up on her – again. In truth, Terry was never much for goodbyes; he didn't give the send-off to someone until they were dead, so he never said the farewell to the living. Armen assumed he thought saying that one little word invited bad luck, and she found the quirk rather entertaining, even if his calls usually weren't.

She set down the phone and shuddered, the chill running up her spine and into the nerve center of her brain having nothing to do with the night air. As she was the medical examiner who specialized in the occult, work calls usually meant bad news, even if they were rare, but something in Terry's voice this time made the hair on her arms stand on end. She thought she

had picked a quiet profession to live out her human existence. She'd much rather return to her ruminating thoughts. The emotions at play within her human form bounced around, back and forth between her millennia of experiences and her current situation with a certain detective. The emotions were distracting, to say the least, since they were quite different from angelic or demonic, or warrior emotion, or the lack thereof.

She'd been a warrior once. A beautiful flaxen-haired badass warrior, not unlike the Valkyrie.

The memory blinked away and she made her way to her bedroom, changing into a pair of old faded jeans, tank, and a hoodie, and reached for a pair of shoes—some no-name brand of black and white sneakers she'd bought dirt-cheap at one of the big retail stores. Armen knew the family behind the stores quite well. They had been on her list in the days of old, before her flesh.

Armen had seen Hell; fire and brimstone were nothing compared to the Darkness—a plane that sat on the edge of Hell.

Hell was comparable to a metropolitan city much like New York but surrounded by a river of fire. It was the outskirts a person wanted to steer clear of, the other planes of existence just outside the ring of fire. That was where the real monsters lay in wait. And Armen would know, for she'd been sent there in the beginning, before she became demon and was allowed to ride the flames.

Far worse than the Bottomless Pit of Abaddon, or Sheol, the Land of the Dead, was Gehenna—a place all feared. The Darkness there would consume you.

She pulled on her socks and shoes with a shudder of remembrance, fetched her car keys from the table, and jogged down the stairs to her Jeep. The sky bore several shades of purple that turned midnight black as she sped off into the darkening twilight toward Terry's new case hoping she'd reach her destination before the chief arrived.

* * * * *

Armen climbed out of her Jeep, disgruntled and shivering. "Is *he* here yet?"

"Good evening, sunshine," the man greeting her said with a lop-sided grin. A homicide detective with the Phoenix Police Department, Terry Armstrong had been a pain in her ass since the day they'd met. Unfortunately, she enjoyed it entirely too much.

"Why's it so freakin' cold?"

"It's wintertime, Armen."

"It's a desert!"

"Where are you from again?" The comical grin spread across his face, suiting him well; his eyes always held wit. He was tall with a close-shaven head. Tattoos covered his muscular arms and, Armen suspected, other places as well. She thought he was insane for wearing only a T-shirt under his Kevlar vest.

"Hell," she said harshly. Calling it by any other name would only confuse him.

Terry laughed. "With that snippy attitude of yours, it wouldn't surprise me." He stepped closer, his six-foot-three frame towering over her. "Where's your coat?"

"I left it at home. I didn't think it'd be this damn cold. I mean, shit, a hoodie should be enough in a desert wasteland."

He withheld his laughter, though a small snort escaped him. "Wait here. I'll get one for you." He came back to her and held out a coat dangling from his fingers. After she slipped it on, he handed her a cup. "I thought you might like this too."

The scent of the brew reached her nostrils before her hand took the cup. "Thanks, Terry."

"Anything for my favorite medical examiner?"

"What are you buttering me up for?"

"Nothing. I can't say you're my favorite medical examiner?"

She cocked her head to the side and sent him her best 'you can't be serious' look. "Why in the world would I be your favorite medical examiner? Better yet, why would you even *have* a favorite medical examiner?"

He laughed again. "My, you're touchy tonight. Didn't sleep well today?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "The days are too short," then sipped her coffee. She crinkled her nose as the burnt caffeinated beverage slid over her tongue.

He nodded. "Then you must love summer."

Again, she shifted her head from left to right, her long blonde ponytail swishing as though it were a pendulum. "The nights are too short."

His boisterous laugh echoed in the surrounding area. "A no-win situation for you, then?"

"Pretty much," she replied. "I'm screwed either way."

"Come on," he said. "If you want to see this before *he* gets here, we'd better hurry." He took her by the elbow and started to lead the way.

She jerked her arm from his grasp. "I am not a child who needs to be coaxed into the mouth of Hell, Terry."

He gave her a blank stare, his eyes completely devoid of emotion, before continuing forward. "Your choice of words always amazes me, you know," he said as they neared the building. "I mean, who says something like that, really?"

"I guess I'm alone in my vernacular."

Terry chuckled. "Is that your word of the day?"

She grinned. "No, actually the word of the day was *wisenheimer*, and amazingly, it had your picture next to it."

"Ah yes, well, I am quite photogenic," he replied with a toothy grin.

Armen fought the urge to roll her eyes. "So, tell me what I'm about to see."

He shook his head. "Nah, I'd much rather see the look on your face when you see it without prior description."

"Damn, it must be bad." Especially if he wasn't telling her; he really got a kick out of watching her face twist into different expressions. According to him, the more grotesque the description, the higher her brows went.

"No, *unique* would be a more appropriate word." He stepped through the door.

That did not make her feel any better about the prospect.

She followed him but stopped short in the doorway, wrinkling her nose as she caught a familiar odor. The squalid scent slithered uninvited into her nostrils, and she had to force herself to move forward, despite the inclination to purge her last meal.

Terry paused, a quizzical expression morphing his features momentarily. "You okay?"

"Fine." She took another sip of the singed coffee, mostly to have the brew's aroma dominate the other odor.

"He's in here." Terry headed for a bulky, steel sliding door standing partially open on the west wall of the warehouse. He pulled on the large handle. The door creaked and screeched as he heaved it open.

The scent of copper filled her nose and coated her tongue in a thick slime, and she gagged on the rancid air before barely stopping herself from turning tail and running away.

"Jesus Christ," she whispered when the scene paraded before her. She winced; using the divine name could bring trouble, given the scent she'd picked up moments ago. The real world of cops and robbers and twisted murderers wasn't ready for supernatural of the religious variety yet. Not that they ever would be.

"Told you it was unique," Terry said. "Some damn weird occult shit, though, eh?"

Right, that's what we'll call it. She shifted her eyes from the scene to Terry's face. "That's an understatement."

The man hung on the freestanding wall, pinned by nails piercing his stretched skin. He still lived, if one could call it that. As Armen stepped toward the door's track, the victim shrieked; startled, she spilled hot coffee over her hand, cringing as the liquid scalded her skin.

This skin . . .

He stopped suddenly, and Armen studied the wall.

Ancient symbols, drawn in blood, surrounded his crucifixion pose. Razor wire encircled the entire scene so no one could go near. The man's head dropped forward, but he wasn't dead—yet.

"He keeps doing that," Terry said. "But he's not talking. We've tried. Makes noises, though. Maybe they cut out his tongue?"

"Perhaps." It wouldn't surprise her one bit; the symbols told her what kind of evil was at play. "Why did you call me? He's not a corpse."

He cast a glance down at her. "The occult shit. You have a knack for it. I figured you would know what all this meant."

She turned her attention back to the hanging man and sighed. "The symbols, they're demon script."

"See what I mean?"

"Terry, this is a very bad situation."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me that. We need to figure out how to get him down."

"He's not meant to come down. If you attempt it, he'll most likely die, and horribly, as well as anyone who attempts to remove him."

"What could possibly be more horrible than what he's already been through?" He abruptly raised a hand as she opened her mouth. "Wait, don't answer that."

Armen shook her head. "I take it no one's searched the area?"

"Nope. Didn't know what would happen," Terry replied. "Barnes started to head straight for him, but I stopped him. I remembered that one, you know, a few months back, where you told me about the trigger that set it off and killed that woman?"

She remembered it vividly. The first officer on the scene had made the mistake of trying to rescue the woman and ended up in the psych ward after losing his right arm and watching the woman and her unborn child die. Half of the fetus had landed at the officer's feet.

A veteran officer like Terry wouldn't have been so easily broken, but then again, there was something different about him. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

"Yeah, well, I figured this one might be the same. I was hoping to find a way for the vic to *not* die this time." His right brow hitched upward. "Any ideas?"

She thought about it, clicking her tongue a few times. "Not unless I can walk in there and look around."

"You just told me —"

"I know, but I'm not stepping near that." She pointed at the razor wire.

He chewed on his inner cheek. "If Chief finds out, he'll kill me."

"If I don't, the victim will hang on that wall until he's dead, and then you can set off the trigger into a corpse."

Terry sighed heavily. "I trust you. Go . . . but don't set the damn thing off!"

She grinned and set down the coffee. "What, do you think I'm an amateur at this?" She carefully stepped forward, eyeing the entire room for any type of trigger based on motion.

"And be careful," he added.

Armen nodded in silence. The concern in his voice was too much for her to deal with. Terry liked her, she knew that, but she wanted nothing to do with anything remotely resembling a relationship outside of work. She just didn't have the time, or the interest, in such pursuits. The last one destroyed everything she'd known. She wasn't about to make that mistake again.

Finding nothing that would set the trap off if she stepped inside, she took a step over the door's track. When nothing happened, she exhaled and circled around to the right, where she noticed a small gap — an inch or so — between the wall and the floor. She crouched and put her head to the floor to see underneath. The wall appeared to be holding itself up. This had dark magic written all over it and there was nothing she could do to reverse the multiple spells she sensed. It was too much and would take too long —

"See anything yet?" Terry said loudly.

She nearly jumped out of her skin and placed her finger to her lips to shush him. He said no more as she stood and walked around the back of the wall, carefully avoiding the razor wire.

A skittering sound behind her traveled rapidly toward the small elevator shaft to her right. She pivoted in time to see a distinct trail of red smoke winding around and into the shaft.

"What was that?" Terry shouted, nervousness layering his voice.

Armen peeked around the wall and glared at him, pointing at him and then cupping her hand around her ear.

He nodded and waggled his hands in a gesture that virtually screamed how nervous she was making him.

Armen smiled at him. She hadn't thought anything could make Detective Terry Armstrong nervous, but she had detected it in his voice before she'd stepped away from him. She turned her attention back to the scene, trying to determine how the contraption would work if triggered and just where in the hell the trigger was.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a stocky man walk up to Terry.

"Armstrong."

"Johnson," Terry replied and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"What's she doing?"

"Trying to figure out what the trigger is."

"Ah, letting your woman do your work for you, huh?"

Terry twitched at Johnson's comment. Armen slipped behind the wall again. She was no man's woman.

"Well, she's probably the only one who can figure it out, Johnson," Terry's voice bounced off the empty walls. "Unless, of course, you have some clue as to how to get this man out alive?"

Silence.

"Are you sure? I'd be happy to let you have a go at it," Terry said. "You could walk in there yourself."

Armen headed to the right, following the fading red smoke.

"Nah," Johnson answered with a shake of his head.

"I didn't think so."

A short, sharp whistle pierced the air, and Armen stopped to look back at Terry. She hated it when he did that. She furrowed her brow and nodded in the direction of the shaft. Terry shook his head, and Armen wrinkled her nose in a mock growl. He couldn't see the red smoke.

"ARMSTRONG!" The shout came from behind him, and Terry and Armen both jumped.

Armen threw her hands up. "Damn it!" Why bother staying silent anymore? She was the only one doing so. It's not like any of them knew what they were dealing with, right? Of course not, because they're *human*. "Idiots."

"What in God's name is *she* doing here? I'd recognize that damn Jeep anywhere! Unless you've got a damn corpse on your hands . . ."

"Shit," Terry said and waved Armen over to him as he turned to face his boss. "Chief, you got here damn fast. I thought the freeway was closed?"

"You're full of shit, you know that, Terry?" Chief Brian McNeil walked up and quickly scanned the scene. He froze when he saw Armen standing near the shaft. She barely refrained from waving. "Get her out of there. She's cluttering up the crime scene."

Armen crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes. Opening her mouth was not a good idea when it came to the chief.

"She's trying to find the trigger so we can save this guy," Terry said.

"The hell she is." Brian took a step toward the scene, past the track of the sliding metal door.

The hanging man screeched in agony. His head flew back and hit the wall.

An unseen force grabbed Armen's arm, her flesh beneath sizzling like it had been touched by the fires of Hell, and yanked her backward into the shaft. She hit the steel elevator cables, and a loud twang echoed as she descended into darkness. The victim's screams followed her down in a garbled mess as she struggled to control her fall. Her leg banged against the side, and a scream of her own ripped from her throat before she landed hard at the bottom of the shaft.

A dust cloud mushroomed around her. She coughed out a moan and covered her mouth and nose, keeping her eyes closed until the dust could settle.

She could hear the chief's shouts. "For Christ's sake, what's happening to him?"

Terry's voice sounded over some racket she couldn't quite place, like metal rapidly moving against a hard surface. "I'd step back if I were you. We don't know the razor wire's purpose."

It was too dark to see past the opening she'd fallen through. She attempted to stand, but her leg wouldn't hold her. Not wanting to risk the elevator car rushing down to crush her, she pulled herself out of the shaft, dragging her bum leg out of the doorway.

"Armen," Terry yelled.

She felt along the floor, crawling to a nearby wall and leaning against it, rocking her head back, and biting her lower lip to keep from screaming again from the pain shooting down her leg. Rattling from a metal gate reverberated down the shaft before she heard Terry's voice. "Shit."

A beam of light penetrated the darkness of the elevator shaft, sweeping its walls. For one heart-skipping moment, the beam hit red scales.

"ARMEN!"

Armen gasped, stunned by the revelation of what had pulled her down. "Son of a . . ."

"Get everyone back," Terry shouted.

A flashlight clattered out of the shaft, bouncing and spinning, offering glimpses of her surroundings. Large square columns, three across and at least four deep, marched across the cavernous cellar. A growl, a shout, and a curse – and a large shadow detached itself from the darkness.