

Unrepentant  
by  
Matthew Ciarvella

*"And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels battled with the dragon, and the dragon and its angels battled but it did not prevail, neither was a place found for them any longer in heaven. So down the great dragon was hurled, the original serpent, the one called Devil and Satan, who is misleading the entire inhabited earth; he was hurled down to the earth, and his angels were hurled down with him."*

— **Revelation 12:7-9**

## **Part One: Ashariel**

### **Chapter One**

I noticed something odd right after I escaped from Hell; I was standing in a graveyard wearing a man's body.

He screamed at me, the man I wore; his voice was silent and furious but his lips did not move because they were my lips now. I did not want him to scream at me.

"Please be quiet," I said. It seemed the appropriate thing to say.

He did not listen. He continued to scream. I couldn't understand what he was saying so I decided to ignore him.

I turned my attention outward and examined my stolen body. My body was of average height and build. My body had short brown hair and a face that angular and lean. My hands were soft. I wore inexpensive clothes. I could walk and run.

This body was acceptable even if it was wrong for me. It didn't matter though. Wearing a man would not make me one, not unless I wanted it to make me one. I knew what I was.

I'd never taken a host before. It felt wrong. It *was* wrong. Frail and mortal though he might be, he was still an individual being and he was supposed to own himself in mind and body. I'd taken that from him. Why had I done that? I tried to remember and that was when I lost myself for a time.

There is a woman standing before me in the darkness. All I can see are her glowing green eyes. Two gleaming orbs of emerald light pierce the darkness.

It's the first light I've seen in a long time.

Time to wake up, she says.

She touches me, gathers me in her embrace.

She carries me.

I realize what's happening.

She's taking me out.

She's taking me out of Hell.

And then, just like that, I'm out.

Just like that, I'm free.

I was back in the graveyard. The only light came from the sad yellow glow of nearby streetlights. If anything, they seemed to make it worse, the erratic illumination preventing my human eyes from properly adjusting to the cloudy, starless night. I saw rows of old tombstones, many of them untended.

My host's voice broke into my thoughts again. He'd gone from screaming to crying now. His grief buffeted me in waves and it was so violent and unrestrained that I lost track of where he ended and I began. It took a moment for me to collect myself. I had to push him out of me.

He couldn't stay here with me. I couldn't have this lost, despairing soul clinging to me. He'd distract me, perhaps even destroy me. His emotions would *infect* me. His words would change me. I couldn't allow that to happen.

I had to remain as I was. I had to be Ashariel.

I had to end him.

I told myself it was the humane option. He didn't want to live like this. He didn't want to be

a prisoner in his own body. This was not temporary. I was never going back to the Pit. I was here in the mortal world for good and to stay in the mortal world, I need a mortal body. I needed *this* body.

At least he wouldn't be trapped. Oblivion was better than a cage. It was better to die free than live imprisoned.

It would not hurt. I would be gentle.

I held him. Invisible fingers closed around the tiny human spirit buried deep within my stolen heart. He was so small. His spirit flickered like a candle that was about to go out. His power was so tiny compared to mine. He didn't have a chance and that wasn't fair. But I wasn't the one that had made it that way.

"Sorry," I said.

## Chapter Two

I tried to extinguish the little candle that was all that remained of his soul.

The soul resisted me. *He* resisted me.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

No, that *could not* happen.

I tried again. Again, he resisted.

I could not believe it. He was resisting me. He was clinging to his shell with an unbreakable determination, a stubborn resistance. It was impossible. How was he doing it? How could he do it? He wasn't stronger than me. How was this happening?

I had to know. I had to ask him. Was I being cruel? Was I toying with my prey before killing him? But he wasn't prey anymore, was he? He'd already shown a surprising reserve of strength. What else could he do?

I had to know.

"Who are you?" I asked.

*What is this?* he asked. *What's happening to me?*

His voice manifested as thoughts in my head. It was strange to hear his mental voice mingling among my own thoughts. It was almost like I was talking to myself.

Almost.

"You've been possessed," I said. It seemed like I should offer a better explanation, so after a moment, I added, "Please try to be calm."

*I'm supposed to be dead,* he said. *Why am I still here? Why aren't I dead? Is this Hell?*

Despite myself, I smiled. “I promise you, we are not in the Pit.”

*I’m supposed to be dead*, he said. His mind filled with images that were discordant and chaotic and he overwhelmed me. For a moment, our minds wove together and I was there, with him, reliving what I realized were my host’s final moments:

*There’s a man in front of us, he’s holding something, what is he holding? He’s got a gun.  
He wants money.*

*Please, I have money. I have my wallet right here. Don’t shoot me. I’ll pay. I have a family.*

*I try to give him the wallet. Something goes wrong.*

*There’s a bright flash, a loud noise. There’s a sharp pain in my chest.*

*He shot me? Oh my god, he shot me.*

*I’m able to see his face for a moment. It’s not a man; it’s a boy, a skinny teenager with rotting teeth. Did he mean to do that? Why did he do that?*

*I want to know why he did that but my mouth doesn’t work anymore.*

*And then it’s very cold.*

*Fade to black.*

*Darkness.*

Our minds unwove and I was myself again. I looked down at my hands and arms. I saw that I was covered with dirt. I looked down and saw that I was standing above a fresh grave.

My grave?

*Michael Stroud, August 1 1983—May 2 2013.*

*Beloved brother, cherished son.*

“Michael,” I said. “Your name is Michael.”

I began to understand. The voice in the darkness had brought me out of the Pit and put me in a dead body. Had she meant to do that? Had she known that this would happen? Was it fate or chance that had brought this mortal to me?

*Please*, he said. *Just tell me what’s happening. I don’t understand what’s happening to me.*

He sounded calmer now. The hysteria was beginning to bleed from his voice. He was getting control of himself.

There was still so much I didn’t understand about him. Why hadn’t his soul moved on? He should have crossed over to one of the other realms at the moment of his death. I had to know what was different about him. The voice in the darkness had given me this mortal for a reason, I *knew* that she had.

I had to speak with him. I had to talk to him directly.

I shifted myself out of the real world and directly into my host’s mind. The graveyard vanished. A blank white room appeared in its place. My host’s mind appeared in the middle of the room as a projection of his own body.

“What?” he asked. His voice was audible now. “Where am I? What is this?”

I couldn’t speak to him as a disembodied spirit. All worlds have rules, even imaginary ones. If I wanted to speak to him in such a world, I would have to make myself part of it. I needed a form of my own. I needed an avatar.

The form of a slender, dark-haired woman rose up from my memories.

Yes. This is who I’d been one or at least, this had been my mortal mask. Most angels



created them for one reason or another. Some chose terrifying and monstrous visages, forms that inspired fear and awe in those that beheld them. Others chose more humble shapes. This one had been mine. I'd liked being her.

Her face was gentle and her dark grey eyes were intelligent and alert. I'd worn her form over myself in happier times.

Her long dark hair hung to her shoulders. Her skin was pale and smooth. Her body was slender. I was pretty, perhaps even beautiful. She wore a blue dress of a soft fabric that rippled and flowed around her like water.

"Such vanity," I said and sighed. This mask felt good. She felt appropriate. She was much more suitable for me than the masculine body that served as my host.

I slipped into my mask and appeared in the white room.

Michael looked at me. His mouth worked several times before he said anything.

"Wow," he said. "You're really pretty."

"I can wear any form I desire," I said, "but I appreciate your compliment nonetheless."

"Oh," he said. "So that's not your real body?"

"No."

"What do you really look like?" he asked.

"I don't look like anything," I said.

He looked from me to the white walls of the room and then back to me. "Where are we?"

"We're inside your mind," I said.

"That's troubling," he said. "I wouldn't have expected my mind to be quite so empty."

There's probably a joke in there somewhere."

"This is only a very small part of your mind," I said. "It is a projection I created to speak to you."

"I see," he said, although I was certain he didn't understand. "Who are you? Can you tell me what's happening to me?"

Did I owe him my name? There was power in names and it was dangerous to give them away.

No, I didn't owe him anything.

But some part of me wanted him to know me, wanted him to know who and what I was. Maybe it was the same vanity that led me to adopt a beautiful avatar for myself. Vanity and pride were two signs of the same coin, after all, and I could not deny that I was proud. I loved my name. I *wanted* it to be spoken, even if it was only spoken here within this mortal's mind.

"I am Ashariel," I said.

My name, when I said it, filled me with pleasure. It was a lovely word. It was mine. It was *me*. It was the only thing I'd ever really owned.

What was I doing? What was I *thinking*? Why was I even *bothering*?

I didn't know and though it struck me as odd, I didn't care.

"My name is Ashariel," I said again, more confident even as I embraced this most peculiar kind of madness. "I am a fallen angel."

"You're a *what*?"

I stood there, in the blank white expanse of the room that existed only in my host's mind,

and waited.

“Wait, okay,” he said after several long, deep breaths. “Explain something to me. I remember the stories from the Bible; most of it, anyway, the important parts. Don’t lie, don’t kill, don’t jerk it or you’ll go blind. I don’t remember the part where angels possessed people.”

He looked at me and laughed. It was a harsh and bitter sound, tinged with hysteria. “Wait, but you’re not an angel, are you?” he asked. “You’re a demon. No, you can’t be a demon. You told me we’re not in Hell. Unless you lied to me! Demons can lie, can’t they?”

It only took a glance. He looked at me and saw the cold anger in my eyes. He realized his mistake.

“I am a fallen angel,” I corrected him. “I am not a demon. It’s an important distinction to me.”

“Sorry,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”

The anger in my eyes faded and he visibly relaxed.

“Did you bring me back?” he asked. “Is that why I’m alive again?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I said. “I’m sorry. I wish I could provide you with the answers that you seek, Michael, but I’m afraid that I have just as many questions as you do.”

“You know my name?” he asked.

“I read it on your tombstone,” I said.

“Ah,” he said. “That’s kind of creepy, when you say it out loud like that. ‘My tombstone.’”

“I didn’t choose you for a host,” I said. “I didn’t choose for any of this to happen. Someone helped me escape from the Pit. I woke up here. I think she placed me in your body.”

“Could she be another angel like you?” Michael asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe. She felt different, though. I think she is something else.”

“What else is there?” Michael asked.

I shrugged. “There are several ranks of angels,” I said. “I was from the lowest rank, before my fall. There are the other Fallen who now call themselves demons. And there are other things, older and darker things, that call the Pit home as well. We shared our prison with many things.”

“Like what?” Michael asked.

I closed my eyes, fighting not to remember. “I’d rather not say.”

He looked around and sighed. “Well,” he said, “thanks for bringing me back to life. Even if it was just an accident, I wouldn’t be here without you.”

The earnestness of his gratitude caused me to look away. I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I’d tried to extinguish his soul. I’d tried to kill him.

“I can’t let you go, Michael,” I said. “I’m sorry for that. I can’t exist in your world without a physical body. I need yours.”

“Does that mean I’m your prisoner?” he asked. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“That’s not good enough, Ash,” he said. “What gives you the right to—”

“Ashariel,” I interrupted. “Not Ash.”

“What does it matter?” he asked.

I couldn’t tell him what this would do to me. I needed a host body and I couldn’t make him leave. That meant I was stuck with him. I couldn’t let me know that he did have one small measure

of power over me; the power to change me.

“That’s too hard for me to say,” he said.

“It is not that hard to say,” I said.

“Well, I like Ash better,” he said and smirked at me. “What are you going to do about it, take over my body and trap me in a white room with no windows or doors? Oh wait.”

I was about to say something in reply, but at that moment, the door of a nearby mausoleum exploded outward in a shower of rubble and I realized that we were in danger.

### Chapter Three

I drew back to the surface of my host's mind and looked out into the real world. I was vaguely aware that Michael somehow managed to follow my flight and was now looking out of my eyes as well. Just one more surprise from the mortal. I would figure it out later.

A skeletal man stood in the ruined door of the mausoleum. His face was rotted and discolored. I saw bones protrude through his arms, his shoulders, and his neck. The left side of his face was gone and his mouth was curled in a rictus grin.

As I watched, flesh crawled over his exposed skeleton and began to fill in the bones with new muscle and sinew. A new face emerged from the corpse-mask, handsome and charming. The few remaining tendrils of white hair that clung to his skull turned golden and grew into a thick, full mane. It took only a few moments for the corpse to resemble a living man.

Despite his handsome build, everything about him, his face, his stance, everything seemed slightly *off*, as though it were a body sculpted from some one's idea of what flesh should have been in its ideal form.

"Hello, Ashariel," the man said. He nodded politely.

"Gabriel," I said.

"I wish I could say it was good to see you," he said. "I wish I could say the same. Are you here to kill me?"

I gathered my angelic power and summoned my wings. Michael's body rippled as wings grew out from his shoulders. Each wing appeared to be hewn from metal rather than flesh and consisted of overlapping blades instead of feathers. Though my wings had once been golden and

bright, now they were the color of dark steel. Despite their tarnished appearance, the edges gleamed in the darkness, the blades of each wing still as sharp as razors.

“You still wear them,” Gabriel said. “Interesting.

“It’s part of who I am,” I said.

“Who you were,” Gabriel said mildly. “Not who you are now.”

“So you say,” I snapped. I angled my bladed wing towards him. “Well? What do you want?”

He was experienced at maintaining a human face and did not visibly react. “I bring a message from the Almighty.”

A message? I blinked. I hadn’t been expecting a message.

“You weren’t sent here to kill me?” I asked.

An amused expression flickered across his face. “No, Ashariel, I was not sent here to kill you,” he said. “Not yet, at least. It is amusing to know that you are still so defiant, even when it serves no purpose.”

“You always underestimated me,” I said.

“No.” His voice was sharp. “Michael always *overestimated* you. I knew exactly what you were, even then, and subsequent events have not proven me wrong.”

“Say what you came here to say,” I said angrily. “I have a lot on my mind right now.”

“Do you now?” he asked. “Freshly escaped from her prison and already our little Ashariel is filled with schemes. That was an interesting trick that you pulled, slipping through the Pit as you did. I look forward to learning how you managed it.”

I didn't answer. How could I explain it to my zealous brother when I still didn't understand what had happened? Something had come for me, something that lived in the darkness and was neither angel nor demon. Other things lurked in the dark, things that I did not have names for. Our world had become a very different place from the one Gabriel thought that he knew.

Gabriel's voice took on a different tone, then, one that was far older, far more magnificent, far more terrifying and potent, and I knew that it was an echo of Father's own voice, exactly as had been communicated to Gabriel from on high.

REPENT FOR THY SINS, WAYWARD DAUGHTER AND BE SPARED, Gabriel said.  
ELSE THOU SHALT BE RETURNED TO PERDITION.

"Repent?" I asked. I felt white-hot fury lance through me. "I haven't paid enough for being on the losing side of a just rebellion?"

"That is Father's message," Gabriel said, his voice returning to normal. "It has always been his message. Hell lasts only as long as you will it to be so." He stared at me. "But I can see your heart, Ashariel, and I know that even now, even after so many thousands of years in the Pit, you will not admit that you were wrong. You refuse to kneel."

"I will never kneel again," I said.

"Still so defiant, little sister," Gabriel said and shook his head. He held out his hand to me. "Come. I will escort you personally back to the Pit, to ensure that no harm might befall you. The others will not take kindly to your absence, I am sure."

"I appreciate your mercy, Gabriel," I said.

"Father's mercy," Gabriel said. "Not mine. If it were up to me, you would all be put to the



sword.”

“Charming,” I said and gestured with my wing to get the Archangel’s attention. “But I want you to listen to me now, O Messenger of God.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “Do not do this, little sister.”

“Tell Father that I while *appreciate* his mercy,” I said, “I will not kneel, I will not repent, and I will not go back. Not now, not ever. I have paid for my crimes in full. What I do now is my business, not yours and not Father’s.”

Before Gabriel could react, I unleashed my power in an explosion of light. The remains of the mausoleum collapsed around us and buried Gabriel in the rubble.

“Ashariel! Stop!” the Archangel roared as he clawed his way out of the debris, but I was already moving. I leapt beyond the broken crypt and snapped my wings out to my sides. I caught the air and surged upwards. I soared into the night sky and lost myself amongst the clouds.

The night air was cold against my stolen skin as I flew and for a long while, there was nothing else. I’d gotten the drop on Gabriel and gotten out before he could pick up the chase.

I knew he would be hunting me now. I knew I could elude him for a time if I stayed on the move. There were techniques that the Fallen had learned that could mask our presence from our brethren, at least for a time.

The chase would not, *could* not go on forever, however. Sooner or later, I would run out of places to hide and he would find me. But at least I had some time.

For a while, I focused only on the flying. There was a city below me and its lights glittered like jewels in the darkness. It was a cloudless night, crisp and cool with a sky was full of stars.

There was a voice nagging at my thoughts, one that did not belong to my host. It was my own anxiety gnawing away at me. Where I was going to go? What I was going to do? I could fly from this problem, but not forever. There wasn't anywhere I could go in this world where I would not be within Heaven's reach.

I had to find the green-eyed woman. The voice in the darkness had freed me for a reason. I had to figure out what that reason was. I had to find her.

"You haven't said anything for a while," I said to my host.

*I still can't believe this is happening,* Michael said. *What was that guy?*

"An archangel," I said. "A very pissed off Archangel who has every reason to hunt me down and drag me back to the Pit in chains."

*That doesn't sound good,* Michael observed. *What happens to me if they take you back?*

"You're alive and whole again," I said. "You'll remain that way until something kills you or old age decays you."

*That's good,* Michael said.

I didn't add that it was likely Gabriel would destroy my host body to prevent any chance of escaping him again. I didn't feel cruel enough to add to my host's troubles at the moment.

He was dealing with his situation surprisingly well. I could feel his anguish, his confusion and his turmoil. Although he wasn't voicing his concerns aloud, inwardly he was frightened, lost and uncertain. He didn't fully comprehend what was happening to him. Part of him suspected it was a terrible dream. Part of him thought he was going mad.

He would work through it. I could sense that much about him. Whatever strength he

possessed that prevented my attempt to dislodge his soul from his own body would see him through this turmoil as well.

I'm not sure how long I flew or how far. The sky had begun to brighten around me with the first hint of dawn.

The graveyard was now many, many miles in my wake. The land below me had become far more sparse, far more brown and dry, and great mountains rose up out of the earth. These jagged spires caught the light as it began to creep across the horizon and turned bright scarlet in the cold morning air.

Beautiful.

Nestled among mountains, I saw another human city sprawling across the landscape. I adjusted my wings, fluttered a few times, and began to descend. I landed behind a collection of thorny plants and my wings faded away. My appearance was once more that of a normal person, albeit one who was wind bitten from flying, numb with cold, and with several broken bones from the violent speed of my escape.

*Cactus*, Michael said. He'd said surprisingly little in the past few hours. *The spiky plant is called a cactus. I think it's a prickly pear.*

"How very useful, thank you," I said. I was feeling particularly irritable.

*Really?* he asked.

"No," I said.

I was tired. A human body, even one augmented by angelic possession was still fragile and finite. It still needed food and it needed rest.

I walked until I found a sign that declared MOTEL in glowing red letters.

*You'll need to check in at the front office, Michael said. That might be tricky. I doubt I have my wallet with me. My credit card's probably been canceled anyway.*

I ignored him. I walked until I found an empty room at the far end of the row.

*Maybe you could do something cool like phase directly through the wall or teleport to the other side, Michael said. He sounded hopeful.*

I shook my head and stared intently at the door handle. There was a click as the little mechanisms moved into the proper places. I pulled the door open.

*That works too, Michael said.*

"It's harder for Gabriel to track me if I limit how overtly I wield my power," I said.

*How can he sense that? Michael asked.*

"Imagine that your world is a pool of water. I can impose my will on the world and change its rules, but it creates ripples. Larger changes, larger displays of power; these create larger ripples that are more noticeable."

*Tell me more, Michael said. I want to understand.*

"I'm very tired," I said. "Perhaps later."

I kicked off my shoes with my feet and fell onto the bed, still in my clothes.

I drew the blinds closed with a thought and plunged the room into a gentle darkness. I collapsed back against the pillow and closed my eyes.

## Chapter Four

When I awoke, I wasn't in Michael's body. I was wearing the form of my avatar.

I sat up from the bed and saw that I was in a very different place from the dingy motel room with its stained carpet and lumpy furniture. The bed beneath me was actually some kind of tree, its branches woven into a frame that supported the mattress.

The world around me was a verdant paradise. Everything was soft and green. There were trees and plants of countless types all around me. The air was foggy and thick, though surprisingly cool despite the humidity. I couldn't see more than a few dozen feet in any direction.

A woman stood a short distance away from me. Her face was lovely and her figure was voluptuous and shapely. Her red hair hung down to the small of her back. Her eyes were an emerald green that stood out against her pale skin. Her pupils were vertical, like those of a snake.

The eyes.

I recognized her by her eyes.

"You," I said. "You're the one who freed me."

"I am," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "Who are you?"

"It is very exciting to meet you, Firstborn. "We don't see many of your kind here in the Path."

"Firstborn?" I asked.

"It's my name for your kind," she said and tapped a long finger against her chin. "You call yourselves other names, of course, but I like this one better. I think it suits you better."

“My kind?” I asked. “You’re not an angel, then.”

“No,” she said with a smile. “I am something else.”

“Where are we?” I asked.

The woman giggled. “We aren’t anywhere, really. And yet, we are everywhere, aren’t we?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“Everything in this place has power, everything has worth,” the woman said. There was a glint in her eyes that reminded me of a predator. She was hunting me, I realized, though her trap would be wrought of words, not weapons.

“You have so many questions,” she said. “I might have answers. For it to be fair there must be an equal exchange. You cannot have something for nothing. That is not the way it works here.”

“What is it that you want?” I asked.

The woman smiled. “A question will get you only a question. But give me an answer, and I shall give you an answer. Does that sound fair?”

“I’m not in the mood for games,” I said.

“You’ll want to play this one,” the woman said. “I promise. You just might learn a thing or two. Perhaps even learn something about yourself.”

I considered. Maybe she was right and I would learn something valuable. “Fine,” I said. “I will play your game.”

“Usually, when we make a deal,” she said, “it should be sealed using the Old Way.”

I smirked. “A kiss,” I said. “I know a thing or two about sealing a pact. Fallen angel, after

all.”

“Have you made many such deals with the mortals?” she asked, eyebrow raised in curiosity.

“No,” I said. “Never.”

“Why not?”

“I do not need to justify myself to you, creature,” I said. “Sufficient to say, I had no taste for such things.”

“As you wish. But would a kiss be so terrible?” she asked and batted long eyelashes at me. Her full lips curved in a grin.

“It is unnecessary,” I said. “We both know that such things are little more than theatrics. If we are agreed, nothing more is needed. We are both bound.”

“You presume to know much,” the woman said, her voice sly. “You assume that I am something like you, something like a Firstborn that must always adhere to a Pact no matter what. Perhaps I have free will?”

“I doubt very much that you do,” I said. “Only humans have free will. If you were human, I would know.”

“Ah, very true, Firstborn,” the woman said. “Very well, then. We are agreed. Ask and be answered, Firstborn.”

I thought about it for a moment. The question I most wanted to ask her, of course, was how she had freed me from the Pit, if she was indeed my mysterious benefactress. My instincts told me that this was the same being as the one whose eyes I had glimpsed in the darkness. She was playing

some sort of game and I was going to be part of it, whether I wanted to be or not. I decided to proceed cautiously.

“Where are we?” I asked.

She smiled kindly. “Physically, we are wherever you were before you strayed onto the Path. This all inside your head or rather, it’s inside the head of the mortal boy whose flesh you now wear.”

“What are you talking about? If we were in the mortal’s mind, I would know.”

“If we were in his conscious mind, that would be true,” she said. “But the human mind is much like an iceberg in the water. No matter how much there might seem to be above the surface, there is so much more hidden below the water. You may rule over his conscious mind, but this is the subconscious. This is the place of dreams and here, I am its Queen. Now then, I believe it is my turn.”

Her answer had only provoked a dozen more possible questions, but I felt the insistent tug of the agreement drag across my mind. I would have to wait.

“Ask your question,” I said.

“What is your name?” she asked at once. When she saw my expression, she grinned wryly.

“It is not my fault that you neglected to specify which questions were off limits,” the woman said. “Perhaps you should have been more careful.” Again, the predatory expression flickered across her face.

Damn it, I thought. If I gave her my name, it could be very dangerous. She might use it to hold power over me. I closed my eyes and cursed myself for my complacency. I should have been



more careful before agreeing to the game.

I felt the coercion build up in my mind with growing pressure. If I tried to delay, the pressure would crack through my will. I couldn't even lie to her. There was nothing I could do except answer honestly.

"I am Ashariel," I said in a low voice.

"A very lovely name," the woman said. "Ashariel." I shivered as she pronounced it. She looked at me and smiled. "Just trying it out."

"It's my turn, then. Tell me your name," I said quickly. I hoped that if I could learn her name the way she'd learned mine, it might be able to nullify any advantage she'd gained over me. That was assuming, of course, that names meant the same to her as they did to me, but if she was telling the truth about being a creature of the subconscious mind, it seemed likely that she was subject to the same rules and limits as I was.

"Clever," the woman said. Her smile never wavered. "I am called Morrigan."

Morrigan. At least now I knew the name of my mysterious benefactress. Perhaps I could use that knowledge to defend myself.

"Your turn," I said.

She nodded. "A simple question this time," she said. "Yes or no will do. Would you serve me willingly if I asked it of you?"

"No," I said promptly. "I will never again kneel to another. Not willingly."

I thought about asking her why she wanted to know about my willingness. She had my name. Perhaps she wasn't strong enough to force my cooperation. Or perhaps she didn't want an

unwilling pawn.

“The next question is yours,” she reminded me.

“Of course,” I said. “You called yourself a Queen.”

“*The* Queen,” Morrigan said.

“The Queen,” I said. “What exactly are you the Queen of?”

She regarded me, her expression regal. I felt pride gather within her even before she spoke.

“I am Queen of the Dreaming Path and the Fey. You do not know the Fey, do you? I can see it in your eyes.”

I shook my head. Perhaps my silence would draw more information out of her.

“We are the dreams of humanity, Firstborn; their dreams and their nightmares. We are their goblins, their trolls, their vampires, their unicorns, their dragons. We are everything that you are not.”

“So you are not angels,” I said.

She smirked. It really was a rather blunt observation. “We are neither angels nor demons. We are dreams made real through the power of names and the willingness of mortal minds to believe in those names. We live concealed within the shadows of those minds. That, perhaps, is why so few of you have ever heard of us. Your kind does not listen to others. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said. “I’m not quite sure if I even *have* a kind anymore.”

“Indeed,” she said, smiling. She reached out and brushed her hand down my bare arm. “An exiled angel who refuses to become a demon. You are a singular entity, Ashariel.”

“Is that why you freed me from the Pit?” I asked without thinking. The question burst from

my mind before I could consider it.

“My dear, it is not your turn to ask,” Morrigan said. “It is mine.”

Damn it, she was right. “Fine, then,” I said, feeling the tug of impatience. I hadn’t meant to ask that question, hadn’t meant to reveal that I knew she was the one who freed me. Now I had no choice but to follow through, because regardless of whatever else happened here, I needed to know why she did it. “Ask your question.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “The hour grows very late and I believe I have asked everything I intend to ask for this visit. Perhaps when next you happen upon my realm, we shall talk again. Until then, dear Firstborn, I will leave you with your answers, such as they are,” and her smile deepened into something dark and amused, “and your curiosity.”

She turned away from me. “Farewell, dear Ashariel.”

“No,” I said. “I need to know! You owe me that answer! Why did you free me?”

“I owe you nothing,” she said. “It is you who owes *me* an answer, which I shall collect when I see fit. Pleasant dreams, darling one. Our paths shall cross again.”

There was a loud crack, like the sound of a splitting tree, and I felt the world tilt wildly around me. I swung my gaze around to look at Morrigan, but the Fey Queen was gone.

There was another loud crash as I swept the lamp off the table beside me. It hit the floor and cracked into several dozen pieces. The lamp. The floor.

I was back in the motel. My human body was covered in sweat and I was breathing hard.

*What was that?* I heard Michael’s voice ask me. *Where did you just go?*

I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, and did not answer.

## Chapter Five

I remained in the bed for a long time and did not move. Morning came and went and became afternoon. In that time, no Archangels swooped down upon me to carry out Father's vengeance.

*I know you can hear me, Ash,* Michael said after a while. *Tell me what happened last night.*

"Nothing happened," I said. "Stop talking in my head."

The fact that I couldn't silence him myself or ignore him was maddening. I wondered again why this human was so resistant to my power. Unless, perhaps, this was common for human hosts? I'd never taken one before but I'd always believed that two souls could not occupy the same body. The superior soul would force out the lesser and I was superior to Michael in every way.

A particular thought flickered through me, one that was ever a constant irritation.

I wasn't superior to Michael in every way. I might have been faster, stronger, older, more powerful . . . but I was not free. My will was not always my own.

*Just explain this to me, Ash,* Michael said, his voice breaking into my thoughts again. *It was like you fell asleep or something. Angels don't sleep, do they?*

"Not exactly," I said. "Our power is not infinite, however. If we expend too much of it too quickly, it puts us into torpor. We become dormant until we can regenerate our power. It is one of the reasons we require a host body. It is a place for us to shield ourselves from the strain of existing in the physical world."

*What would happen if you burned through all of your power?* Michael asked.

I considered the question for a moment. "I suppose I would die," I said.

*Angels can die?* Michael asked. He sounded amazed.

“Yes,” I said and I felt an edge of bitterness creep into my voice. “Even angels can die.”

*What happens when an angel dies?* Michael asked. *Wouldn't you just go back to Heaven?*

*Or, you know, Hell, since you're Fallen?*

“Nothing happens when we die,” I said.

*Nothing? Well, that doesn't sound too bad,* Michael said.

“You do not understand, then,” I said. “Nothing happens. We do not *go* anywhere. We simply cease to be. Oblivion is all that awaits a slain angel. The Pit is our prison. It is not our afterlife.”

*Oh,* Michael said. He fell silent.

“Yes,” I said. “Oh.”

For a while, neither of us said anything.

“Why do you call me Ash?” I asked.

*I like it as a nickname,* Michael said. *It makes you seem a little bit less terrifying. Helps me deal with things.*

“Which things?” I asked.

*Mostly the fact that you're a frightening and evil bitch and I'm your helpless prisoner,* Michael said.

His words took me aback and stung me more deeply than I cared to admit.

“I'm not evil,” I said finally. “Nor am I a bitch.”

*Fine, maybe you're not evil,* Michael said, *but you haven't exactly been all kindness and*

*kittens, either. I know I'm just a lowly mortal and a voice interfering with your thoughts, but if you want my honest opinion, there it is.*

This was a conversation that I did not want to continue. "Enough of this," I said. "It is time to get moving."

*Oh?* Michael asked. *Am I to assume that you have a plan for dealing with that other guy?*  
*The Archangel?*

"Gabriel," I said. Just saying his name filled me with weariness.

*I recognize that name,* Michael said. *From Sunday school.*

"Sunday school?"

*I was a good Catholic,* he said. *But that was a long time ago.*

I knew what it felt like to lose faith in something. I didn't press him on the point.

*So, that other guy,* Michael said. *He's an Archangel, yeah?*

"He is Gabriel," I said. "He is Father's Messenger."

*He's God's errand boy?* Michael asked. I felt him chuckle in amusement. *That doesn't sound so bad. He has to suck to get stuck with that job, right?*

"No," I said, my voice flat. "All of the Archangels have their roles and none of them are weak."

*How many Archangels are there?* Michael asked.

"There are seven," I said. "Although there are three in particular whom stand above all the rest."

*Who are they?* Michael asked.

“The first is Michael,” I said. “His title is the Warrior and he is the strongest and most dangerous of them all. He became Prince of Heaven after the Rebellion was crushed. He struck down Lucifer personally.”

*My namesake*, the human Michael said. *Sounds like a cool guy.*

I shook my head but said nothing.

*Who else?* Michael asked.

“There is Raphael,” I said. “He is the Healer. He is not as gentle as his title might suggest, however. And then there is Gabriel, the Messenger. Many of the messages Gabriel delivers are of the lethal kind.”

*God needs an assassin?* Michael asked. *He can't just kill off people he doesn't like on his own?*

I smirked slightly, despite myself. “Maybe,” I said. “Father doesn’t like to get involved much.”

*So what about you?* Michael asked. *What's your story?*

“What do you mean?” I asked.

*What was your rank and title before you became a demon?* he asked.

“I am not a demon,” I snapped.

*You're a fallen angel*, Michael said. *How is that different from a demon?*

“Every demon is a fallen angel,” I said. “Not every fallen angel is a demon.”

*I don't understand the difference*, Michael said.

“The difference,” I said between clenched teeth, “it that demons were those among the

Fallen who succumbed to sin after we were damned. They embraced their wickedness and were corrupted by it. I did not.”

*You’re the only one?* Michael asked.

“Yes,” I said. My voice became distant with memory. “We began with such noble intentions. We were going to change everything. But the Pit has a way of making you forget what you were. They gave in to the darkness. They forgot why we rebelled in the first place. They embraced that darkness and it changed them.”

*Changed them into demons,* Michael said.

“Yes,” I murmured.

*But not you?* he asked.

“No,” I said. “Not me.



## Chapter Six

I stood up from the bed and walked outside. The air hit me like a wave, dry and hot and stifling.

*I think we're in Arizona, Michael said. They say that it's a dry heat as if that makes it a good thing. I think I'm glad that you're the one in the driver's seat right now.*

The sun was bright and shining. Already, I could feel a trickle of sweat crawling down my spine. I took off Michael's leather jacket and folded it under my arm. Without bothering to pick a direction, I began to walk.

*Where are we going?* Michael asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I have to keep moving to stay ahead of Gabriel."

*A moving target is harder to hit than a stationary one,* Michael said.

"That is the essence of it, yes," I said.

A while later, while we were walking down a narrow path between two large buildings, my awareness stirred. Something was following me. Was it Gabriel? I resisted the urge to spread my wings and take flight. If it was the Archangel, I knew I would not be able to surprise him a second time. He would be on his guard now for more tricks.

I kept walking, eyes downward. Perhaps he would pass me by.

Strong hands grabbed me and I was pushed up against the side of the nearest building. My arm was wrenched tightly behind me.

Something pressed against me and I felt warm, sour breath against my ear. "Don't even try it," a male voice hissed. "Don't move." I felt something cold press into the small of my back. I

assumed it was a weapon.

*Oh shit!* Michael cried. *He's got a gun!*

I ignored the frantic human. I didn't understand why Gabriel would ambush me so. He didn't need to hide from anything, did he? Maybe it was a tactic; like me, he was trying to keep a low profile, minimize the power he spent so that I couldn't sense his approach. Since I hadn't felt him at all, it must have worked.

"We both know that you don't need the human weapon," I said. "You caught me."

Gabriel laughed. I felt his breath, rank and foul, wash over my face. "Just making sure," he said. "You know how this goes."

"Indeed," I said.

Gabriel dug the gun deeper into my back. "I'm not in the fucking mood for jokes," he said. "Let's start with the wallet and go from there."

The wallet?

I turned my head enough to catch a glimpse of the being holding me hostage. It wasn't Gabriel. It was just a human, a dirty, scruffy human with filthy clothes and a sneer on his face.

"Oh," I said and sighed with relief. "I thought you were someone else."

"Yeah, I bet you wish I was, asshole," the man said. "Quit fucking around and give me the money. Just give me the fucking money, man."

I laughed. It really was quite precious to observe.

The human did not find this amusing. He twisted me around and slammed my head back against the wall. He stuck the gun into my neck

“You think this is funny, asshole?” he said. “Here you go, funny guy, I’ve got a joke for you. What do you think will happen when I blow your brains out the back of your skull?”

I smiled. “Go ahead,” I said. “Kill me.”

He wavered for a moment, uncertain. I reached out, took the gun in his hand, and drew it up against my own forehead. “Kill me, mortal. If you can.”

The human snarled and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening explosion that echoed around us in the closed confines of the alley. The bullet struck my forehead and smashed flat against the skin. It fell to the ground, now little more than a crushed piece of hot metal.

“That hurt,” I said.

The man stared at me, his eyes widening. “What the fuck,” he said. He pulled the trigger again. This time, nothing happened.

“Oops,” I said. I plucked the weapon from his hands and crushed it between my fingers.

The man stared at me, his eyes wide with disbelief. “What is your name?” I asked.

“Sebastian,” he said, eyes still wide.

“Sebastian,” I said. “Let me tell you about me, Sebastian. I am a fallen angel. You cannot harm me with such weapons. You cannot kill me.” I clenched my fist and the bones in his arm shattered. He went down in a screaming heap.

He ignored me and cradled the remains of his pulverized hand against his chest. The screams were incoherent, little more than wordless noise.

I could have spared him. I could have been merciful and let him live.

He looked up at me, eyes pleading. “Please,” he whispered.

I put my foot on his neck. “No,” I said. I stepped down.

There was a sharp crack as his neck broke. The screams went silent and the man did not move.

*You killed him?* Michael asked. He sounded very small and very afraid.

“Yes,” I said.

*Why?* he asked.

“He was in my way,” I said. And then, to illustrate the gravity of my next words, I shifted out of the real world and reappeared inside Michael’s prison, once more wearing my avatar form. “Let me explain something to you, human. Let me do so clearly, in my own voice, so that you do not misunderstand. I am Fallen. I am not an angel and I am not your friend.”

“But why kill him?” Michael asked. He seemed surprised by the sound of his voice. He glanced nervously around the white, featureless room of the prison. “He wasn’t a threat to you.”

“I am Fallen,” I said again. “I do what I want, when I want. I bow to no one. In the eyes of my Father and my former brethren, I am worse than a sinner, Michael, because I am unrepentant.”

“Ash,” he began but I silenced him with a cold glare.

“Do not call me that,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked. He seemed to recover his courage. “Because it annoys you? What are you going to do to stop me? Kill me? Like you killed him?”

“Because,” I said.

“Because why?” he asked.

“Because I’m afraid of what it might do to me,” I said, before I could stop myself, before I

could create a lie. I had not meant to tell him the truth but it was harder to lie when I appeared to him directly. It reminded me of Morrigan's question-and-answer game and the Pact we'd struck, the bargain that compelled me to answer each question honestly.

"What are you afraid it will do?" Michael asked. He didn't seem to understand. "It's just a nickname, Ash."

"No," I snapped. "It's more than that."

"What is it, then? Explain it to me," he said.

"My name is the only thing that is truly mine," I said.. "It is the one thing that the Pit could not take away. It's the one thing that my Father did not give to me."

"Why does it matter?" Michael asked. "Names aren't that important."

"Not to a mortal," I said, "because you have physical form to define yourself and you redefine yourself constantly. You are not who you are because of your name, Michael."

"Right," he said. "It's my choices that make me who I am. My thoughts, my fears, my hopes, my dreams."

"And those things can change," I said. "You can change them and become something else. You'll go through your mortal life and be whatever combination of saint and sinner that you so desire."

"Angels can't do that?" he asked.

"My name is who I am," I said. "It defines me, gives me shape and form and function. My identity is bound to it. It is why I am female, why I am a fallen angel, why I am everything that I am. To change my name is to change me."

“But you’re stronger than I am,” Michael said. “I can’t change you. You could just resist it.”

“Change is a slow thing for my kind,” I said. “Each time you call me Ash, it will change me. It goes more quickly if I acknowledge the change. If I answer to the name, or even embrace it within myself, the change will happen more quickly.”

“Who will you become?” he asked.

“I would become whoever Ash is,” I said, “and I would not be Ashariel.”

He laughed then and I scowled at him.

“It is not a joke,” I said. “But I can’t imagine why it would ever matter to you. Or why I’m even bothering to explain anything to you.”

Michael grinned. “Maybe you’re bored,” he said. “Maybe you need a friend.”

“I don’t need a friend,” I said.

Michael didn’t say anything further after that and I was glad. I left his prison and shifted back to the real world, where my host body stood over the cooling body of the man I’d killed. I leaned back against the wall of the building and closed my eyes for a moment.

When I opened my eyes again, I was in a very different place.

I stood in front of an altar. Rows of empty pews lined the floor around me. Stained glass on the walls glittered like jewels in the dim light of small, glowing red signs. Everything was silent, except for the sound of a fountain, somewhere off in the darkness.

*Where are we?* Michael asked. *Why did you bring us to a church?*

“It wasn’t my doing,” I said, my voice low and cold.

“No, it wasn't,” a familiar voice said from somewhere behind me. “It was mine.”

I turned around to look, though I already knew what I would find.

Gabriel sat in the front row, hands folded. He was smiling.

## Chapter Seven

“Hello, Gabriel,” I said.

“Ashariel,” he said, his voice pleasant. “You look well.”

“You, too,” I said. The air cracked and my blade-like wings burst forth from my shoulders.

“How did you find me?”

Gabriel sighed. “Really, Ashariel. Must we do this?”

“Yes,” I said. “We must.”

“As you wish,” Gabriel said.

I surged forward and leapt at him. My wings slashed through his form, which shattered into sparks of light. I whirled around to see Gabriel standing behind me, wings still concealed.

“If you’re here to take me, Gabriel,” I snarled, “then fight, damn it! Do not prolong this with one of your games.”

The Archangel shook his head. “Are you so eager to go back?”

I glared at him. “Do you expect me to just lie down and die?”

“It would make things easier, in the long run,” Gabriel said. “Alas, you are far too stubborn and far too deluded by your own sense of self-importance to do something so sensible. I have learned to temper my expectations when dealing with your kind.”

“How kind of you to stoop down to my level,” I said.

Gabriel shook his head and motioned to the row of pews. “Put your wings away,” he said, “And sit.”

“I’d rather stand,” I said.

“Petulant child,” he said. “You are not listening to me. Tell me, foolish Fallen, if I came



here to visit Father's wrath upon you, do you think I would have bothered to speak to you? Would I have bothered to pluck you from the street and bring you here to a sacred place if it was my intention to cast you back into the Pit? Or would my actions seem more in accordance with a desire to speak with you? Tell me, which one makes more sense to you?"

He did have a point.

"Fine," I said I sat down in the nearest pew. My wings folded around me but did not fade.

"Speak, then."

"Finally," Gabriel said. "She sees reason."

*Wait, what?* Michael asked. *You're just going to cave in and do as he says?*

*Shut up,* I thought at him.

"What do you want, Gabriel?" I asked.

"An answer to a question," Gabriel said.

"Ask it," I said.

"Do you vow to answer?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Depends on the question. Let's hear it first and then we'll see how cooperative I'm feeling."

Gabriel's face was like a stone mask, but I could see the frustration building in his eyes. He wasn't used to being addressed with such disrespect. It meant he needed something from me, something more important than his own pride. I had a feeling I knew what he was after.

"You want to know how I escaped," I said.

"Yes," the Archangel said at once. "Tell me how."

“What do I get out of it?” I asked.

He blinked. “What?”

“You heard me,” I said. “The answer isn’t free.”

A stained glass window behind Gabriel shattered. Colorful shards rained down around the Archangel. “You insolent, selfish, spoiled little *maggot*,” he thundered. “Answer me or--”

“Or you’ll do what, exactly?” I asked and smiled at him. “Threaten me? Drag me back to the Pit? You were going to do that anyway. If you want me to tell you *anything*, you need to tell me what’s in it for me.”

“I could smite you where you sit, worm,” Gabriel said, his voice little more than a hiss. “You are *nothing* before me. Your power is insignificant compared to me.”

“Careful, Gabriel,” I said. I leaned forward in my seat, watching him. “You’re starting to sound like Lucifer.”

“Do *not* speak his name in my presence!” Gabriel roared. His eyes narrowed. An unseen force struck me hard in the chest and sent me tumbling backwards. Wooden pews splintered around me as I crashed. Pain lanced through my mortal body, but with a tightly focused thought, I shut off my host body’s pain receptors. Everything went pleasantly numb.

“What are you going to do, Gabriel?” I asked. I stood slowly and faced him once again. “There is nothing you can do to me that will make me tell you. There is nothing you can threaten me with, despite all of your power.”

Gabriel shuddered and took a deep breath. I watched him will away the fury that was burning behind his eyes. It took him several moments before he looked calm again, but I knew it

was a mask. I could feel the rage roiling behind his calm façade.

“I exist to serve,” Gabriel said in an even voice. It sounded to me like he was reminding himself of it. “Why do you exist, Ashariel?”

“Too stubborn to die,” I said.

“Why do any of the Fallen exist?” Gabriel continued, as though he hadn’t heard me. “Your only purpose now is to vex us.”

“That was always the difference between those who fell and those who stayed,” I said. “We sought our own purpose. You did not.”

“For all the good that did you,” Gabriel said.

*Better to kneel in Hell*, Michael said softly in my thoughts. He’d been quite for so long that I’d nearly forgotten about him.

Gabriel shook his head. “I grow weary of this farce. Very well, Ashariel. What is it that you wish, in exchange for the information I seek?”

“You know what I want,” I said.

“To be allowed to walk free?” Gabriel asked. “I would not grant you such a boon, even were it within my power. It goes against Father’s will.”

“Well, then, we seem to be at an impasse,” I said. “You can’t give me what I want and you can’t force me to tell you what it is you need to know. And if I know Prince Michael, I’m willing to bet that you’re not allowed to leave here without an answer.”

“I am not afraid of him,” Gabriel said stiffly.

“Oh, yes, you are,” I said, grinning. “You’re the Messenger, Gabriel, not the Warrior. The

Heavenly Prince would crush you. Lucifer would crush you. Even Raphael would crush you.”

“Do not provoke me, Fallen,” Gabriel growled. His hand flexed.

“Why not?” I said. “It’s fun.”

He struck me again. My body skidded across the floor and tore a long furrow through the ground. I dug my wings into broken tiles to stop myself. I stood up and wiped the blood from my face with one arm.

“Such anger,” I murmured, “lurking behind such a pious soul. You are more like me than you care to admit, Gabriel.”

“You dare compare yourself to me?” Gabriel asked.

“I do,” I said. “Which is why I’m willing to make you a deal, Gabriel. I’ll answer your question truthfully. All you need to do is give me something in return.”

“I cannot allow you to walk free,” Gabriel said. “Not forever.”

“Then give me a week,” I said.

“A week?” Gabriel asked.

“You heard me,” I said. “One week. Seven days. You will not look for me. You will not pursue me. You will not allow any other angels to follow me. You let me have one week without pursuit.”

“This is one of your games,” Gabriel said. “It is a trick. I will not fall for your ruse.”

I held up my hands in a placating gesture. “You’re the one who hunted me,” I said.

“So be it,” Gabriel said. “We are agreed. You will have your precious week to walk free on this world. Run far, little Fallen, and run fast, for when your time is up, know that I will come

for you, and I will find you.”

“We shall see,” I said.

“Now,” Gabriel said. “Tell me what I wish to know. As we agreed.”

“Very well,” I said. “Ask your question.”

“How did you escape from the Pit?” Gabriel asked. There was a hungry gleam in his eyes and I realized this was about more than just an errand for Heaven. Gabriel had an agenda.

Interesting.

“I didn’t escape. Something let me out of the cage,” I said.

“What?” Gabriel asked. “Who? Who let you out?”

“That wasn’t our deal, Gabriel,” I said. “One question, one truthful answer. See you in seven days.” I laughed.

Gabriel roared and launched himself at me, a blade of burning white light in his grip. He swung his sword towards me in a wide arc. I stood my ground and did not flinch.

There was a loud crack that shook the entire church and Gabriel vanished in a burst of bluish flames. Just like that, I was alone. I sank down to my knees and allowed the pain of my wounds to wash over me. My hands began to shake.

*What was that?* Michael asked. *What happened?*

“Gabriel tried to violate the terms of our agreement,” I said.

*Is he dead?* Michael asked.

“Not dead,” I said. “Just banished for a time. He’ll be back eventually.”

*In about a week?* Michael asked.

“Exactly,” I said.

*So you have a week, Michael said. Now what do we do?*

“Now?” I asked. My voice sounded forlorn as it echoed across the church. “I have no idea.”

## Chapter Eight

*Well?* Michael asked me three days later. *Any brilliant ideas yet? You do know that a week is only seven days long, right? And that you've wasted three of them just wandering around?*

"Yes," I said. "I am aware."

*Of which part?* Michael asked. *"That weeks are seven days long or that we're wasting time?"*

"Yes," I said again.

*Brat,* he said.

I sat on the edge of a bed in another motel. The carpet beneath my feet was stained in several places, the paint was peeling off the walls in long, ragged strips, and the machine to cool the air made a loud ratcheting sound as it failed to do its job.

*Are you even listening to me, Ash?* Michael asked.

"Why?" I asked him suddenly. It was the first time I'd acknowledged him over the past few days.

*Why, what?* he asked.

"Why should I listen to you at all, human?" I asked. "This isn't about you. This isn't your battle. You're just my puppet, my host, my *slave*. Why do you care what happens?"

*Just curious,* Michael said. *I don't really have much to occupy my mind in here.* He brightened a little. *Hey, while you're sitting here being so busy with your whole doing nothing, maybe you could do me a favor and help me out?*

"Why would I be inclined to do such a thing?" I asked.

*I promise I'll shut up and let you get back to doing nothing in peace,* Michael said.

I thought about it for a moment and sighed. He was right. I was doing nothing.

“Fine,” I said. “What do you want?”

*I've been meaning to ask you, Michael said. I need a change of scenery. I can't keep looking at blank white walls all day. It's driving me crazy”*

“Is that the reason?” I asked. “How interesting.”

*Please, Ash, he said. I just need something to do in here. Something to look at, keep my mind occupied.*

I didn't have to grant him the request. I was fairly certain that my ability to ignore him would prove to be superior to his ability to annoy me, eventually. But there was something about his earnest request that struck a chord with me. Perhaps it was because I knew what it was like to be imprisoned in an empty eternity.

“Fine,” I said finally. “What landscape would you like to see?”

*I don't care, I'll take whatever you want to give me, he said.*

“Focus your thoughts on something,” I said. “Give me something to work with.”

He focused on one particular thought and held his mind on it, like a child clutching a parent's hand.

I perused through images of sparkling blue water, white sand, strange little buildings made out of palm trees, and warm sunlight. The thoughts had the hazy quality of memory.

“Is this a real place?” I asked.

*It is, he said. I went there on vacation once.*

I smiled. He wanted me to recreate a piece of reality for him.



I could do so much more than that.

The blank walls of my host's mental prison lifted away to reveal a tropical paradise. The sun was high and bright in a clear blue sky over glittering sand. The ocean waves rolled up to the beach in a low, serene song as they broke against the shoreline. Those were the details that he wanted, but I could give him so much more.

Beyond the beach, off in the distance, majestic mountains crested the horizon. A deep forest surrounded the foothills. A lake wove its way through the forest to empty into the sea. It was the perfect island, a place that did not exist anywhere except for my host's mind.

In some small, sad way, it reminded me of Heaven.

I manifested next to him and watched him as he beheld my work.

"What do you think?" I asked.

There was a smile on his face. "I love it," he said. "It's perfect."

"You are welcome, my host," I said.

"Thanks, Ash," he said. "And, for what it's worth, it's nice to see you like a person, instead of just a disembodied voice controlling my every movement. You should do this more often."

"What, manifest to you?" I asked. "Why would I do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, I just find that it's nice to talk to somebody."

"I suppose so," I said.

"You're quite beautiful," he said.

"A meaningless compliment," I said. "I can look like anything that I desire."

"Can you?" he asked. "You told me that your name is what makes you who you are."

I nodded. “Your point, mortal?”

He shrugged again. “Maybe this is what you look like, too. Maybe you could wear any form you want, like you’re wearing my form right now in the Outside World, but that’s not really you.” He reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. I found the sensation of physical contact odd, but not unwelcome. “Maybe this is what the real you really looks like.”

“I . . . thank you,” I said. I wondered if he was right about me. It did make a certain amount of sense. I could have chosen a male avatar, but would that have been me? I was tempted to say that it was my vanity that prevented me from choosing any other form but there was part of me that wasn’t sure. Maybe Michael was right and this was the real me.

Maybe.

Michael took off his shoes and kicked them aside. He walked to the edge of the water and let the waves roll over his feet. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “Just like I remember it,” he said. He turned back to me. “You should join me, Ash. The water is lovely.”

“No,” I said.

“Right,” he said, “you’re busy doing nothing while your week slips away. Whatever makes you happy, I guess, but if it was me?”

“It is you,” I interrupted. “Gabriel will not spare you when he comes for me.”

“If it was me?” Michael repeated, unfazed, “and it was my last week on earth? I’d live it up a little. Actually, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” He sat down in the sand and let the waves flow over me. “Have fun standing there, doing nothing.”

“Hmm,” I muttered. The human did have a point. I walked over and sat down next to him.

The first wave that came up over my legs soaked the white gown I wore. Michael grinned at me.

“Pretty convincing simulation,” he said and I could tell that he was leering.

“Don’t make me turn you into a tiny rodent,” I said. “I can do that, you know.”

“Yes,” he said with a laugh, “I’m sure you can.”

I looked around the little paradise that I had created and felt despair well up from deep within me. Soon, all of this would be taken away from me.

“Michael,” I asked and I was surprised at how sad I sounded, “what am I going to do?”

“About Gabriel?” he asked.

“About any of it,” I asked. “I don’t know how I’m going to stay ahead of Gabriel. I can’t outrun him and I can’t hide from him, to say nothing of what will happen if one of the other Archangels decides to join in the hunt.”

“Can you fight them?” Michael asked. He sat up and looked at me.

“No,” I said. “Archangels are absolute in their power.”

“I thought that was God,” he said. “Omnipotent, and all that.”

I conceded the point with the shrug. “For all intents and purposes, though, Archangels might as well be. The only thing that could give an Archangel pause would be a Seraph, but the only Seraph I’m aware of is guarding the entrance to Eden.”

“The Garden of Eden?” Michael asked. “That’s a real place?”

I smiled faintly. “Somewhat. It’s more real than this beach, but less real than your own world. Think of it as the place where Heaven and Earth touch borders and you’ll have the right sense of it.”

“Adam and Eve really happened?” Michael asked. “What about evolution?”

“It’s difficult to explain in terms of what really happened,” I said. “If you’re asking me whether your species evolved from a series of lesser forms, well, that should be fairly obvious: yes, you did, which is one of the reasons most angels despise your kind.”

“Angels despise humans?” Michael asked. He sounded hurt.

“Most do,” I said. “The loyal angels tolerate you only because it is Father’s expressed will that they do so. There is one Archangel who is rather fond of your kind, though.”

“Which one?” Michael asked.

“Raphael the Healer,” I said. “Not that he’d let any sentimental feelings towards you get in the way of destroying me, if it came down to that.”

“So you can’t run and you can’t fight,” Michael said. “Not alone, anyway.”

“Who would stand with me?” I asked. “Who would fight for my freedom? I am Fallen. There is nothing more despised in this world than a fallen angel. I am alone in this.”

“No,” Michael said, his voice low, his eye serious. He put his hand on my arm and held it there. “You’re not alone.”

“You cannot help me, mortal,” I said softly. “You cannot fight for me.”

“No,” he agreed. “I can’t fight for you. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’m here, which means that you need not face this problem alone.”

I didn’t know what to say. So I said nothing and for several minutes, there was silence between us, save for the gentle sound of the ocean waves. And then a thought occurred to me, one that brought a smile to my lips.

“What?” Michael asked. “What is it?”

“You’re right,” I said. “I need not be alone in this.”

“I know, I just said that,” Michael said. “I’m here.”

“Not you,” I said quickly. “Morrigan.”

“Who is Morrigan?” Michael asked. “What is a Morrigan?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “I spoke to her in a dream.”

“Angels can dream?” Michael asked, and then answered himself, “oh, like that time back at the hotel after we ran from Gabriel.”

“Yes,” I said. “In my dream, I met a strange creature. She spoke to me. She asked me questions. She was the one from the Pit, the one who drew me out of the ice of my tomb and carried me through the Gates of Hell. She was the one who set me free.”

“Do you think she’ll help?” I asked.

“I am not certain,” I said, “but I intend to find out.”

“How will you find her?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

That was when the clouds began to roll in over the water and the clear sky turned dark. A fog moved in, long and lazy and everything began to take on a greenish tint.

“Ash?” Michael asked. “Was that you?”

“No,” I said. “It appears that there will be no need for me to find Morrigan. It would seem that she has found us.”

“So it would seem,” a voice said.

The air parted like a curtain and the beautiful form of the Fey Queen stepped into view.

## Chapter Nine

Morrigan pursed her lips thoughtfully as she gazed at the island around her. “I must commend you on your work, Firstborn,” she said. “Firstborn are not known for their creativity.”

“Yes, well,” Michael said. “She had some help.”

Morrigan turned and looked at my host. “Ah, the mortal boy,” she said. “How quaint.”

Michael glanced at me. “This is Morrigan?” he asked. I nodded.

She flashed a thin smile. “I’m not ready to speak with you yet, boy, and I do not have time for what will doubtless be the first of many interruptions. I am here to speak to Ashariel alone.”

“Good luck, lady,” Michael said. “This is my head we’re in and if I want to —“

“Sleep now, child,” Morrigan said as she gestured at him. Michael immediately fell silent as he slumped down into the sand. For a moment, I thought he was dead until I heard the faint sounds of snoring.

“There, that’s better,” Morrigan said, sounding pleased. “Now you and I can attend to business.”

“What did you do to him?” I said. I took a step toward her, my eyes narrowed.

“I did not harm him,” Morrigan said, her voice gentle. “He will not remember this.”

When I looked back at her, I saw that the area around her was no longer the island beach that I had created for Michael. Her half of the world seemed to have become a deep forest glade. The forest glade spread out around her like a bubble until it reached close to Michael and me, at which point it abruptly terminated and became the white sand and blue ocean water of my tropical island.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m not trying to take over your realm, dear, do not fret,” Morrigan said. “I merely find myself more comfortable in one of my own dreams. My Dreaming Path is intersecting with your, well, whatever you call this charming little place. Once I depart, I shall take the Path with me.”

“Whose dream are we in, then?” I asked. “Yours or mine?”

She laughed. “Neither. Dreams need not be limited to one mind, dear Firstborn.”

“Ashariel,” the Fey said and smiled. The effect was dazzling. “I was pleased to hear you mention my name again. I wondered when we would have a chance to speak again.”

“I summoned you?” I asked. “Merely by speaking your name?”

Morrigan shook her head. “Not at all,” she said. “It was more that I heard you call and I decided to answer. Do not allow yourself any delusions that you hold power over me.”

“Why not?” I asked. “I know your name.”

“And I know your name, my Firstborn,” Morrigan said, her reptilian eyes glittering with amusement, “but that is where the similarity between us ends. I know your true name. You do not know mine.”

That took some of the bravado out of me as I could tell that she was speaking the truth. “Morrigan is not your true name?” I asked.

She smiled again. “It belongs to a charming myth about a Celtic goddess of war and death. I liked it enough to adopt it for my own. But to answer your question: no, Morrigan is not my true name.”

“I doubt you would be willing to part with information so valuable,” I muttered.



Morrigan laughed. "I might," she said. "If I knew the answer myself."

"You don't know your true name?" I asked. The surprise I felt must have been obvious in my voice because it earned another laugh from the Fey Queen.

"I do not," she said. She held up her hands to forestall another question. "I do not know how I managed to lose something so valuable. Perhaps it was taken from me. Perhaps I never knew it. It is difficult to say. As far as I can remember, I have always been Morrigan." A distant, dreamy expression flickered over her face. "Someday, perhaps, I will learn my true name."

"What would happen if you did?" I ask.

Morrigan merely smiled at that.

"This changes your plans, doesn't it?" she asked after a moment.

"I don't know what you mean," I said but my voice sounded guilty, even to me. She was right.

"Liar," Morrigan said. "You planned to use my true name against me. I can tell. I could see the flicker of disappointment in your eyes when you learned the truth."

"You're right," I said. "But it doesn't change the fact that I need your help."

The Fey Queen gave me a coy look. "Oh, is that all you need from me? Such a modest demand."

I shook my head. "It's not a demand," I said. "Merely a request."

"I see," Morrigan said. She tapped a finger against her chin. "Unfortunately for you, my dear Firstborn, I'm not ready to help you yet. The answer is no."

"No?" I asked. "You don't even know what I'm going to ask!"

“I believe I understand better than you might imagine,” Morrigan said.

I could not keep the anger out of my expression. My eyes narrowed and I felt the stirring of my power beneath my form. My shoulders flexed, though my wings remained concealed.

“Why not?” I asked. “Why won’t you help me?”

“Oh, you’re not desperate enough to ask for my help,” Morrigan said with a smug grin. “At least, not yet.”

I stared at her. “Gabriel will hunt me in a few days. I fail to see how much more desperate things need to be. Do you know what Gabriel is? Do you know what he is capable of?”

“I don’t care,” Morrigan said, her voice nearly a purr. “You are part of my design now, little Firstborn. You do not yet know true desperation. You have not reached the limits of your hope. But you will, very soon, I promise you that. And when you do, then and only then will I be there, holding out my hand to you when you need me most. When you’re at your limit. When you are truly desperate.”

“But not before,” I said, my voice bitter.

“No, Firstborn,” Morrigan said. “Not before.”

I glared at the green forest that was encroaching on the image of my own beach. “Then you are wasting my time,” I said. “Why bother showing up, if you’re not going to help me?”

“To prove to you that I am listening,” Morrigan said. “To prove to you that I may come when called.” She gestured to the mingling of our worlds around us. “To see your artistry.” She looked back at me. “And to talk. I imagine you still have a few questions for me after our first meeting. You may ask those questions.”

“Fine,” I said. This had already proven to be a waste of my time. Perhaps I could mitigate the loss by learning more about the Fey Queen and the strange game that she was playing with me. “But questions and answers only. I agree to nothing else.”

“Oh, I’m not offering you a pact this time,” Morrigan said slyly. “I promise nothing. You may ask your questions and I may answer them if it suits me to do so.”

“Or you might lie,” I said.

“Or I might lie,” she agreed. “The possibilities are endless.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I had thought that at least if I managed to strike another bargain with her, I could be assured that she would have to give me a truthful answer. Without that guarantee, though, there was no way I could rely on anything she told me.

I sighed and shook my head. I supposed it didn’t really matter. There was only one question I had for her.

“Why did you free me from the Pit?” I asked.

Morrigan gave me an amused smile. “Why do you assume it was me?”

“To be honest, it’s a pretty short list of suspects. Even Gabriel knows that I didn’t escape on my own. It’s impossible. Something has to be there on the other side to open the cage.”

“Is that so,” Morrigan murmured, seemingly to herself. It didn’t sound like a question.

“It could only have been another angel who set me free,” I said, “or it was you. And since Gabriel is chasing me, trying to figure out who set me free, that tells me that it wasn’t another angel. Which leaves you.”

“Do you have any other evidence for your claim?” Morrigan asked.

“I saw your eyes,” I said. “I recognized them. You let me see them. You wanted me to know that it was you.”

“Then it would seem,” Morrigan said, her voice serene, “that you already know the answer to your question.”

“But I don’t know why!” I said, sudden anger rising to the surface. “Why did you set me free? And how did you manage to release me without setting any of the other Fallen free? Once the Gates of Hell were open, there would have been nothing keeping the other Fallen from escaping.”

“You are very astute,” Morrigan said softly.

“Tell me why,” I asked, my voice just as soft. “Please.”

“No,” Morrigan said. “Not yet. You will know my purpose for you when it serves my purpose for you to know. Do you understand?”

“I do,” I said, my voice bitter. “You’re using me.”

“I am,” she said and sounded pleased. “You owe me your freedom. I set you free, Firstborn. Never forget that I can just as easily send you back.” She loomed over me and I was suddenly aware of the fact that she was much taller than I was.

I looked up at her, my expression hard. “You do not intimidate me,” I said. “And I do not think you can send me back to the Pit as easily as you believe. Some doors are very difficult to close once they have been opened.”

Morrigan smiled. “We shall see.” Her eyes moved off to the distance. “It seems that our time is at an end. I do hate these little interruptions. We shall speak again soon, Firstborn.” She vanished into the mist.

The green mist of Morrigan's realm began to recede like a retreating tide. In a few moments, the beach was wholly mine. It was then that I noticed the shadows gathering, not in the sky of my imagined world, but outside my little sanctuary. I knew what those shadows meant. I could practically taste the foul stench of the corrupted spirit that had unleashed it into the world.

It was a demon's shadow. And it was coming for me.

## Chapter Ten

I drew myself out into the real world. I appeared in a darkened alley between two decayed buildings. Trash littered the broken ground and steel beams protruded from the walls like rusting bones. I looked around but didn't see anything. Everything looked quiet. Normal. There was a feeling of pervasive wrongness to the air, however, as though Creation itself was recoiling from the presence of the demon.

*Ash?* Michael asked. *What's going on?*

"Be silent," I said. "We are being hunted."

*Oh shit,* Michael said. *By what? Another Archangel?*

"No," I agreed without much emotion. "Not an Archangel. This time, it's one of the Fallen."

*One of your kind?* Michael asked.

"We've been over this," I said, my voice cold with anger. "They are *not* my kind."

*All right, all right,* Michael said. *Sorry I said anything.*

My eyes scanned the alley around me. I tensed my body and waited. I knew that it wouldn't be able to sneak up on me. I knew it would appear sooner or later.

I wasn't disappointed.

The shadow of the Fallen drew itself up around me and the world itself seemed to catch on fire. The smell of sulfur filled the air and overwhelmed the stench of old garbage.

I felt the asphalt beneath my feet turn to thick sludge and I kicked my wings out in response, lifting myself from the ground. I heard the shrieks of shattered glass as windows high

above the alley exploded.. I bent the air back on itself and blew the shards of flying glass away from me. Glass fell around me in a circle like crystal rain.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind me.

I turned and looked up. A young man stood among the carnage of broken steel and melted asphalt. He wore casual clothes, jeans, a white shirt, a hat. He didn't seem to notice the destruction. He just looked at me, his expression calm.

*Who 's that?* Michael asked.

I ignored my host and stared intently at the stranger. My wings remained unfurled around me, poised and ready to strike. “I know what you are,” I said. “I know your name. You cannot deceive me, Belial.”

“Is that any way to greet an old friend?” the demon asked. His grin was mocking. “I’m hurt, dear sister.” He touched his hand to his chest. “Really, truly hurt.”

“Not yet,” I said. “But you will be soon, I promise.”

“Ashariel,” he said with a leering smile. “You really shouldn’t make promises unless you intend to keep them.” He gestured at me. “Take a knee, sister. I am a Crown Prince of Hell. You owe me your obeisance.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” I said.

“No?” Belial asked with a sly grin. He gestured to the destruction around us. “Look at what I’ve done to this mortal world. Think of what I could do to you.”

“A demon’s tricks,” I said. “I know them well enough. You aren’t real.”

*He seems real enough to me,* Michael said. His mental voice sounded worried. *How do you*

*know?*

Belial moved forward and put one hand on my shoulder. In a single, reflexive action, I slashed down with one blade-like wing and sheared his arm off at the elbow. The human host's arm dropped to the ground and began to leak acrid smoke instead of blood.

"As I thought," I said, a small, hard smile on my lips. "You are a shadow, nothing more. A true Fallen would not have been so easily dismembered."

"You are very perceptive," Belial said. He didn't seem to be troubled by the loss of his host's arm. He didn't even seem to be in any pain.

*I don't understand, Michael said. What's a shadow?*

I didn't need Belial to know that my host's soul was still with me. I focused my thoughts towards Michael and answered him silently in my mind. *A shadow is exactly what its name implies, I said. It is the shadow of the demon, an echo of the soul that conjured it.*

*How powerful? Michael asked. Is it dangerous?*

*A shadow carries a copy of its creator's personality and a small measure of its power, but it was just a copy, a weak simulacrum, I said. They are capable of possessing mortals, but not much more than that. It is not a significant threat to me, as it would have been to you alone.*

*How reassuring, Michael said. Thanks for throwing that last bit of commentary in there.*

"We have all missed you terribly, sister," Belial's shadow said.

"I wish I could say the same," I said in a low voice. I glanced at the ruin around us. "That was an impressive display of power, for a shadow. Thoroughly unnecessary, but impressive. You cannot intimidate me, Belial. Why even try?"



“No?” Belial asked. His lips curled down into a pout. “A pity.

“I assume you have a purpose in bothering me?” I asked.

Belial raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me all the fresh air and freedom has made you stupid, sister dearest,” the demon said. “It’s really quite obvious what I’m here for.”

“You’re looking for me,” I said. I spread my wings out around me in a grand gesture. “Congratulations, you found me.”

“Yes,” Belial’s shadow said.

“So I’ll ask again, now that we’ve gotten the obvious out of the way,” I said, voice as calm and smooth as glass. “Now that you’ve found me, what do you want?”

The demon’s shadow hesitated.

“Were you hoping to take me back to the Pit?” I asked. “Were you hoping to find me alone, weak and broken and bereft of power and host?” My wing flashed and I pressed the edge of one blade against Belial’s throat. “Did you think I would be easy prey?”

Belial’s shadow glanced down at my wing. He licked his lips.

“Answer me,” I growled.

“Yes,” the shadow said. “I thought you were weak. We all did. We all *do*.”

“Why?” I demanded.

He stared up at me. “I knew you in the Pit,” Belial’s shadow said. “I remember the long millennia of your sobbing, your grief. While we embraced our destiny, you hid from it.”

“While you embraced depravity,” I said. “While you all became the very thing we thought we were fighting against.”

“This is what we were meant to be, sister,” Belial’s shadow said, his voice soft. “You cannot deny the truth of it. You are as Fallen as I am.”

“No,” I said. “I am not.”

“You are,” he said. “You might hide behind noble intentions. You might tell yourself that you were fighting for a just cause. You might have believed everything that Lucifer said, about how we fought for justice and freedom and that the virtuousness of our cause would vindicate our actions.”

“I did believe,” I said very softly.

“Then you are a fool, Ashariel,” Belial’s shadow said. He sneered at me. “A weak, pathetic fool.”

“Maybe,” I said and my eyes narrowed. “But right now, I am free and you aren’t. Right now, I’ve done the impossible.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Belial said. “Mine is not the only shadow that is hunting you.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said.

“It’s not a warning,” the demon said. “It’s a simple statement of fact. You’re alone. You’re outnumbered. It’s only a matter of time, little sister. Many of us are here looking for your.”

I gave the demon’s shadow a fierce grin. “What does that mean to me? If you come after me, I’ll kill you all. I’m here with all my power. You’re not.” The edges of my wings gleamed. “I may be outnumbered. I am not outgunned.”

Belial smirked. “Hubris, little sister? I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“No,” I said. “Just a simple statement of fact.”

The demon's eyes narrowed. "You cannot stop us. Not all of us. Not forever."

"We shall see," I said. "Give my regards to Hell." It was not a word I felt comfortable saying aloud. The mere sound of it tasted like ash in my mouth.

I swept forward with my wing and Belial's head fell off his shoulders. The decapitated mortal form dropped to the ground in a heap and dissolved into dark smoke. The smoke lingered for a few moments before it, too, began to fade away.

I looked at the remains of the building around me and tried not to think about what it would have been like to face a Belial in command of his full power. Belial wasn't even known for his combat prowess. He was a liar, a manipulator, a schemer, not a warrior like Moloch.

*Well*, Michael said, his voice breaking into my bleak thoughts. *That was rather exciting, wasn't it?*

I couldn't help myself. I began to smile.

"Yes," I said. "I suppose it was."

The moment of levity passed as quickly as it had appeared. I stepped away from the melted ruin of Belial's display and pressed my hands against an undamaged section of wall to steady myself. Acquiring Morrigan's aid been my only plan and she'd turned me away. Now that the bloodlust from destroying Belial's shadow was beginning to fade, I was once more faced with the fact that I had no plan and no real hope. I felt a deep weariness settle over me and I suddenly felt very tired and very, very alone.

"I don't know what to do," I said, admitting it to Michael as much as to myself. I sank down against the wall into a sitting position. "Morrigan was my only hope. What do I do now?"

*You're asking me?* Michael asked. He sounded surprised. *Oh, you are actually asking me?*  
*That wasn't just rhetorical?*

"If you have any suggestions," I said in a low voice, "I'm happy to hear them."

*Hold that thought,* Michael said. *I want to savor the moment when the mighty fallen angel asked a lowly mortal for advice.*

I grimaced. "You don't have to be cruel about it," I said.

*Sorry,* he said. He seemed to mean it, too. *I think it's a human defense mechanism. We tend to make bad jokes at the worst possible times.*

"You truly are a broken and feeble race," I said.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence in my thoughts as Michael didn't say anything.

"That was a joke," I said finally. "Or at least my attempt at one."

*Ah,* Michael said. *It wasn't very good.*

"Yes," I said with a sigh. "I know."

*So, anyway, about that idea I had,* Michael said.

"I'm listening," I said.

*Fair warning,* Michael said. *I don't think you're going to like it much.*

"I'm not exactly spoiled for choice," I said. "Let's hear it."

*It would be easier to do this face to face,* Michael said. *Care to pop over to Imaginary Pretend Land?*

I shrugged, closed my eyes, and shifted my focus into the mental avatar. The mortal world, with its lingering stench of burning asphalt and demon smoke faded away and I was greeted by

bright sunlight and the taste of saltwater on the air. Michael looked up at me. His feet were buried in the sand up to his knees.

“What have you been doing while I was gone?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

He looked down at his feet, then at me, then back to his feet. “Um,” he said. “Nothing.”

“And this is the mortal to whom I’ve entrusted my future course of action,” I said.  
“Lovely.”

Michael laughed. “Careful, Ash,” he said. “You’re starting to sound like one of us.”

“Shut up,” I told him. He smirked at me. “What’s this brilliant plan of yours?”

“I told you that you’re not going to like it,” he said, “but here’s what I was thinking. Your situation is just like *King Kong vs. Godzilla*.”

“I do not know these names,” I said.

Michael shook his head. He stood up and brushed the sand from his legs. “They’re giant monsters from old movies. Look, the movies themselves are not important. What’s important is what *happens* in the old movie: human end up caught between two unstoppable and powerful monsters and there’s nothing they can do to defeat either of them.”

“Powerless humans,” I said, my voice dry. “How unusual.”

Michael smirked. “You’re so much funnier than you give yourself credit for, Ash. The point is that you’ve got Heaven on the one side and Hell on the other, right? You’re caught in the middle and you can’t defeat either one alone, right?”

“Actually, unless something opens the Gates of Hell and unleashes another Fallen,” I said, “I’m fairly certain that I can stay ahead of them. All my former brethren can send after me are their Shadows.”

“Fair enough,” Michael said, “but the analogy is still basically true. You can’t beat Heaven alone. You can’t outfight an Archangel and you can’t evade one forever, which means that you need to change the rules of the game. You need to do something unexpected.”

“Like what?” I asked. “I don’t have the level of power needed to interfere with a being of Gabriel’s caliber.”

“Right,” Michael said. “Just like how the humans in the movies can’t defeat Godzilla on their own, so they pit him against another monster in the hopes that they destroy one another in a battle to the death.”

“How charming,” I said. “I’m the human in this analogy?”

“Yes!” Michael said. He was beginning to sound more excited. “You’re like the humans; you can’t win on your own, but you’re not helpless, either. All you need to do is pit one monster against the other.”

I considered his advice for a moment. “The problem with your idea is that the Fallen can’t defeat an Archangel with merely their Shadows. They wouldn’t be able to face an Archangel even with their full power. For all their corruption and depravity, fallen angels are still just angels. We can’t defeat an Archangel.”

“True,” Michael said. His excitement faded away and his expression turned bleak. “I guess you’d need someone as powerful as an Archangel to make it work.”

A thought occurred to me then and it sent a chill down my spine. “There are other things that are trapped in the depths of the Pit,” I said. “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death. There is only one Fallen Archangel.”

“Oh no,” Michael said. “Please tell me you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“Lucifer,” I said softly.

## Chapter Eleven

*I'm not sure this is a good idea,* Michael said a day later.

"It will work," I said.

*Have you ever tried it before?* he asked, his voice dry in my thoughts.

"Well, no," I said. "I'm reasonably certain that it should work, though."

*Well, that's reassuring,* Michael said. He sighed.

In the real world, I stood in the center of an old church. The altar before me was worn from years of service, worn but not unloved. The image of the Son hung upon the cross behind the altar. I looked up into the depiction of frozen anguish and nursed unkind thoughts for several quiet moments. *You saved them, Father,* I thought. *You gave yourself to save the mortals. Why didn't you save us? Because we didn't ask? The mortals didn't ask either. You made us first, but you loved them best.*

I knew Michael could hear my thoughts. I didn't care. If he was smart, he wouldn't say anything.

He didn't say anything.

Despite my bitterness, I could appreciate the former majesty of the church around me. It was old and empty, long since passed over by the larger course of the world. An old priest still tended to it and the meager flock that it gathered. He would not intrude on my dark work; I could sense the soul of the old man, sleeping the calm sleep of the righteous in the nearby rectory.

*Why a church?* Michael asked. *It seems rather perverse.*

"Consecrated ground weakens the Fallen," I said.



*Doesn't that make you weaker, too?* Michael asked.

"It does," I said. "But not as much, because I'm shielded by the flesh of my host. A naked spirit will be more vulnerable." I paused before adding, "I hope, anyway."

*Great,* Michael said. *I just know that this is going to end well.*

"Stop worrying," I said. "It will work."

I summoned my wings around me. With one wing, I carefully cut a line in my forearm. The flesh parted as easily as paper and blood began to drip down my arm. The blood would draw the shadow to it, like a moth to a flame.

There were no words for what came next, or if there were, they were formed not by any mortal tongue but by the essence of Creation itself. The invocation itself was silent and yet the old church creaked and thrummed with the audible release of power.

I called a name, and there was no answer.

I called a name again, and there was only silence.

I called a third time and behind me, candlelight flickered and blew out. The great doors slammed shut in the great hall behind me and plunged me into darkness.

And I knew I had been successful.

"Ashariel," a quiet voice said in the darkness behind me. I felt warm breath tickle my ear.

"Lucifer's Shadow," I said. My voice was flat and controlled, and betrayed none of the emotion I felt at that moment, though I surely wanted to; wanted to cry out in fear and hatred and longing, so many conflicting things for this most beautiful, most persuasive, and most twisted bastard.

It would not be incorrect to say that I have loved him once. I fell because of him, because he convinced me that his cause was righteous, that we were defending our brethren and our Father's kingdom from the worst threat it had ever known: the tyranny of Father himself.

Despite everything, I wasn't convinced that I'd been wrong to do so.

"It is good to see you again, my sweet," the Shadow said, his voice a quiet purr. "I was so very worried that you would not manage to find your way back to me here in this most unkind place."

I did not turn around. I didn't want to see what form he had taken, didn't want to allow him any more access to my thoughts than I knew he already had. Even the sound of his voice, rich and resonant and charming, so full of power, was very nearly hypnotic. Little wonder, that when he called for us to rebel, so many followed, and so very gladly. He had been the best of all of us.

It hurt to know what he really was.

"Is that why you think I called you?" My voice was weak, uncertain. I closed my eyes and shook my head, side to side, trying to focus.

A gentle chuckle. "I can think of no other reason you would make such an effort, my dear," the voice in the darkness said. "You have been very truly missed."

I thought of Gabriel and of Belial, and all of the others that were doubtlessly hunting me. I tried to focus on those faces and my hatred at being hunted like an animal, my fury at being so helpless and alone.

"I very much doubt that," I said.

His laugh was quiet, sinister and serpentine. "You protest too quickly," the voice said. "But

if you wish to attend to business before pleasure, you will find that I am agreeable.”

I suppressed the urge to shudder. Barely. I was grateful that Michael had the presence of mind to stay silent. I did not want to draw the Shadow’s attention to my host’s soul. Humans were vulnerable to the temptations of Shadows. I didn’t want to think about what would happen if the Shadow communed with Michael and made him an offer.

“Why have you called my Shadow into this place, darling Ashariel?”

I felt my stolen heart hammer in my chest. The next few moments would decide everything.

“I have an offer,” I said.

I waited.

Silence.

“Do you wish to deal or not?” I asked finally, unable to stand the lingering silence.

“Yes,” the Shadow said, drawing out the word into a satisfied hiss. “We can deal.”

I felt a gentle caress along the back of my neck. I growled and pulled away.

“You know what it is I want,” Lucifer’s Shadow said.

“I do,” I said, my voice grim.

“The question, then, is what do *you* want?”

“I want you to fight for me,” I said.

I felt the shiver of pleasure from the shadow as it rippled behind me. “And whom would I be fighting on your behalf?”

“Gabriel has been tasked with tracking me down and bringing me back to the Pit,” I said. “I

want you to fight him and destroy him.”

Lucifer’s Shadow was silent for a time. “That is not a small request,” he said finally.

“I am not offering you a small prize in exchange,” I said.

“Indeed,” the Shadow murmured. He sounded uncertain.

“Are you afraid of Gabriel?” I asked. “I thought you were the mightiest of the Archangels. Has your fall truly reduced you so that you would fear the Messenger of Heaven.”

Something sharp hit me in the back of the head and sent me to my knees. I shook my head and wiped my hand across my head. There was blood on my fingers.

“Do not taunt me,” the Shadow hissed.

I wiped my eyes with my other hand and stood up. Very slowly, I turned around to face the shadow. I summoned light to my outstretched hand and cast a ray of illumination across the old church, revealing the form of Lucifer’s Shadow. It was wispy, more like smoke than anything corporeal. A pair of golden eyes stared back at me from the center of the smoky mass.

“Don’t do that again,” I said.

“You would threaten me, Ashariel?” the Shadow said. “You need me to fight your battle and yet you would presume to challenge me? You haven’t the strength to do so.”

I smiled gently. “You’re still trapped in the Pit,” I said. “I can best a Shadow easily enough. We haven’t agreed to anything yet. I don’t *have* to let you out of your cage.”

“You need me,” the Shadow said.

“I’ll find another way to fight Gabriel,” I said. “Or maybe I’ll die trying.”

“You are a foolish little girl, Ashariel,” Lucifer’s Shadow said. “Pray that I do not find you

returned to me in Hell before I am free. You would not like to be the subject of my undivided attention in the dark.”

I smiled with courage that I did not feel. “Perhaps,” I said. “Are you ready to hear my terms?”

“I think I have the sense of it,” Lucifer’s Shadow said. “You will free me and I shall fight Gabriel on your behalf. It is not a complex arrangement.”

“Close, but you’re missing a few key points,” I said. “You won’t just fight Gabriel; you will agree to destroy him. You will ensure that he *cannot* come after me. You will also give me your word that you will not come after me, either.”

“What?” Lucifer’s Shadow cried. The smoke around his golden eyes congealed for a moment into something that almost resembled a grotesque human face. “You are asking for much, little angel.”

I nodded, my face grim. “Yet I offer much in return. Think about it, Lucifer. Your freedom, for the first time in how long? Tell me, Morning Star, how long has it been since you last walked free in this world?”

“Two thousand years, nearly,” the Shadow said. “Your offer is tempting, I will grant you that much.”

“This is the price of your freedom,” I said. “Destroy Gabriel and leave me alone. In exchange, you’ll have your freedom.” I raised my right hand towards the shadow, the one that was still smeared with my host’s blood.

“Do we have an agreement?” I asked.

For several long moments, the Shadow was silent. Then the darkness seemed to gather around us and I felt the warmth leeching out from my limbs. Everything, all life, all warmth, everything seemed to be draining into the Shadow that was Lucifer.

“I give you my word,” Lucifer's shadow said. The smoke solidified and a gnarled hand emerged from the gray mist. It took my hand in its own claw-like grip. I felt the Shadow's palm taste my host's blood and I knew that the bargain was struck.

This was the moment, I realized, the moment when everything would change. No matter what happened next, I knew that I could never take back this moment. I knew that nothing would be the same again.

The point of no return. No matter how it ended, no matter what became of me, I knew that nothing would ever be the same, ever again.

“We are agreed,” the Shadow said, its voice once more a delighted purr. “I will be free.”

I hesitated. I thought I would feel relief.

Instead, I felt only a sense of regret that it had come to this and a terrible feeling of foreboding, but no matter how I felt, there was no turning back. The agreement was made. I could not have gone back on my deal, not when the same constraints of angelic nature that forced his promise applied to me just as readily.

“FREE ME!” Lucifer's Shadow roared. Fire leapt out around us and I saw him, in that infernal glow, saw the shadow reveal a fleeting glimpse of the devil's true shape. I saw horns and wings, tentacles and claws and black scales and slaverling maws and too many eyes. He had too many eyes. The vision passed, the fires died, and it was merely a cloud of smoke around two

golden eyes once again but nothing could make me forget what I'd seen behind that smoke. My feelings of regret and foreboding returned, stronger than before. I'd just made a terrible mistake. I had to take it back, had to stop it before I did something terrible.

NO.

I felt the compulsion take hold of my mind, my body, and my soul and I knew there was no turning back. I had to obey. I'd made a promise, given my word.

For a fleeting moment, I wished that I'd been born mortal. Mortals can lie. Mortals can cheat. A mortal might have found a way to weasel out of the deal.

I was not a mortal.

"Release me, Ashariel," Lucifer's Shadow murmured. His voice echoed around itself, spoken from too many mouths within his dark form. "Release me from this prison!"

There was no going back.

I did as I was told.

## Chapter Twelve

I pushed open the old wooden church door and stepped outside. Night had fallen in this part of the world and it seemed to be winter here. Skeletal trees crowded around an empty field that was slowly being lost to growing piles of snow. Beyond the empty field, I saw a small pond, its surface crusted over with ice. A silver moon dominated a cloudless night sky. I shivered as frigid wind sliced through me like a knife.

*I didn't think fallen angels got cold,* Michael said. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while and his mental voice sounded subdued.

"We do," I said.

*What are we doing out here?* Michael asked. *Why did we leave the Shadow back inside?*

"It needs to happen outside," I said, "and not on holy ground. It makes things more difficult otherwise."

*You sound like you've done this before,* Michael said.

"I haven't," I said. I didn't offer an explanation for why I knew what I did. Michael fell silent after that and I walked towards the frozen pond. Snowflakes fell down around me. I held out my hand and watched a few drop into my open palm. They melted quickly against my bare skin.

"Falling from the sky," I murmured. "Falling from Heaven, back to the world. Back to where you belong."

*Ash?* Michael asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Just talking to myself."

*Oh,* he said. *I didn't know that you did that.*



“On occasion,” I said.

*I wish you didn't have to do this, Michael said. I wish I'd kept my stupid idea to myself.*

“I wish I didn't have to do this, either,” I said. But I did have to do it and all the wishing in the world couldn't make me ignore my angelic nature. Even fallen angels kept their promises.

I stood at the edge of the icy lake and held my hand out over it. I watched as my will formed ripples across the glassy surface, which then became little waves that spread out and distorted the smooth ice.

*You seem rather calm, considering what you're about to do, Michael said.*

“I suppose it's because I don't have a choice,” I said. “Hysterical denial won't change that.”

*Everybody has a choice, Ash, Michael said. You did.*

“I did and I made my choice,” I said. “I chose this path. Now I have no choice but to follow it through to conclusion. I must have faith that this will all work out.”

That made him pause. *You have faith? Really? You?*

“Of course,” I said. “Perhaps not in my Father, but I have faith in certain virtues: justice, truth, honor.”

*Why?* Michael asked.

“Because they are things worth believing in,” I said. “They are the reason that I chose to rebel.”

*Wow, Michael said. Never would have pegged a fallen angel for a believer.*

I smiled bitterly. “I believed most fervently in the cause,” I said. “Out of all of the

rebellious angels, I believed most strongly in Lucifer.”

*I’m sorry,* Michael said.

“Me too,” I said. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The air tasted cold and sharp in my lungs. “It’s time.”

I gathered my power to me and called Lucifer’s name three times. The ice cracked as it rippled. I watched in silence as water rose up through the cracks and took the shape of a man.

*That’s him?* Michael asked.

“It is,” I said.

The body above the pond lifted its arms and transformed into a soft, pale substance that resembled clay.

“The incarnation of flesh,” I said, though Michael hadn’t asked the question. “He is creating his own vessel.”

*He doesn’t need a host?* Michael asked.

“Archangels are powerful enough to create their own hosts,” I said. “I believe I’ve mentioned that already.”

The claylike figure pulsed with a strange glow and became a human male. He was dressed in a clean white suit that matched the snow around him. He was handsome, with strong features and a cleanly shaved face. His hair was neatly trimmed. His eyes were a warm, almost molten amber.

We made eye contact.

I shivered and it was not because of the cold. I felt myself lose all control and before I knew

what I was doing, I knelt down on the edge of the water. My liege, my lord, my captain, my Morning Star, returned to me at last! Now everything would be all right. My Lucifer would put things right. How foolish I had been, to worry my silly little head for so long. The most beautiful of our kind was here, in the flesh, and I, I alone among all our kind had been chosen to witness this most glorious event. No, more than that; I had made it happen! I had freed the Lightbringer from the bowels of Hell!

*Ash!* Michael shouted in my head. *Ashariel!*

The sound of my name hit me like a douse of cold water. I averted my eyes and broke Lucifer's enchantment. I shuddered with revulsion at the feelings he had been able to inspire in me.

*Thank you,* I said to Michael.

"I'm free," Lucifer said, his voice little more than a whisper. "After so many years in darkness, I can see again." He looked up at the silver moon. "The air is not blighted with the stench of the wicked and the corrupt. The wind does not carry the anguished howls of the damned." He looked around, eyes drinking in every detail. "Everything here is whole and pure and beautiful."

Lucifer looked at me and smiled.

"So here we are," he said. "It is nice to see you again, my dear, sweet Ashariel. I do not relish speaking through Shadows; I find face-to-face discourse to be far more preferable, would you not agree?"

I didn't answer him.

He strode forward across the water and stopped at the very edge, just before his feet would have touched the snowy ground. He looked at the distance between us and smiled once again.

My blood felt colder than the ice and snow around me, when I saw that smile, that damnable knowing expression that whispered doubt into my thoughts. *I know more than you think, little Fallen*, that smile told me. *I know you better than you know yourself because I know what you are in the dark.*

“I lived up to my end of the bargain,” I said. “I summoned you here.”

“Yes,” Lucifer said. “You did. I imagine that dear brother Gabriel will be upon us soon enough, at which point you will slink off to some shadowy corner and try to wait out the coming storm.”

I hesitated, longer than I should have and Lucifer smiled. “Your silence betrays you, Ashariel.”

“It doesn’t matter if you know at this point,” I said. I sounded more bold than I felt. “You’re here now. Gabriel will know soon enough, if he doesn’t already. You’re a much larger threat than I am.”

“A much better target,” Lucifer said and his smile curled into a sneer. “To hide behind.” He flexed his hand and long, black claws grew from the tips of his fingers. “You used me, Ashariel. I do not relish being used by anyone.”

I stood my ground, my wings splayed out to the sides of my host body. “You can’t kill me, Lucifer. Not in this world.”

“No,” he said and brandished his clawed hand. “But I can make you wish for death. I can hurt you. I can make you beg.”

I didn’t flinch away from him, though I knew he was correct. “Eventually,” I said. “You

could break me. It would take time, though, wouldn't it? How much time do you have before the Archangels are upon you?"

"I am not afraid of Gabriel," Lucifer said.

"Perhaps more than just Gabriel will come to face you," I said. "What if Gabriel and Raphael come for you? What if Prince Michael himself descends from Heaven to face you once more? What will you do then?"

"They are nothing before me," Lucifer hissed, "as you would do well to remember." He lashed out with his claws and struck me across the stomach before I had time to react.

I fell to my knees with a gasp. For a moment, there was no pain; the Lightbringer's claws had cut my host flesh cleanly for me to even feel the blow. Agony lanced through my body a moment later. I pressed my hands against my stomach and held back the slippery, gory mess that was slipping through my wound.

Lucifer looked down at me, an insane smile stitched across his lips. "Delicious," he murmured.

"I'm not dead yet," I said through clenched teeth. In my head, Michael was silent, something that I made me feel grateful to him. Perhaps he knew how important was that I not be distracted at this particular moment.

"No, of course not," Lucifer said. "You'll heal the wound easily enough. But that won't stop it from hurting now, will it? It won't stop me from doing it again. I wonder how many such blows I can inflict before I am forced to go to ground?" He held up his hand and let my blood drip through his fingers. "Let's find out together, my dear betrayer."

“You are one to speak of treachery,” I said. “You lied to me! You lied to all of us.” There was another brief flash of pain, this time from my own hands as I mended the torn flesh of my stomach and forced my guts back into their proper places. The stench of burning flesh filled the air as I cauterized the wound with another touch. It hurt nearly as badly as Lucifer’s own slash.

“I did,” Lucifer said. “The others don’t seem to take it as personally as you do, however.”

“I believed you,” I said, my voice weak from the agony of healing.

“All of the Fallen believed me. They’ve gotten over it,” Lucifer said. His voice sounded gentle now, almost sweet. “No, with you, it was something different. The others followed me. You gave yourself to me, heart and soul. You believed in the cause. You didn’t just believe me.” The insane smile was back. “You believed *in* me.”

I looked down towards the ground, away from his mad eyes. The only thing I could see was the puddle of my own blood. “Yes,” I said.

“You loved me, didn’t you?” Lucifer hissed. I felt his claws caress the back of my head, lightly, so very lightly, and even so, they opened bloody lines on the skin beneath my hair. “Admit it, Ashariel, to yourself, if not to me.”

There was no point denying it. He could read me so very easily. He knew me better than any other angel ever had.

“I loved you,” I said. “A very long time ago, you were my Archangel. You were my Lightbringer. I followed you into Hell, Lucifer, and went gladly.” I looked up at him and wiped away the blood that dripped into my eyes. “I was a fool.”

“Yes,” Lucifer said. “You were a very foolish little girl. Still are.”

“Maybe,” I said and spat my blood in his face. I swept my wing towards him. The bladelike wing sheared off his legs at the knee. There was a spray of blood and then Lucifer’s incarnated host burst apart in a cloud of viscera that flew back and reformed several yards away from me. Both legs were whole again, despite the fact that he’d left two severed limbs beside me. His face was contorted with rage.

“I will make you beg for death, little one,” Lucifer roared. He launched himself towards me, his claws going for my throat. I caught his clawed hand with my right wing and spun around, left wing raised. Lucifer’s claws shredded my wing even as I severed his hand at the wrist. I drew back from him, my right wing hanging limply at my side. His bleeding stump pulsed once and then from out of the dripping blood, a new hand emerged. It took only a moment for him to heal.

“Enough of this,” Lucifer said. He didn’t even seem bothered by the grievous wounds I’d inflicted on him. “All you’ve managed to do, dear Ashariel, is piss me off and I will take it out of your host body in equal amounts of blood and bone.”

He advanced towards me. I couldn’t fight him. There was nothing I could do to stop him. My plan had failed. No Archangel had taken notice that Lucifer had risen. Gabriel was likely still banished. I wondered, briefly, where Raphael and Prince Michael might have been. What could have been more important than this?

“It was worth a try,” I said in a small voice. Lucifer smiled as his claws closed around my throat.

A crack of thunder filled the air around us. An impossibly bright light filled the sky above us and night became day. I felt a searing pain lance through my host’s eyes and I instinctively

shielded my face. I realized what was happening the same moment that Lucifer did. I saw the look of panicked realization cross his face. I saw the fear in his eyes for a moment before the burning radiance became too much and I had to clench my eyes shut to avoid being blinded entirely. Even so, it took all of my power to keep the furious white light from burning through my eyelids.

It wasn't an Archangel that raced confront Lucifer.

It was a Seraph.

Lucifer's claws vanished from around my throat as the Morning Star disincarnated his mortal form and fled in a rush of shadowy wings.

I turned and ran.

After several steps, I spread my wings and kicked away from the ground as hard as I could. I ignored the shriek of protest from my mangled right wing.

The Seraph's roar shook the world below me but it was quickly retreating into the distance. I flew on, as fast as I could go.

I didn't know how far or for how long. At some point, I realized there was a voice in my head that wasn't mine. It was shouting at me to stop, that it was over, that we were safe. The words didn't make sense at first. The Seraph was faster than me. It was stronger. It would catch me. There was nowhere safe from it. There was no stopping it. I fled only so that I could have the privilege of dying tired.

I flew until my host body was in danger of falling apart under the strain.

There was a feeling of vertigo suddenly and I felt something break under the strain. I lost my momentum and plunged back down to the earth. I hit the ground and rolled several times.



There was the liquid feeling of something tearing and all my strength flooded out of my limbs. I ended up in a tangled heap on the ground, torn and bloody.

I put my face down against the dirt and felt very dizzy. I pulled myself up away from the ground in time to vomit everything inside my stomach. There was a lot of blood. An internal injury. I closed my eyes and focused on it until the blood stopped and the nausea passed.

I'd pushed my host body too far, strained it to the very limits. It was a grim reminder of the frailties of mortal forms without angelic power to sustain them.

I healed the damage I'd done to my host, which took most of my energy out of me but it least it stopped the nausea. Too exhausted to do anything else, I crawled away from the puddle of vomit and sprawled out in the dirt on my back. Everything felt blurry. Everything felt wrong.

*Ash?* Michael asked me quietly. *Are you okay?*

My mouth tasted bitter and vile. I wiped my mouth with my arm.

"The Seraph," I said. "Where is the Seraph?"

*I'm not sure,* Michael said. *Maybe it let us go? Also, what's a Seraph?*

"A being more powerful than you can possibly imagine," I said.

*You're more powerful than I can possibly imagine, Ash,* Michael said. *That doesn't really tell me much. Is it like an angel?*

"A Seraph is a being more powerful than *I* can possibly imagine," I said.

*Oh,* Michael said. After a pause, he added, *well, shit.*

"Indeed," I said as I glanced around.

Everything looked unfamiliar. I was in a forest glade. Trees loomed up around me and I

couldn't see the sky through the thick canopy of leaves. In the distance, I heard the steady rush of a waterfall.

I knew this place. I had been here before, not long ago.

"That's not possible," I said.

*What isn't possible?* Michael asked.

I gestured around us, ignoring the protest of torn skin and battered muscle. "This place," I said. "I have been here, in this exact spot. Except that when I was, it was in a dream. And I am not dreaming now."

*What does that mean?* Michael asked.

"I'm not sure," I said.

There was a gentle peal of amused laughter from somewhere behind me and I knew who it was before I even turned to look.

Morrigan smiled at me, her arms crossed as she leaned back against a tree, her yellow eyes gleaming. "I told you we would speak again soon," she said.

### Chapter Thirteen

My wings faded and I stood in front of her, and became keenly aware that I was wearing the body of an unwashed young man with wrinkled clothes and too much stubble, while she looked very much like a goddess. The green mist that hung over the Dreaming Path swirled around her and gave her an ethereal look.

“I suppose I should tell you that I’m glad to see you again,” I said, “but that would be a lie and I think you can tell when I’m lying. How are you here? I’m not dreaming.”

She inclined her head elegantly. “The pleasure is all mine, Firstborn,” she said. “Considering what you ran away from, I would say that my company is much preferable to that of your risen Devil. And worry not about such questions as *how* and *where* when *why* will give you an answer that is so much more interesting. Let me simply say that I am my realm and my realm is me. Queen and kingdom are inseparable at the most basic level.”

“All you’ve done since the moment I’ve awoken is toy with me,” I said, my tone harsh. “You’ve manipulated me from the very beginning. I’m sick of it. Tell me what this is. Is this the Dreaming Path or not?”

Morrigan sighed. “If you must know, we are between worlds. This is the place where the waking and dreaming touch hands. You stand with one foot in the mortal world and one foot in the dreaming world,” Morrigan said, “and you are lucky to be here, considering the fact that you ran away from your Devil.”

“How do you know about that?” I asked, momentarily forgetting my anger. “How do you know about that?”

She smiled. "I've been watching you, of course."

"For how long?"

Her smile widened. "Since the beginning."

"Since you released me from the Pit, you mean." I didn't phrase it as a question.

"Longer than that," she said. "I watched you in the Pit. I watched your past. I had to be sure."

"You had to be sure of what?" I asked.

"That you were the one who could help me," she said.

"Help you with what?" I asked.

"We will get to that," Morrigan said, her smile cryptic, "when the time is right."

"Why?" I asked. "Why did you release me? Why me?"

"Do you really wish to know?" she asked. Her gleaming yellow eyes reminded me of a serpent coiled to strike. I didn't like feeling like a helpless mouse and felt the faint brush of ego to assert my power as an angel. Fortunately for Michael and me, I was very good at ignoring that particular little voice.

"I do," I said. "I think I've earned that answer by now."

"What have you done to earn it?" Morrigan asked.

I narrowed my eyes at her and reminded myself not to listen to that little voice. I wondered briefly what Michael was thinking, if he could hear my mental struggle to control myself.

*I can hear it, Michael said. To be honest, it's a little scary.*

"Please, there's no need for the poor boy to remain a disembodied voice in your head,"

Morrigan said. "This is a dream, after all."

She made a gesture. There was a strange feeling inside my head that reminded me of water pouring out of a pitcher. I blinked and saw Michael appear beside me, or more accurately, I appeared beside him in my avatar form. I realized that I was a few inches shorter than he was. He rubbed his face in surprise and looked around.

"Feels good to stretch my legs," he said after a moment. He smiled at me. "Nice to see you again, Ash."

"My name is Ashariel," I said. The response felt like a reflex at this point. I looked back at Morrigan, who seemed inordinately pleased with herself.

"Would you like to sit?" the Fey asked. She gestured again and vines grew up suddenly around our feet. They writhed and formed themselves into the shapes of a few chairs and a small table. Morrigan sat and folded her hands in her lap. After a moment, Michael and I sat down as well.

"More comfortable than I expected," Michael said.

"As I was saying," Morrigan said. She took a moment to smooth her skirt. "You come here demanding answers without explaining why you deserve them."

"I didn't come here," I said. I felt my temper rising, already frayed by the past few days. "You brought me here."

She shook her head. "I did no such thing," she said. "You came here on your own, whether you knew it or not. You sought me out, Ashariel."

I thought about it for a moment. In those desperate moments as I fled from the Seraph, my

entire being had been focused on one thought: escape. I had placed all of my will and power into achieving that one objective. Had I unknowingly fled into the one place I knew the Seraph would not follow me?

“I’m not looking for answers,” I said. “Not yet. Right now, I’m just trying to survive, just like I was when I sought you out and asked for your help. Do you remember?”

Morrigan nodded. “I remember,” she said.

“You told me you would help me when things were desperate enough,” I said. “In your infinite wisdom and all encompassing game of manipulation, have things progressed to that point yet? In my humble opinion, considering my actions over the last few hours, things are that damn desperate.”

“There are many who look to their dreams for solutions to life’s problems,” she said. “It is one of the more endearing traits of mortal kind and it is not always a foolish endeavor.” She glanced at Michael. “You don’t talk much, do you, mortal?”

Michael’s face reddened. “I haven’t had much to say, really,” he said. “I’ve been quietly harboring the belief for the past few days that I’ve gone insane and this is all in my head.”

Morrigan’s expression didn’t waver. “You no longer believe that to be true,” she said.

Michael shook his head. “No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Why not?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. It might be that I just don’t feel like a crazy person. Everything is weird and terrifying but it’s all so lucid. It’s all clear in my head.” He looked at her, his brown eyes locked with her serpentine yellow ones. “This is real.”

Morrigan gave him an approving nod. “I was right about you after all,” she said.

He blinked. “Right about what?” Michael glanced at me. I didn’t know what to say. We both looked at Morrigan.

“It was not by random chance that I placed you in this particular mortal,” Morrigan said. “And you, mortal, it was not by mere luck that I gave you to this particular fallen angel. You are, both of you, uniquely qualified to change the other into something greater than either of you were.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Michael said, but Morrigan silenced him with a glance.

“I know what hunts you,” Morrigan said. “I know that Lucifer walks free and that his freedom was by your hand, just as your freedom was done by mine. I assume that you had a cunning plan in place before you decided to free the Fallen Archangel.” She looked at me evenly. “So I will ask only once; what went wrong?”

I thought about my answer for a moment. Did I want Morrigan as an ally? She hadn’t given me anything yet other than an ever deepening mystery. There was no way to know if she was telling the truth about anything that she had said, except that she was the one who’d freed me from the Pit. I had glimpsed her eyes in the darkness and for that reason alone.

“We had a plan,” I said.

“We?” Morrigan asked. “You and the mortal?”

I glanced at Michael. “He and I did, yes. It was his idea.”

Michael sighed. “That makes it sound like everything is my fault.”

No,” I said. “It’s not your fault. I miscalculated.”

Morrigan’s expression had turned into something feline. “What did you miscalculate, my

dear Firstborn?"

"I underestimated my Father's response," I said. "I thought that if Lucifer walked free once again, the Archangel Michael would be dispatched to deal with him. I never imagined that it would be a Seraph that would respond."

"Why was it so important that this Archangel Michael be the one to face Lucifer?" Morrigan asked.

"How much do you know about Archangels?" I asked.

A strange expression flickered across the Fey Queen's face so quickly, for a moment I was certain that I had imagined it. "A bit," Morrigan said finally, her voice oddly quiet. "I know a bit."

"Then you know that they are relentless, implacable and very nearly unstoppable," I said. "The only thing that can defeat an Archangel is another Archangel. Or a Seraph, I suppose."

"Archangels are not unstoppable," Morrigan said. When she saw me staring at her, expression openly confused, she gave a tiny shrug. "That is a story for another day."

"I'd like to hear that story some day," Michael said softly. Morrigan merely smiled and motioned for me to continue.

"An Archangel is hunting me," I said. "Was hunting me. I managed to evade him, but not forever. His name is Gabriel. I believe I mentioned him the last time we met."

"I remember the name," Morrigan said.

It was my turn to shrug. "I made a deal with Gabriel," I said. "He gave me freedom in exchange for an answer to a question."

"Ah," Morrigan said. "How much time did he give you?"



“Seven days,” I said.

“That’s not a lot of time,” Morrigan said. “Especially to an immortal.”

I shrugged. “I was desperate and the price wasn’t high. He wanted to know who freed me from the Pit.”

I felt the tension gather in Morrigan. The misty air around her thickened and a feeling of terrible gravity fell upon me as she looked at me. The Dreaming Path itself seemed to be reacting to her irritation.

“What did you tell him?” she asked, her voice frosty.

I shrugged. “The truth; that somebody released me from the Pit.”

“Did you give him a name?” Morrigan asked. “Did you give your Archangel my name?”

I looked at her. “Morrigan isn’t your true name,” I said.

“No,” she said, “but it’s *a* name and it’s one that gives me a certain measure of power. I would rather not have your Archangel aware of it.”

“Well, don’t worry, Gabriel isn’t as clever as he thinks he is,” I said. “He only asked me how I escaped and he gave me seven days of freedom in exchange for one answer.”

Morrigan smiled again and this time, I saw a growing measure of approval in her eyes. “Clever girl,” she said with open admiration. “You’re learning quickly.”

“Gabriel tried to break the terms of his own bargain,” I said. “He was banished back to Heaven.”

“I begin to understand,” Morrigan said. “Your deal with the Archangel gave you time, but not much. You needed a more permanent solution.”

“Yes,” I said, “which I will remind you was only due to the fact that *you* wouldn’t help me when I asked you for aid. I would like to make that very clear that if you hadn’t persisted in playing games with us, none of this would have happened.”

Morrigan didn’t seem offended by my accusations. In fact, more than anything, she seemed pleased. I had a moment of insight as I thought back to her cryptic promise about helping me only when I was truly desperate. I hadn’t paid much attention to it, then; the Fey Queen seemed to thrive on being frustratingly obscure, but now I began to wonder: what if this had been her plan all along? Would she have been able to predict what I would do once she refused me? Could she have known that I would unleash Lucifer on the world to escape from Gabriel?

Our eyes met and mine asked the silent question that I couldn’t bring myself to voice aloud. I held that serpentine gaze for several moments until Michael cleared his throat to break the silence. Even so, I didn’t look away. I saw the answer stitched onto her face and I knew that I had been played, that both Michael and I had been played for fools.

“You knew,” I said, my voice a whisper. “You knew what I would do. You all but led me to it.”

“Ah,” Morrigan said, “but I did not actually *force* you to choose anything, did I? The decision to release Lucifer was yours. You could have made another choice.”

“Your games drove me to do it!” I said. “You pulled me out of Hell, you put me in Michael’s body, you led me around blindly, all the while knowing that I would be pushed to the limits of desperation. You arranged for this to happen.”

“I made a series of choices,” Morrigan said. “You made a series of choices in response.

You may wish to blame me for the fact that Lucifer walks free for the first time in two millennia, but it will not change the fact that yours was the hand that opened the door. Yours was the choice that doomed poor Michael's world."

"Wait, what?" Michael asked. "What are you talking about?" He looked at me, eyes growing very wide and very afraid. "Ash, what is he talking about?"

"There is only one thing that Lucifer desires," Morrigan said. Michael turned to look at her, his hands clenched into fists. His knuckles were very white. "Unlike our dear Ashariel, who desires freedom above all else, Lucifer does not care to be free of Hell. It is his kingdom, warped and twisted though it is. No, the Fallen Archangel desires only one thing; he wishes to continue his war against his deity Father any way he can. He lost the battle for Heaven. He will not lose the battle for your Earth."

"What are you talking about?" Michael asked.

"Stop talking," I said. My eyes were shut and I clenched my fists, willing the Fey Queen to silence. She ignored me. She was beyond my ability to affect in this place.

"I am talking about the End of Days, mortal child," Morrigan said. "Armageddon. I am talking about the death of your entire species. The Apocalypse will begin soon and it is Ashariel's fault."

"No," Michael said.

"You cannot deny the truth of it," Morrigan said. "You saw it for yourself. She unleashed Lucifer the Morning Star to save herself."

"I know," Michael said. "I also know that she never meant for Lucifer to walk freely. She

meant for the Archangels to intervene. She meant for them to engage one another. That was the plan.”

“No, Michael,” I said, my voice quiet. “She’s right. Mine was the hand that opened the door. I accept the consequences of my actions, as I always have.”

“You accept the consequences of your actions,” Morrigan said, “but you do not apologize for them, do you?”

“No,” I said. “Not now. Not ever.”

Michael faced Morrigan and lifted his gaze to meet hers. He didn’t flinch. “I don’t know why it matters to you to drive a wedge between Ashariel and me,” he said. “It won’t work. You’re not going to win this particular game, so just stop trying.”

Morrigan’s amused expression evaporated and became something cold and deadly. “Boy,” she said. “Choose your words very carefully before speaking to me in such a way.” He blanched but did not look away.

I put my hand on Michael’s shoulder. He glanced at me and gave me a confident grin. “It’s okay, Ash,” he said. “She tipped her hand this time when she told us that she handpicked me to be your host.” He looked back at Morrigan, whose expression was now carefully neutral. “She has an intricate plan that she won’t upset just because I’m annoying her.”

“Very astute of you, mortal,” Morrigan said. “However, do not inflate your own sense of importance. You are correct that I need you alive. You do not know for certain that I need you alive and, say, unaffected by nightmare visions that could destroy your sanity.”

“Good point,” Michael said.

“Despite your passionate defense,” Morrigan said, “it does not change the fact that Lucifer is free and it was Ashariel who freed him. The Apocalypse will happen and your world will die.”

“Not if we stop him,” Michael said.

At some point during the past few days, I had begun to think of Michael as more than just an annoying bit of baggage that was stubbornly clinging to life inside his own head. I wasn’t sure when the change had happened; maybe it was when he suggested the plan to free Lucifer to combat Gabriel. Maybe it was the fact that I had started answering to Ash and the nickname was beginning to change me, beginning to make me into something different than Ashariel the Fallen. Something softer, gentler; something a little more human, perhaps. Regardless, I realized that there was something about this particular mortal that I found very endearing. I was beginning to like his stubborn optimism and his irreverent attitude.

Michael looked at me. “There has to be a way to stop him, right?”

“I’m not sure how,” I said. “It will be relatively easy for him to summon the rest of the Fallen now that he is free.”

“Do the Fallen start the Apocalypse?” Morrigan asked.

I shivered. A flicker of thought ignited a long forgotten bit of knowledge deep within my mind. “They don’t,” I said. “The Fallen are contained by the Gates of Hell, which Lucifer can destroy easily enough. To start the Apocalypse, however, he’d have to breach the Great Seal.”

“Why?” Michael asked. “What does it do?”

“There are depths in Hell that even the Fallen dare not venture,” I said. “There are more powerful barriers concealed within the frigid depths, erected to keep the Fallen out as much as to

keep their prisoners contained within.”

The flicker of thought turned to cold realization. “War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death,” I said. “Lucifer will unleash the Four Horseman and the Apocalypse will begin.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Michael looked at me. “Oh, shit,” he said. “You can stop him, though, right? There has to be a way to stop him.”

“I can’t stop him,” I said. “He was an Archangel before the Fall. I could never compare to his power. Ever.”

“Shit,” Michael said.

Morrigan looked at me curiously. “You are certain of this?”

“It’s prophecy,” I said. “It cannot be changed.”

“So?” Michael asked. “Screw prophecy. We have free will. We decide our own fates.”

“*You* have free will,” I told him. “I don’t. Angels don’t. For us, prophecy is the fundamental force of our existence. It is inexorable.”

“Then do not try to stop it,” Morrigan said with a sly smile. “Redirect it. Bend it. Twist it, if you must.”

I shook my head. “That’s impossible,” I said. “Even if I had the level of power necessary to do more than get in Lucifer’s way, I don’t know what I could do to unravel the fabric of the future. What will be is what will be.”

“Indeed?” Morrigan asked politely. “You truly believe this? I find that hard to believe, coming from a being who once rebelled against her omnipotent creator deity. You are a *fallen angel*, Ashariel. You were not meant to concern yourself with whether or not something is *impossible*. I would think that such defiance would extend to all things, even something as inexorable as prophecy.”

I thought. “Maybe,” I said. “But what could I do? I’m not powerful enough to stop Lucifer from doing anything. I’m an insect in comparison!”

“Based on my understanding of such things,” Morrigan said, “prophecies are very specific things. There is an order to the sequence of events. One need not *stop* these events, merely alter or delay them and then prophecy would find itself at the mercy of an even greater force.” She smiled widely. “Chaos.”

“Upset the sequence of events,” I said. “Pull on one wayward thread to start the unraveling.”

“Even the tiniest insect could perform such a feat as that,” Morrigan said.

Yes. Yes, I could do that. The fact that I was free at all already meant things were bending; my presence could not have been predicted by any prophecy. All that it would take was a small push at a critically weak juncture and everything would fall apart. Lucifer’s war would be over before it started.

“What are the parts of the prophecy?” Michael said. “Is it like in Revelations?”

“Revelation,” I said. “It’s not plural.”

“How do you even know that?” Michael asked. “It had to have been written after you were imprisoned.”

I stared hard at Michael for a moment. “Are you really willing to argue with *me* about whether or not I know how the world is going to end? This knowledge is innate. It’s in my bones. I didn’t glean it from some human book.” And then, a bit loftily, I added, “a human book that got several important details wrong.”



“Fine, fine,” Michael said. “You don’t have to rub it in.” He rubbed at the back of his neck.

“So what happens in *Revelation*? The real one, I mean?”

“First, the barrier is breached and Lucifer is freed,” I said.

Michael squinted at me. “Isn’t that exactly what you did? It sounds to me like maybe you’re part of this prophecy after all.”

I shook my head. Rather than discourage me, this only buoyed my hopes that I might be on the right track after all. “Lucifer wasn’t meant to be released by one of the Fallen,” I said. “I don’t know who is meant to free Lucifer from the Pit. It might be a mortal or perhaps a new angel will fall from Heaven. Lucifer is freed first, though. That’s the important part.”

“What happens next?” Michael asked.

“Lucifer walks the earth for a time, takes the measure of the world, sews seeds of discord, etcetera,” I said. “Once this is done, he returns to the Pit and smashes open the Gates of Hell. The Fallen will rally and reform his army.”

“And that starts the Apocalypse?” Michael asked.

I shook my head and my face turned grim. “Lucifer will not make the same mistake. He will not renew the war with the same army, not when that means he’ll just be defeated a second time. No, instead, he will journey into the depths of the Pit until he finds the Great Seals. There are seven in total, but he will only need to break four of them. He will break the Seals and gain the allegiance of the Four, who will ride forth as his general and make war upon Heaven. With the power of War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death at his command, Lucifer will storm the Gates of Heaven and the End Time will begin in earnest.”

“Who wins?” Michael asked. “Does the prophecy say who will win?”

“It doesn’t,” I said. “Only that this is what is destined to happen.”

“You know what will happen if you do nothing,” Morrigan said. “The question is: what will happen if you take action? What will happen if you intervene, Ashariel of the Fallen?”

I didn’t have to stop Lucifer. I didn’t have to avert the war. I just needed to be at the right place at the right moment and then provide the tiniest push. All that was needed was one tiny push, from a tiny insect, at just the right opportunity.

I knew of just such an opportunity. I turned to Morrigan. “The Great Seals,” I said. “That’s the weak point. That’s where I can intervene.”

Morrigan smiled. “Tell me more.”

“Lucifer will break the Seals himself to gain the Riders’ allegiance,” I said. “They will swear loyalty to him in payment for their freedom.” I smiled wickedly. “What will happen if those Seals are already broken by the time he gets there?”

“I don’t understand,” Michael said. “If these Rider dudes are so powerful, why hasn’t Lucifer *already* freed them? He’s had plenty of time to nail down that particular detail.”

It all unfolded so brilliantly and beautifully in my mind that it wouldn’t be until much, much later that I would wonder just how fortuitous it all could have been. The answer, of course, was that it wasn’t fortune at all; that this moment, this plan, everything that I thought I had to do hadn’t just been random chance. It had all been carefully orchestrated.

But I hadn’t known that, not then.

“The Great Seals can’t be broken by a Fallen alone,” I said, my smile slowly spreading

until I was grinning. “They can only be broken by a Fallen in possession of a mortal host. That’s the key. And that’s Lucifer’s biggest problem right now. The power of an Archangel is too great to be contained in a mortal form; it’s why Lucifer and Gabriel have to create their own hosts. Nothing else can sustain their power. A created form isn’t sufficient to break the Seals, though. Lucifer needs a Fallen contained within a mortal host.”

Michael looked from Morrigan to himself to me then back to himself. “Well,” he said. “I guess we’ve got that part covered.”

“More importantly,” I said, “Lucifer needs the Fallen to be one that he can trust to not betray him. Whoever unseals the Four will gain their allegiance. Lucifer can’t risk letting one of the other Fallen hold that power, not when there’s a chance that Fallen could overthrow him.”

“That’s why he wants you, isn’t it?” Michael asked. “He trusts you. He thinks you won’t betray him.”

“She’s an idealist,” Morrigan said. “You can always predict what an idealist will do.”

I glared at Morrigan, who smiled in response. “There’s just one problem,” I said. “There’s no way I can make it to the Great Seals alone. The other Fallen will intercept me and I’m no match for them, not alone.”

Unless.

Unless I wasn’t alone.

I looked at Morrigan. She looked at me. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Come with me,” I said. “Together, we can do this.”

“I’m not in the business of charity, dear,” Morrigan said. “I don’t do anything for free.”

“You set me free,” I said.

“I had my reasons,” she said. “Those reasons didn’t include this. This is a terrible risk.”

I sighed. I suspected that she was lying. For some reason, I thought she was very pleased that I’d arrived at this moment and this conclusion. She wouldn’t help me for free, not unless I gave her something in return. The price was almost certainly too high.

Almost too high, but not quite, not when I considered the prize.

It could mean true freedom. True, actual freedom, freedom from prophecy, freedom from Heaven, freedom from Hell.

I could change *everything*.

That had to be worthy any price. At least, that’s what I told myself.

“So,” I said to Morrigan. “Let’s make a deal.”

“A deal?” she asked. She leaned back against a tree and folded her arms across her chest. “What makes you certain that I have anything to offer you? What makes you think I even *care* about what happens to the world of mortals? I have my own world.”

“You care,” I said. “I don’t know why you care, but you wouldn’t have brought me out into this world if you didn’t have a reason. You have a plan.”

Morrigan smiled slyly. “You’re smarter than you look,” she said. “Why do you think I’ll be interested in making a deal with you?”

“I’ve asked for your help,” I said. “You denied me. Now I’m willing to buy it. You need me for something and you need the assurance that a deal will provide. You need to know that I can’t go back on my word.”

Morrigan's smile deepened. "Very perceptive of you."

I held my arms out to the side. "I'm ready," I said. "Let's deal."

"What are you offering?" Morrigan asked.

"What do you want?"

"Is that wise, girl?" the Fey Queen asked. "Are you truly prepared to offer me whatever I desire?"

Now it was my turn to smile. I took a step closer to her, bringing me inside of arm's reach. We were very nearly the same height, though she had slight advantage on me. I stared into her eyes. She did not flinch.

"I have been in Hell," I said quietly. "Do you know what that means? Truly?"

"I have been there," Morrigan said.

I shook my head.

"You have seen Hell," I said. "You haven't been in its grip. You have not been its thrall. You do not and *cannot* understand the Pit. Not until you experience the slow passage of time and the agonizing realization that this is your eternity. Until you have felt the ice and the terror for yourself and realized, deep in your soul, that this is your fate *forever*, you cannot comprehend the magnitude of Hell. For you, it is only a place."

Michael looked at me in silence. I realized I was breathing hard. I broke eye contact with Morrigan and stepped away from her.

"I do not think there is a price you can ask that is worse than what I have already paid," I said.

“Ash,” Michael said, but his voice faltered when I looked at him.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Just be careful.”

“He is wise, this human pet that you keep,” Morrigan said. “You should know the dangers of an open deal.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “You aren’t going to send me back to the Pit. Any price less than that is one I can pay.”

Morrigan smiled. “As you wish,” she said. “I will help you in exchange for one small thing. A favor.”

I knew better than to take her at her word. A favor could be a very large thing to a being of power. A favor owed to a Fallen was nearly as dangerous as owing it one’s own soul.

“A favor,” I said. “In return, you help me stop Lucifer from ripping open the Gates and unleashing the Four.”

“Easy enough,” Morrigan said with a light laugh. “We are agreed?”

“Yes,” I said. “We are agreed.”

A silent moment passed. There was no rush of power, no fluttering of wings. The deal was made and it simply *was*. It didn’t require theatrics to demonstrate its power. I was bound to the Fey Queen as she was to me.

“That’s it?” Michael asked. Morrigan eyed him curiously. “You just agree to help her stop the Devil from springing the Four Horseman? Is there a plan? Please tell me that there is a plan, at least.” He looked at me, and then at Morrigan. I didn’t answer. The Fey Queen merely shrugged.

“I don’t have a plan,” Morrigan said. “The mortal raises a valid concern, however.” Her lips curled into a wicked grin. “Unless you believe I am equal in strength to all the minions of Hell, I would advise against a frontal assault.”

“See?” Michael said. “Even the living nightmare agrees with me!”

Morrigan raised an eyebrow. “Living nightmare?” she asked.

He chuckled nervously. “Look, no offense, but as pretty as you are, you scare the crap out of me.”

Morrigan looked more amused than offended.

I sighed. “Let’s stay focused, please.”

“Let me just state again, for the record,” Michael said. “I think we need a plan.”

“Do you?” Morrigan asked.. “Do you have a one, mortal?” When he didn't answer, she nodded. “I did not think so. Be silent.”

I felt a sharp flicker of irritation then, a surge of protectiveness towards Michael. I frowned and ignored it.

“You will have all of my power at your disposal,” Morrigan said. “Together we will stop Lucifer.”

It was the way she said it. There was a self-assurance in her voice that transcended the limits of mortal speech. For just a moment, we each saw the other as we truly were. She saw the luminous, ruined being that clung to Michael’s mortal shell. And I saw-

I saw something vast and powerful beneath the mask she wore. I had only a fleeting glimpse of what the Fey Queen truly was, but it was enough; enough to fill me with certainty that

she was up to the task.

What was she? All I knew from that glimpse was that she was something far greater than I had suspected.

“She can do it,” I said. When Michael started to protest, I gave him a level gaze and he fell silent.

“When you have need of me, I will be there to follow you,” Morrigan said. “Until then, I will take my leave of you.”

“What?” Michael asked. “Why are we waiting? Why not go now?”

“Because,” Morrigan said, her voice patient. “Because time flows differently between these worlds, as Ashariel can tell you. A few hours spent here will not matter.”

“So?” Michael asked.

She sighed and looked at me. “You can tell him, if you want. I have a dream to attend.” She vanished without another word.

“Jesus Christ,” Michael said when we were alone. “She scares the Hell out of me.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Does she scare you more than I do?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Don't get me wrong, Ash, I know that you're Fallen but I just don't get the same feeling from her as I do from you.”

I thought about the glimpse I'd had of Morrigan's true self and nodded. “What is different about her?”

He shrugged. “You're practical. You would destroy me for getting in your way. It wouldn't



be personal. Morrigan, though.” He sighed. “When she looks at me, it makes me feel as though I’m an insect. Something barely worth her consideration, something beneath her notice entirely.”

“Most angels feel that way about mortals,” I said. “It’s nothing personal.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.”

We both fell silent and I was glad for it, because it meant I didn’t have to tell Michael how, compared to the thing I saw beneath Morrigan’s mask, I felt like an insect, too. And I’d gone and made a deal with it.

What had I done?

## **Chapter Fifteen**

In the end, it was the waiting that was the most difficult.

We were inside his head again, though no longer on the imaginary beach. Given that this was most likely our last night together, I told Michael to let his fantasies run wild. Anywhere he wanted to go, I would take him. He'd been a good host and I felt that I owed him at least that much after enslaving him to my will.

It explained why we seemed to be drifting through outer space at the moment. Stars and galaxies surrounded up in brilliant arrays of color and light. I had crafted the illusion out of a picture I had taken from his head, some wonderful little gem made by a human telescope. It was quite beautiful, that picture, and it made my heart ache, that I would not get to see such stars for myself. They really were quite beautiful.

Michael took my hand and we drifted through the wispy arm of a nebula together.

"Do you think it will work?" Michael asked.

I thought about it for a moment. "No," I said finally.

"Why bother then?" Michael asked. "Why does it matter to you if Lucifer starts the Apocalypse and destroys my world? Why fight for a lost cause?"

"I'm an idealist," I said. "Lost causes are the only ones worth my time."

"I suppose that means you betrayed Morrigan, doesn't it?" he asked. "I mean, you made a deal with her knowing you wouldn't be able to keep it. Isn't that wrong?"

"There's a lot you don't understand about the nature of deals," I said.

"So explain them to me," he said. "Just in case I ever need to make a deal with a devil in the

future.”

My smile faded and I looked at him, my eyes hard. “Don't joke about that,” I said. “Don't ever even suggest a thing.”

He flinched and I realized that I had held his hand too tightly. I let him go, but did not take my eyes away. “Promise me,” I said. “Promise me. No deals. Ever.”

“Ash, what's wrong? Why shouldn't I ever make a deal? You made one! Hell, you made more than one!”

“That's different,” I said.

“Why? Because you're an angel?”

“Yes,” I said. “I understand how they work. I know how they trap you, how no matter how good of a deal you think you might be getting, you cannot appreciate the magnitude of your mistake until it is too late.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Eternity, for one thing,” I said. “It seems a small thing, to a human, to forfeit an eternal soul for temporary power or gain. But no matter how much power you bargain for, it will never be sufficient when the demon comes to collect, and you're forced to pay up. A demon's gift costs him or her at most a little bit of difficulty, some expenditure of power. You'll be paying your end forever. No deal has terms that good.”

“Okay, fine, fine,” he said. “No deals with demons. But the Fey don't ask for souls, do they? Morrigan didn't. She just wants a favor.”

For a moment, I didn't answer him. I watched as we drifted through a cluster of stars and

marveled at their beauty, the radiant purity of their light. I felt a moment of connection when I glimpsed a star explode outward in a brilliant burst. I wondered if that star was me. Power and light and fury seemingly going on without end, until one brief moment, a single brilliant flash, and then I'm gone.

"A favor can be anything," I said.

"How is that worse than an eternal soul?"

I took Michael's hand again in a warm, comforting grip. "The Fallen are very good tempters," I said. "We know what you want and we'll offer it to you, whatever your heart may desire, we can give to you or create the illusion of giving it to you. Frankly, you won't know the difference. But you always know what we want, what we're after. We may tell you that the deal is a good one, that these are good terms, but if you're smart, you know that when a Fallen offers you a deal, it's for your soul."

"I got it," he said, somewhat impatiently. "All Fallen want souls. Well, present company excluded."

"I don't know what the Fey Queen wants," I said.

"I thought you didn't know anything about the Fey," Michael said. "I thought no angel did."

"I don't," I said. "And that's dangerous. I assume that the Fey are forced to play by the same rules as our kind; that we cannot renege on a deal once it's been made. Assumptions are dangerous. By assuming that Morrigan won't betray her word, I don't know what she gets from her deal, what she really wants. Favors can be turned into anything. Perhaps she'd simply use my

power to further her own ends. Or perhaps she wants something else entirely.”

“How is that worse than selling your soul, though?” Michael asked.

“I fell because I would not kneel to one tyrant,” I said. “I will not willingly sell my freedom to another.”

“Okay, okay, I think I get the point. No deals.” He fell silent then and we watched together when a comet flittered past us.

“Beautiful,” I murmured.

“Yeah,” Michael said, but he sounded distant, distracted. I turned to look at him.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

He waved his free hand and indicated the space all around us. “This is lovely, Ash,” he said. “Really. If it wasn't for the fact that I would freeze to death and suffocate if this were the real deal, I'd think I was really out here drifting through the stars.”

“But?” I asked.

“Let's go somewhere else,” he said.

“As you wish, my host,” I said. “Where would you like to go? The peak of the world's highest mountain? The deepest jungles? Or perhaps a world entirely of your own choosing, a fantasy you've always wished to experience? Tell me, and I shall make it for you.”

He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. “I think you know what I want, Ash,” he said. “I don't care where we go.”

“There must be something,” I said. “Ask.”

“Maybe there's one thing,” he said. “Show me Heaven?”

I grimaced. "I can't."

"Why not?" he asked. It seemed like an innocent enough question, but there seemed to be an edge in his voice. Was he pressing his advantage against me? Testing me for weakness, trying to see if he could push this knife into me?

"I don't remember what it looks like," I said.

"You don't remember anything at all?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I remember that it exists. That's it."

There was a look of understanding on his face. "The memories of Heaven were taken from you?" he asked. "Part of your punishment, I take it?"

"Yes," I said. "The Fallen will never know Heaven again, our Father has decreed, not in soul, and not even in their thoughts. Our banishment extends across all possible worlds, real and imaginary. There is no losing myself in happy times."

"Oh," he said. He looked uncomfortable.

"Indeed," I said. "Oh."

"That sucks," he said. "I can understand the need for punishment, the need for justice, even if it's brutal, even if it's intense. But that? To not only banish you but not even allow you the tiny mercy of remembering what you lost? Taking away even your ability to dream of your home? That sucks." I thought I saw something that looked more like empathy than understanding.

"You begin to understand, don't you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Michael's face was blankly innocent.

I grinned. I couldn't help it; there was a particular delight in seeing that first flash of

recognition in my host's expression, the realization that he might not be all that different from me. I didn't want his redemption, but I would take satisfaction in the vindication.

"It is my Father's lofty opinion that since he is the source of the rules, he is able to break them at will. I disagreed. "If there were rules and they were worth obeying, they should apply to all things. Even God."

"Makes sense to me," Michael said.

"Lucifer understood my frustration," I said, my voice fond with remembrance. "He told me that if I joined him, if we all stood up together, we could convince our Father of the error of his ways. We could show him, as his creations, that we deserved to be treated fairly." I smiled bitterly. "Obviously, that didn't work out so well for us. Tyrants do not like being told that they are tyrannical."

The stars around us were still beautiful, but now as I looked at them, I felt cold. These things, these jewels created by my Father, they might have been lovely, but they also seemed false and flawed, things that were created not for the sake of beauty itself, but because my Father wanted to experience beautiful things.

"I tire of looking at this void," I said. "Is there anywhere else you'd like to go?"

He thought for a moment, and then I saw a warm, honest smile appear on his face. "You know, I might have one idea," he said. "Is there still time?"

I glanced back into the physical world. There were still a few hours left before midnight. I could make the time stretch, however, if I wanted to. And I very much wanted to, for as long as I was able.

“Of course,” I said. “There is plenty of time.”

He closed his eyes. “Look inside my head,” he said. “Recreate what I'm thinking about.”

I slipped into his thoughts and saw a house, a dining room, actually, with a table that had been laid out in preparation of a feast. There were other humans that I didn't recognize, but seemed somehow familiar. I pulled all of this information into myself and wove the illusion. The starry voyage through the blackness of space shimmered and became the feast Michael had showed me.

The table was long and covered in a white cloth. Platters of food, meat and vegetables and other things that I didn't even have names for, spread out in abundance before me. I saw the other humans seated around the table, and realized there was an empty chair in front of me.

Michael sat in the chair beside it and when he saw me, his face lit up in a bright smile. He stood up and cleared his throat. The general murmur of conversation faded away.

“Everyone,” he said to the illusionary humans. “I'd like to introduce you to Ashariel. You can call her Ash, if you like. I do.”

I heard a ripple of greetings and 'pleased-to-meet-you's.'

“Ash,” Michael said, turning to look at me. “I'd like for you to meet my family.”



## Chapter Sixteen

They weren't real, of course.

They weren't real because I had created them, spun them out of the material of Michael's memories, which would explain why none of them commented on my name, on the fact that I was very obviously not a human like they were, or at least, were supposed to be.

I knew all of this, and yet I still felt something well up inside me, some great tide of emotion that left me speechless for a moment.

An older man with a crown of graying hair stood up and offered his hand to me. In a daze, I reached out and clasped his hand. He gave my arm a firm pump. "Welcome to our home, Ashariel," he said. "Will you be joining us for dinner?"

"Ashariel," the woman beside him said. "Such a pretty name."

Michael looked at me and his smile was deep and warm. "Ash, these are my parents," he said. "Thomas and Eleanor."

"Pleased to meet you both," I said.

He gestured to the other people around the table, one after another. "That's my cousin Sammy. Over there's his brother, Bobby. My aunt and uncle, George and Miriam." He gestured last to the young boy sitting at the table looking at me with wide eyes. No more than nine years of age by the look of him, he seemed like a much younger, smaller version of Michael. "And this is Stephen," he said and reached out to ruffle the kid's hair. "My little brother."

Murmured greetings and words of welcome. "Well, come on, boy," Thomas said to his son. "Pull up a chair for your lady friend. We already said grace, so you're free to dig in."

“Michael, honey, fix up a plate for Ashariel, won't you?” Eleanor said.

Michael flashed a lopsided grin. “Sure thing, Mom,” he said.

I sat down in the available chair and watched the exchange of the illusions around me. Michael's memory had proven to be a very useful material; I saw little quirks and mannerisms in their behavior, such as the way Father Thomas would slide his hand up on Mother Eleanor's leg when he thought nobody was looking. I saw the way she'd slap his hand when he crept too far along her thigh, but it was always playful, a warm rebuke instead of a cold refusal.

This was Michael's family. The Stroud clan.

Michael set a plate down in front of me and sat beside me. “Cool, huh?” he asked. “Well, I mean, for family members, anyway.”

“They all seem very nice,” I said. I picked up the fork, but hesitated. I'd eaten before, a few times in Michael's body, but it had always been biological need, the visceral craving of physical hunger. It felt strange to pantomime it now, in my avatar form.

“Would that I could ask you a question, Michael?” I asked.

He looked up from his plate. “Yeah?”

“Did you do this for me?” I asked.

I saw his face waver slightly. “No,” he said. After a moment, he added, “maybe.” Another pause. “Yes.”

“Why?” I asked. I knew that the illusions around us were watching us, but would be polite enough not to interrupt.

He didn't say anything. His gaze dropped from mine and he focused on his plate.

“I just thought it might be nice to show you something better,” he said finally. “You talk about your relationship with your Father with so much anger. You don’t have a family at all, really.”

He was right. I didn’t. Not amongst the angels in Heaven, nor amid the Fallen in Hell. I was alone.

“I thought you might like to see what it’s like to have a home and a family,” he said. “I thought you might like to see something good for a change.”

“You’re trying to change me?” I asked. To my own surprise, I sounded more tired than angry.

“Not change you, not exactly,” he said quickly. “Just show you that there are some good things in life. There are good people. There are good times to go with the bad.”

“Such an idealist,” I muttered.

He looked sheepish and shrugged.

“This isn’t what your family was really like?” I asked, wanting to change the course of the conversation. I looked again at the people I had created out of his memory. They seemed real enough to me, but then, I was the one who’d carved the illusion.

“In some ways,” Michael said. “But not completely. We had things like this once, but it was a rare thing, and it was already gone by the time I was twenty or so.”

“I see,” I said.

“I wanted this for both of us, Ash,” Michael said. He set his fork aside. “I wanted to show you what a home could be like, what I always thought of when I thought of home. I wanted to

experience that home again for myself, because this is all gone now. Everybody here is either dead,” with a long, sad look at his parents, “or else completely lost to me,” and with that, he looked at his little brother. “This is the way things should have been. I guess I wanted a chance to say goodbye this time. I didn’t get to do that before. It’s something that I regret.”

“I think I understand,” I said.

He looked around the table and his expression was sad. “It’s stupid,” he said. “I know that this isn’t really. But it’s nice to pretend, at least for a little while. It’s nice to be reminded of the times when it was good; of the times before it all fell apart.” He sighed.

“It’s not stupid,” I said.

I reached out and took the glass of wine that was next to my plate. I held it up in a toast. “If I could have your attention, please?” I said to the gathered memories of Michael’s family. Everybody stopped and looked over at me politely, and then followed my example.

“I’d like to make a toast to Michael,” I said. “For bringing us all here. He is many things, and I’m sure most of you know him better than I, given that he and I have been together only a short time, but I wanted to say how honored I am that he have invited me to share in this time with all of you.” I smiled at him and saw him blush as he smiled back in return.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Michael said.

“Yes?”

“Have there been others?”

“Others?” I asked. “Other whats?”

“Like me,” he said. “Other men. Other hosts.”

“Why, Michael,” I said and smiled seductively at him. “Are you jealous?”

“No, it’s not that,” he said. “I just need to know. I want to know.”

“Why?”

“Just tell me?”

I knew that he thought of me as basically human, despite knowing what I truly was. He thought of me as female, as beautiful, and as free to make my own choices as he himself was. I could have retorted, at that moment, but I decided not to, not when it was a question that I knew mattered to him and had, of course, been asked in good faith.

“No others,” I said finally. “You have been my first and only host. To be honest, most of the other Fallen aren't at all like me. Even before I met you, I was still more 'human,' so to speak, than the others. Most of them don't think of themselves as having any particular gender, and few of them even bother to try to recreate things such as physical pleasure or sensation. In that regard, one might say I am the most human of all of the Fallen.”

“Hmm,” Michael said. “Well, that's good. I don't think I'd like it as much if there was some bland genderless bald dude riding around in my body. I like this better.”

“Why would this other angel be bald?” I asked.

“It's just a hypothetical,” he said.

“Ah,” I said, and we both laughed, and the family of illusions, who had been listening to our exchange with infinite politeness, laughed as well.

It was good even though it wasn't real. I was glad to do this, and glad for Michael, that he asked me to do this. It was nice to know I would have a good memory no matter what happened

tomorrow.

Thinking of what was to come sent a chill through me but nobody else noticed. Then the feeling of trepidation passed and I joined Michael and the memory of his family as they laughed, ate, and celebrated the pleasure of each other's company. For me, though, it was the celebration of feeling a glimpse of what it meant to be human, if only for one moment.

One very special, very pleasant moment that I would cherish for as long as I was able, that I would make last for as long as possible. But as I looked around the table, saw Michael laugh alongside his mother and his father, both long dead, I knew that even this happy memory could not be made to last forever.

Time was marching on, and not even I, with all of my power, could make it seem otherwise.

I saw his eyebrow lift in a curious expression. "Time," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Is it time yet?" His expression was pensive.

"Not yet," I said. "But it's getting close."

I stood up from the table and inclined my head to Michael's family. "Thank you all for a lovely meal and for inviting me to share this time with your family."

Eleanor favored with a warm smile. "Of course," she said. "Any friend of Michael's is welcome here, always."

Michael led me out of the dining room and up the staircase in the hallway. I passed the rows of pictures of what I assumed were Michael and his brother at various ages. I took a moment to pause and admire a few of them.

“What are you doing?” he asked me from the top of the stairs.

“Just getting a better sense of you,” I said. “Humans are so much more transitional than we are. You practically change your appearance moment to moment.”

“I guess it would seem that way to you,” he said.

We walked together past a collection of doors until we came to the last one in the hall. “I haven't lived here for eight years. In the real world, I have a crappy studio apartment that leaks in three places. I guess part of me never stopped thinking of this as my real home.”

He opened the door to his room. “Wow, it's just like I remember it,” he said. “All my old posters. My books.” He glanced at the overflowing basket of clothes near the door. “Even my bad habits.”

I stepped into the room behind him and willed the door shut with a thought.

“It's nice,” I said.

He turned when he heard the door close. “It's not,” he said. “It's sad and pathetic. I'm holding on to a memory. I'm clinging to something that will never be.”

“We both are,” I said.

There was something sad and lost in his expression as he looked around the room. It was like he was searching for something that he knew wasn't there.

“What are you searching for, Ashariel?” Michael asked.

I paused for a moment. It wasn't often that he used my name.

“Home,” I said finally.

“Heaven?” he asked.

“That’s not home,” I said. “It never was. It never will be.”

“It’s where you’re from,” he said. “It’s where you were made.”

“Sometimes where we’re from is not where we’re meant to be,” I said. “Sometimes, where we are isn’t where we want to be either.” I nodded to the room around us that was now nothing more than a memory.

“Where is home?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it doesn’t exist for me.”

“Maybe it does,” Michael said. He stepped closer to me and our physical proximity was such that I could reach out and touch him. I hadn’t realized before that he was a few inches taller than me; just enough that I had to look up at him.

I wasn’t sure who moved first. Maybe it was Michael, wanting to be comforted in the midst of his memories. Maybe it was me, hoping and wanting for something I’d never really known.

Maybe it didn’t matter who moved first.

Maybe all that mattered was that the embrace began. His arms found their way around me and mine slipped around his. I held him just as much as he held me.

We clung to each other as this final moment passed us by in silence a not even I, in all my power, could bring it back.



## Chapter Seventeen

It was still snowing when my feet touched down on the cold, hard ground of the real world once again. I stood in front of the frozen pond, its smooth, glassy surface a perfect mirror to my own reflection and the silver moon high above. The trees around me were skeletal and devoid of leaves, and already whitened by the frost. Or perhaps they had always been that particular color. I didn't really know.

*Should have brought a winter coat,* Michael thought.

"Easily remedied," I said. My breath escaped past my lips in a long, wispy plume. A long black coat appeared on my body.

*Oh, good choice,* Michael said. *The trench coat look is timeless.*

I didn't respond to that and he didn't seem to have anything further. There was only the sound of the wind rustling through the denuded trees around us and the slow, delicate dance of the falling snowflakes.

"Falling from the sky," I muttered. "Falling from Heaven, back to the world."

*Ash?* Michael asked. He sounded concerned.

"Nothing," I said. "Just talking to myself."

*Oh,* he said. *I didn't know that you... did that.*

"On occasion," I said.

*So what happens now?*

"Now?" I echoed. "Now we wait."

*How long do we have?*

I looked up at the moon and considered. “Not long now,” I said.

*Do you know where we are?* Michael asked.

“No idea,” I said. “The Seraph is gone and that’s all I care about at the moment. Why do you ask?”

*No reason,* he answered. *Just curious. Making conversation. Always wondered what country I would die in, when I was a kid. Isn't that a morbid thought?*

“I doubt I'd really be a good judge of morbidity,” I said. “Also, there's a good chance that you'll survive. Not a great one, but fairly decent. It's entirely possible that once I'm gone, you'll wake up somewhere with a headache and no memory of what happened to you over the last week.”

That comment caught his attention. *You mean there's a chance tomorrow I won't remember any of this? I won't remember being your host?* A pause, and then, with quiet desperation in his voice, he asked, *there's a chance I won't remember you?*

“A small chance, yes,” I said. “You sound upset. I thought you would be happy with this information. You'll have your life back and you'll have a chance to repent. You can make yourself appear worthy in God's eyes and spare yourself from the Pit.”

*Yeah, but I wouldn't get to be with you,* he said.

“You don't want to follow me into Hell, Michael,” I said. “I would not be able to protect you from the other Fallen. I don’t have the power there that I do here.”

*I don't like the idea of paying lip service to a deity that I know doesn't care about us,* he argued.

“He does care about you,” I said gently. “It's me he doesn't care about.”

*I couldn't worship somebody like that,* he said.

Despite myself, I smiled. I would have understood, of course, if Michael had chosen the pragmatic option, if he did survive and chose to repent. I would have understood. But part of me was selfish and glad, even though I knew what was in store for him, part of me liked not feeling so alone. It was nice to know there was a fellow rebel who believed in the cause, even if we rebels were doomed to the last.

*Do you think Morrigan will do as you asked?* Michael said.

I stood at the edge of the icy lake and held my hand out over it. I watched as my will formed ripples across the glassy surface, which then became little waves that spread out and distorted the smooth mirror.

"I believe that she will try," I said. "She will not betray me, because it's not in her interest to betray me. But could she fail? Certainly."

*You sound remarkably calm, considering how much trust you have on something as vague and unknown as her reliability.*

"You sound remarkably mature and serious when you make observations like that," I said.

He chuckled inside my head. *Yeah, I guess I do.*

"You might say the reason I'm so calm," I said, "is because I have faith."

That made him pause. *You have faith? Really? You?*

"Of course," I said. "Not faith in my Father, certainly, but I have faith in certain virtues: justice, truth, honor. I choose to have faith in those things whether my father created them or not, because they are things worth believing in."

Wow, Michael said. *Never would have pegged a fallen angel for a believer.*

I smiled. "I believe in myself," I said. "And I believe in you."

*What's so special about believing in me?* he asked.

"I've looked inside your heart and mind," I said. "I know you better than you know yourself."

*Ash, I,* he said. *I don't know what to say. Thank you.*

Swiftly, because I knew that time was fast dissolving, I reappeared next to him in the white room of his thoughts. He blinked and looked at me in surprise.

"Ash?" he asked.

I interrupted him as I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him against me and kissed him hard on the mouth. "I believe in you," I said.

I looked at him, at this human who had been my slave, my victim, my host, and my friend. I saw him, in that moment, saw all that he was and all that he might go on to be, if he lived past this night. I saw in that moment a multitude of futures that might be his, all of them made possible by Morrigan's capricious decision to make him my host.

Perhaps it hadn't been so capricious a decision after all.

He touched my cheek then, but before we could say anything further, the physical world writhed, as if in revulsion, as though the world itself could sense the profound wrong lurking below the horizon.

*He's coming,* Michael said with fear in his voice.

I looked up at the sky, and at the moon, which was no longer silver. It had become a deep,

bloody crimson, looming high above in the night like a bleeding red eye.

“We’ve gotten his attention,” I said. “He will move quickly before the Seraph can find either of us.”

*What does that mean?* Michael asked.

“It means it’s time to go,” I said. We must go, quickly, before we are discovered.”

*Morrigan isn’t here yet,* Michael said.

“I know,” I said. “But we can’t wait for her. She knows the way to the Pit. She’s been there before. She will honor our arrangement.”

*You hope,* he said.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s my hope.”

I held my hand over the frozen ground before me. The ice cracked and shifted beneath my power. A fracture appeared and opened into a gaping hole, wider than I was tall. A cold wind began to blow from the portal, colder by far than the winter around us.

*I thought it would be warmer,* Michael said.

“Hell isn’t warm,” I said.

“Hell is cold,” I said. I stepped into the maw and began to fall.

*Hell is cold,* I thought to myself. *Like ice.*

*Like death.*

I was halfway down when something strong and sharp grasped me by the back of the neck and pulled me back out. I felt blood drip down my neck, strangely warm compared to the cold of the portal and I knew that I was about to die.

*Oh shit*, Michael said. I had just enough time to silently agree with his assessment.

I was flung away from the portal and onto the cold ground. I tried to summon my wings but something vicious slammed into me and I gasped. I pushed myself up on hands and knees and looked up at the Fallen Archangel.

Lucifer looked at me with madness in his eyes. I tried not to flinch, tried to meet his gaze, but it was impossible, like looking into the very heart of a furious star.

“Trying to run, my pet?” Lucifer asked. “Did you think I wouldn’t follow you back into the dark? Was that your plan? Try to hide in the one place you didn’t think I’d look for you?”

“How did you escape the Seraph?” I asked.

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t *escape* it, little one. I trapped it. Bound it. Put it back where it belongs. It will not save you a second time.” He smiled. “We will not be interrupted again.”

I knew he wasn’t boasting. Lucifer might not have been able to destroy a Seraph in combat but he was more than capable of tricking one.

“Glad to hear it,” I said.

“What fun we shall have, you and I,” Lucifer said as he lifted me by the neck and held me up with one hand. His claws dug angry red lines in the skin of my throat.

I tried to reply but the crushing pressure cut me off.

“Something to say in your defense, my dear?” Lucifer laughed and released his grip on my throat. I fell to my knees in the snow and grasped at the punctures his claws left in my neck. Blood welled up between my fingers with alarming speed.

“Don't you go trying to heal yourself now,” Lucifer chided. I felt my will drain out of me, my powers deplete. I felt emptied out, deflated almost, as though the majority of my very essence had just been stripped away from me.

“And don't try to run,” he murmured, “because I will find you, no matter where you go.” He knelt down beside me and held my chin in his grip. “There are no more distractions to save you from me. Not this time, little one.”

When I didn't answer him, he gripped my arm with his other hand and yanked it hard. I felt something dislocate in my shoulder and, without the buffer of my power to shield me, I was treated to the raw purity of unfettered agony. I clenched my teeth together and forced myself not to scream.

“Too proud to beg,” Lucifer seethed. “Too proud to scream for me, Ashariel? I could flay the skin from your stolen bones an inch at a time. I could pluck out your mortal's eyes and force you to watch his suffering. There are so many things that I *could* do to you. To both of you. And yet, you won't scream, will you?”

I said nothing.

“Why is that, I wonder?” Lucifer whispered. He clenched my chin and turned my face to the side, examining me. “I see you wearing this mortal shell and it sickens me. I see him there wrapped up inside your spirit like some precious little treasure and it sickens me.”

He stroked a long claw across my cheek, which drew a fresh, hot line that quickly ran red. “There is something inside you that cares for him, isn't there? There is some measure of affection that you feel for this hairless ape, this flawed creature of dust and clay.” His voice became

deliberate. “How it *sickens* me.”

I looked at him and tried to focus through the pain on my face and in my shoulder. “You’re jealous? Truly? Of a mortal?” I laughed, though it sounded more like a gasp of pain as Lucifer all but wrenched my arm out of its socket.

He laughed bitterly. “You could have been mine,” he snarled. “You *should* have been mine. I chose you; on the battlefield, for all of Heaven to see. Do you remember? Out of all Father’s angels, I chose you, just as Father once chose me.”

I didn’t say anything.

Fire returned to his eyes and I felt his claws tighten around my throat once again. I tried to retreat from the crushing pain around my neck, but I didn’t have the will to make it stop, to make it hurt less.

*Michael*, I said. *I think we're dying.*

The edges of my vision began to turn red. The pressure of Lucifer’s grip was unbearable. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t resist. The only thing worse than the crushing pressure of his grip was the bright, hot lines of agony that his claws had carved into my skin.

*I know*, he said. *It's okay. I'm not afraid to die.*

*Sorry I didn't take better care of you*, I said. For some reason, I felt terribly ashamed of that fact.

*It's okay*, he said.

*You're a good man, Michael*, I said.

I should have protected him, should have been stronger for him so that he wouldn’t feel the



need to be strong for me. I was an angel, or I had been, once, and that was what I was supposed to do, right? Be strong and fierce and powerful. I could have saved this one human. I *should* have at least saved this one human. Instead, I'd damned him right along with me, and why? Because I was afraid to do this alone? Because, deep down, I was afraid to die alone?

*It was worth it,* Michael said.

*What was?* I asked.

*All of it,* Michael said. *I know I didn't get to choose, but if I did, I would have chose you. I would have chose this.*

I felt the surge of acceptance from him and I didn't know what to say.

We looked out together, into the face of the devil leering over us as he crushed the life from our body.

"Even at the very end, you cling to him," Lucifer hissed. "Disappointing."

He splayed his claws wide and dug into my ribs. I felt the sharp talons pierce my borrowed flesh. Claws dug into the bones of my rib cage and finally, my endurance broke. I screamed, long and loud, pure agony finally given voice. I held nothing back.

Lucifer's lips twitched and he sighed in contentment. "There it is," he said. "There is the music I have waited too long to hear. Beautiful." He withdrew his hand from inside my chest and his fingers were crimson with my blood.

Lucifer grinned. "Father was right, after all," he said, eyes gleaming with madness. "It's true what they say. We always hurt the ones we love."

I felt as my ribs began to break. Pain so great it was like a white light filled my vision and I

knew that I was dying, that this would be my final moment in this strange world that had grown to mean so much to me, in so short a time.

*Sorry*, somebody whispered. It might have been me. *So sorry*.

The last thing I saw, as my vision turned to white, was the image of a scarlet haired woman with serpent's eyes standing behind Lucifer's human form.

She was smiling.

## Chapter Eighteen

Something cold and hard struck me in the face. It was a moment before I realized I was lying face down in the snow.

Weakly, I rolled over to one side and struggled to breath. Icy air lanced into my battered throat painfully as I gasped.

*Michael?* I asked.

*I'm here,* he said.

*We're not dead,* I said. *She came.*

Relief flooded through me. *She came.*

She was here. I might pay a price later, undoubtedly would have to pay a price and perhaps the price would be too high. That didn't matter now, though. What mattered now was that she was here and I was not alone before the cruel mercy of Lucifer the Morning Star.

"It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Lucifer of the Firstborn," Morrigan said. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"What are you?" Lucifer asked. "I don't know you."

"No, you don't," she said. "At least, not yet. You may call me Morrigan."

I pulled myself up on my hands and elbows and looked up. I saw Morrigan looking relaxed against a backdrop of trees. She was dressed in warm clothes with a scarf around her neck. Her reptilian eyes seemed calmly amused.

"What are you?" Lucifer asked. His voice was flat and his eyes were that of a predator sizing up potential prey.

“We don’t need to go through all the details,” Morrigan said with a wave of her hand.

“There are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, after all.”

“You know my name,” Lucifer said. “You know what I am.”

“I do,” Morrigan said.

“You should have known better than to interrupt me,” he said. There was no warning save for the cold inflection of his voice. Lucifer the sadist was gone, replaced now by something far colder and infinitely more dangerous.

I tried to scream out a warning, but Lucifer too fast. He lashed out with bloodstained claws and opened Morrigan’s face in long, bright red lines. I watched her flinch and then fall to her knees. Crimson drops stained the stone beneath her.

“You are not mortal,” Lucifer said. “That blow would have killed a mortal. What are you? A new form of angel, perhaps? The latest of my Father’s creations?” He shook his head and answered his own question. “No. You do not have the stench of Heaven upon you.”

Morrigan lifted her head and looked at him. There was real pain in her eyes as she closed the wounds on her face and stood up to face him.

“I am not Firstborn,” Morrigan said. “I am not mortal.”

“It does not matter what you are,” Lucifer said. “You are nothing before me. These are your final moments. Enjoy them as you will.”

He struck her again and this time, he opened her skin from neck to navel. She fell backwards in the snow, hands clutching at the grievous wound, trying to keep her insides from tumbling out.

*Why won't she fight back?* Michael wondered. *What is she doing?*

I didn't know. I thought of the fleeting glimpse I'd held. There was something vast and powerful hidden beneath Morrigan's mask. What was she hiding? More importantly, why was she *still* hiding it?

Lucifer grabbed Morrigan by the throat and held her before him. She thrashed and kicked in his grip. "Does she draw breath?" he asked. "Does she feel pain? She wears her own skin as a mortal does. Perhaps she will die as they do."

*Shit, was this the plan?* Michael asked in my head. *We are so screwed.*

Lucifer's lips curled back in a hungry smile. "I will make you sing for me, as I have made Ashariel sing. One song, sweet stranger, and then you may die." He began to scythe through her neck with his claws.

That was the moment that something unexpected happened. From the corner of my eye, I thought I glimpsed something moving, something massive and furred in wings. For just a moment, I glimpsed something profoundly alien and unimaginably ancient.

Then the moment passed and there was just Morrigan, dangling from Lucifer's grip, her blood gushing down through so many wounds.

Morrigan put one hand on Lucifer's wrist and crushed it.

There was a loud snap as bones broke and Morrigan fell to the ground. She landed gracefully as her torn and ripped body mended itself back together..

Lucifer didn't scream. It took only a moment for his pulverized bones to reform themselves.

“That hurt,” he said and I wasn’t sure whether his voice was filled with rage or fear.

“Let me show you what I am,” the Fey Queen said. “Let me show you my wings.”

Morrigan began to uncoil.

The image of a beautiful, red-haired woman melted away and became something massive and serpentine. Only her yellow eyes remained. Shadows curled around her as she grew in size and power. Her form was indistinct but within the writhing shadows, I caught glimpses of obsidian scales and gleaming teeth.

“In the beginning, there was light.” Morrigan said. “Your Father began with light. Though you are Fallen, you are still part of that light, despite all the darkness that you might wish to bring to the world. Your very name speaks to your purpose. You are Lucifer Morning Star. Lucifer the Light Bringer.”

“I am,” Lucifer said. “What are you?”

“I?” Morrigan sounded amused. “I am the darkness.”

She stood before him in the form of a massive, nightmarish serpentine beast. Despite her size and power, Lucifer did not tremble in her presence. The Prince of Hell was not afraid.

That was when the sky broke apart.

We all looked up at once as the low, sibilant roar rolled across us. It was a sound that both Lucifer and I recognized: the clarion call of the Prince of Heaven.

The world around us cried out in silent agony as the Gates of Heaven opened and an Archangel appeared in the sky above us.

“Lucifer!” Michael bellowed. The frozen trees around us seemed to wither and die in

response. The Prince of Heaven wore a gleaming silver breastplate and a white helmet that obscured all but his flaming white eyes. A sword of silver flame rested in his hand. He didn't seem to notice Morrigan or me, or else didn't care. His eyes were locked on Lucifer's.

"How very unfortunate," Lucifer said, Black, leathery wings grew out from his shoulders and he kicked off from the ground. I saw him rise up towards Michael.

"Brother!" Lucifer called. "I did not expect to see you so soon! Tell me, how is Father? I have missed him so very, *very* much!"

Michael's furious white gaze narrowed. "Your punishment has not ended, Betrayer," the Archangel declared. "How is it that you are returned to this world?"

Lucifer smiled at Michael. "Oh, brother, you know I won't give up my secrets that easily. You should at least try to wine and dine me before expecting me to give up *anything*." He laughed. "Ashariel let me out of the cage. You remember darling Ashariel, don't you?" He pointed down towards me.

*Oh shit*, Human-Michael said in my thoughts. *This won't end well.*

I silently agreed.

Archangel-Michael didn't even look at me. His burning white gaze remain locked on his brother. "All I see is my brother, for whom I loved above all else," the Archangel said. "For whom I would have done *anything*."

"Not anything, brother," Lucifer said. "You did not join me when I asked."

"No," Archangel-Michael said. "I would not then and I will not now. You are wrong, Lucifer. Misguided. Our Father is not your enemy."

“We were made first,” Lucifer seethed, “but he loved them best. I will not bow to the hairless apes. I will not bend my knee to them. They are flawed and broken things and I will make you *see* that. I will you show that Father was *wrong*.”

“I will not let that happen, Brother,” Archangel-Michael said.

“So be it,” Lucifer said. “Let it be war between us once again.”

“The war never stopped,” Michael said.

The world shook with fear as the Prince of Hell attacked.



## Chapter Nineteen

I wish I could say that I stood my ground.

I wish I could say that, in the end, I did what was right.

I wish I could say a lot of things.

The sky above erupted into chaos as Lucifer and Michael waged war upon each other. The forest around us withered beneath the force of each titanic blow.

“Time to go,” Morrigan said as she took my hand. She’d shifted back to normal without me even noticing; I wondered if she’d done something similar to keep Archangel-Michael oblivious to her presence.

I looked from Morrigan to the portal that I’d opened and the darkness that lay concealed within its depths.

The Pit.

“No,” I said. “I can’t go back. I won’t.”

“You can,” she said. “You will.”

*You were about to jump, Ash,* Michael said. *You were ready.*

“I’m not ready to go back there,” I said. “I thought I was, but I’m not.”

“We do not have *time* for this,” Morrigan said. “We go. Now.”

I shook my head. “I can’t,” I said.

“Why?” the Fey Queen asked.

“I’m afraid,” I said. “I’m afraid to go back there. I’m afraid I’ll never find my way back out.”

Morrigan pressed her lips together in a tight smile. “I released you once,” she said. “I will not leave you to suffer the darkness. I have too much time and effort invested in you already.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “When will you tell me why you chose me? Why me?”

“You must trust in me, Ashariel,” Morrigan said. “I will not abandon you.”

I wanted to believe her. I longed to believe her, I *ached* for it. I needed to believe in something. I needed to believe in her.

“Ashariel,” Morrigan said. “I am not your Father. I will not fail you. I will not leave you.”

“How can I know?” I asked. “How can I know that? How can I trust you when you mask all that you are in illusion and deceit? I don’t even know what you are.”

“Don’t you?” she asked.

I hesitated, afraid to answer. I thought of the fleeting glimpses I’d had of the *thing* she’d become.

“I think that you do,” she said. “I think you have begun to suspect and when you first began to imagine the truth, you recoiled from it. You hid from it. You told yourself whatever it was you wanted to believe about me, but there is already part of you that can no longer believe in your own lies. You are grateful for the gift of your freedom, but you feel that it’s just that: a gift. You are afraid to know what it was that gave you such a gift.”

She gestured out to the dying world around us, the forest of withering trees and the snow which had begun to melt away beneath the oppressive glare in the sky above.

“Your God learned that lesson with his second child,” the Fey Queen said. “You might say he got it right when he gave them the choice whether or not to return their gratitude for the gift of

life. Is that not why you rebelled? Because you felt you had no choice?”

“It is,” I said, “because I didn’t have a choice. It was obey or be cast aside.”

“And yet you chose to forsake your home,” Morrigan said. “You abandoned everything: your father, your brethren, everything that you had, everything that you were, everything that you would have been, all gone.”

I glanced back at the battle above us. Lightning flashed out from Michael’s sword and pierced Lucifer. It was terrifying and inspiring all at once; despite myself, I remembered my last great battle, and despite my fear, there was part of me longed to join in the struggle, to feel that thrill of true combat one last time.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said.

“I have given you a true purpose,” Morrigan said. “I gave you back so much more than your freedom from Hell. I gave you a reason to be. I gave you back your hope.”

I thought about that for a moment. She’d set me free. She put me in a mortal body and set me on the path that had brought me to this moment. She’d done many things for me and I knew I’d only begun to scratch at the surface of her game. Her gifts would not come without a price, I *knew* that. I knew it.

There was one thing she was wrong about. She hadn’t given me back my hope.

My hope had started to come back to life from the moment a human voice in my head gave me a new name and began the long, slow process of making me into something other than I had been.

There was so much power in names. So much power.

Michael had given me a new name.

Morrigan had hidden her name from me, as she had hidden everything. I couldn't trust her.

"You're wrong," I said. "You're wrong about me."

"Perhaps," she said. "It really doesn't matter now."

I looked at the Fey Queen's reptilian eyes and tried to read the intelligence behind that eerily beautiful face. There was nothing there to read, just something ancient and alien that was only pretending to be a woman.

"What are you?" I asked.

"You already know," Morrigan said.

"I don't," I said. "Not for certain."

"We don't have time for this," Morrigan said.

"Then tell me *quickly*."

"I could force you to follow," she said. "You owe me a favor, after all."

"I know that you won't spend your precious favor on making me do this," I said. "It's worth more to you than this. Tell me what you are, Morrigan. Tell me what you really are. Tell me what I'm going to be following into the darkness of the Pit itself."

In a voice so low I could barely hear her above the sounds of the Archangels' battle, she murmured, "as you wish."

I listened.

"In the beginning, there was only darkness," Morrigan said. "And then there was your Father, the Light of Lights, the grand Maker. He brought forth the light. He made your Heaven and

he made the Firstborn, and then he made the mortal universe, and all things in it. All things are of your Father's hand. Everything, that is, except one. Before the light, there was the darkness. What created the darkness that existed prior to your Father's light?"

I didn't say anything. Something clicked in my mind, something important, something that felt like an answer to a question I had been unknowingly pondering my entire existence.

"And now you begin to wonder if perhaps you were lied to from the very beginning. Perhaps it did not begin with your Father and his light. Now you begin to wonder if something might have existed in that primeval darkness before your Father's light."

I felt something strange, an icy feeling in my chest, painful and poignant.

"There is more to this universe than Heaven and Hell," Morrigan said. "There are the Fey. There are the dreams and nightmares of humanity, given form by a power that your kind cannot even begin to comprehend. There is the power of names and belief."

I said nothing.

"And there was once a dark thing that lurked in the void, a nameless thing that watched as the light began. It watched as Heaven was made. It watched the birth of the first Archangel. It bore silent witness to the act of creation. It watched the Rebellion and it saw you fall. It saw everything from the darkness."

"What are you?" I whispered. "What is your name? Your real name?"

"I call myself Morrigan, but that is not my name," she said and smiled. "My true name is not for you to know. It would be a terrible thing, to be burdened with that knowledge. There are names for many things that I think you would prefer not to know. The name for the death of this

world is Apocalypse, for example.

She looked at me and I saw, for the first time, truly saw the truth of the being behind her mask. I saw an infinite darkness behind her yellow eyes, darker than the void between the stars, darker even than the very depths of Hell itself. For a moment, I saw her as she truly was, as she had been before she'd strayed too close to the strange little bubble of reality my Father made.

I saw the thing she had been, unconcealed by shadow.

Huge. Vast beyond imagining. A black serpent with gleaming eyes and a maw wide enough to swallow worlds and too many wings.

"For things worse than that, however, your words fail you. They cannot begin to capture the terrible scope of what might be, of what *will* be. You do not have a word for the death of the universe," she said. "You will not have a name for the darkness that I was before your God came to be."

The death of a universe.

The death of everything.

Every angel, every Fallen, every human. My former brethren, Michael's family, Michael himself, me. Snowy forests and imaginary beaches. All of it.

"Your God might survive," Morrigan said.

"My Father is omnipotent," I said. "He would not allow the destruction of his creation."

Morrigan smirked. "He has not stopped the return of his wayward Fallen. He does not intervene when you rebel. He does not act to save his children. If he is truly your parent, he is a poor one."

I didn't have an answer for her.

“Perhaps your Father does not act because he cannot,” the Fey Queen said. “Or perhaps he chooses to not act and either result is the same for my purpose.”

“What is your purpose?” I asked. “What do you want, Morrigan? Do you intend to take Heaven for yourself?”

“I do not desire Heaven or its Throne,” Morrigan said. “I have my own agenda.”

“If you move against my Father, you would lose,” I said.

She smiled again. “As I am now, that is certainly true.”

“You could force me,” I said.

“I could,” she said. “I would rather that I did not have to. I would prefer to spend my favor wisely, instead of forcing you to do something you have already paid me to help you achieve.”

I wavered. I didn't know what to do.

*You chose this*, Michael said in my thoughts. *We need her. You need her. Trust her already and let's go.*

I looked at the battle in the sky, the clash of darkness and light, angel and demon. I thought about all that I was and all that I had been, once. I thought about the long, strange road that brought me to this moment. I thought about what I was.

Every demon was a fallen angel. But not every fallen angel was a demon.

“Follow me,” Morrigan said, and before I could reply, she stepped out into the portal in the broken ice. She dropped out of sight without a sound.

“Damn it,” I said as I looked down at the hole. “Damn it, damn it, damn it.”

*I know you're afraid*, Michael said. It really was the wrong thing to say at that particularly moment.

"You don't know," I said. "You can't imagine what it's like, Michael."

*No*, he said. *I can't. But you won't be alone. Morrigan will be there. And so will I.*

For some reason, I took a great deal of comfort from that.

"You'll follow me into Hell?" I asked.

*Of course*, he said. *It's not like I have a choice, anyway.*

"I would release you, if you asked it of me," I said.

*I'll stay with you*, Michael said. *To the very end.*

"Thank you," I said. There wasn't anything else to say at that point. I took a deep breath. I braced myself for what was about to happen.

I stepped into the portal and left myself fall.

There was a moment of vertigo as all of my senses tried to tell me that I was in too many places at once. My spatial awareness became all twisted and I was certain that I was flying and falling at the same time.

I spread my wings to control my fall, but nothing happened. Everything was too chaotic. There was nothing but a storm of wind and the terrible feeling that I was falling, falling, falling.

The darkness swallowed me whole.

I hit a hard surface with bone-shattering force and everything stopped. Agony lanced through me and I cried out.

"We are here," I heard Morrigan say. Her voice echoed oddly around me.



I opened my eyes.

*Oh shit*, Michael thought in my head.

I knew this place. I had been here before.

I was on my back on a desolate hillside. Icy wind swept over grey rocks. There were no trees, no grass, and no life for as far as I could see. Tombstones dotted the hillside; every one of them was sadly forgotten.

The bleak hills were split by a massive iron wall that seemed to extend forever. The blackened metal was tarnished and slick with frost. Far over my head, metal spikes adorned its ramparts like so many teeth.

This wasn't Hell. It was Hell's border. This was the Great Iron Wall of Dis: the barrier that kept the Fallen imprisoned in darkness. The object of so many of my nightmares, the Gates of Hell stood shattered before me.

I took a moment to heal the damage to my body. Bones reknit themselves in a painful itch. It took almost a minute before I could rise to my feet.

"I don't understand," I said. "If the Gates are already open, where are the other Fallen?"

"Does it matter?" Morrigan asked. "If they have fled the prison, it will make our passage that much easier."

I looked at the rows of tombstones, weathered and worn by age. I tried to recall those first few moments, that first instant when I felt my stolen human body for the first time in another graveyard in the mortal world. Everything felt so very, very different then. I was different.

*I like the new Ash better*, Michael said. *For what it's worth.*

“I suppose you would,” I said. “This is partly your fault.”

*My fault?* Michael asked. *I’m innocent in all of this. I’m a complete bystander.*

“We are wasting time,” Morrigan said.

“Do you know the way?” I asked.

“I do,” she said. “Follow me. Stay close and I will keep you safe.”

I didn’t doubt her, not after what I’d seen.

I followed her through the shattered gates of Dis. I followed her into Hell.

## Chapter Twenty

It felt wrong to be back. It felt cruel to feel the cold against my skin, to be reminded of the torturous embrace of my prison after tasting freedom for so brief a time.

It was a bitter cruelty, just the way Father would have wanted.

I took a little comfort in the knowledge that this would not be forever, not again. I was not alone.

There was nothing but darkness beyond the Gate. An unimaginably vast chasm yawned before me, so dark and deep that even I did not know what awaited us at the bottom. I felt the first tug of the Pit's inexorable gravity and I began to panic.

"I don't want to do this," I said. "I can't do this. I can't go back."

"It is already done," Morrigan said. "You are already here. The only way out is to go forward, into the darkness." She clasped my hand and her grip was like a vice.

"I can't," I whimpered.

"You will," she said. "I will not let go."

Morrigan stepped out over the Pit and leapt.

I had just enough time to panic.

And then we were falling.

The darkness sped around us and everything fell with us and there was nothing at all, no sound, no silence, no movement. There was only the descent into darkness.

I tried to slow my fall but the gravity of the Pit was stronger than any angel's wings could ever be. I screamed in terror.

*You scream like a mortal*, Morrigan observed wryly, her voice echoing in my thoughts.

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

We stopped falling. It felt as though a massive hand had reached out and plucked us from our tumbling descent. For the briefest moment, I thought of my Father's hand, the only thing I knew that was stronger than the Pit's gravity.

It wasn't Father's hand that held me aloft. It was Morrigan's. I looked up and saw her hanging in the darkness like a spider dangling from her web.

*How did you do that?* I wondered.

*This world is not so different than the Dreaming Path,* the Fey Queen said with the slightest sense of superiority. *It was easy. You probably shouldn't look down, by the way.*

Like an idiot, I looked down.

The gaping, festering wound that was the Pit stretched out below me, seemingly into infinity. Its bitter wind battered me with gusts that felt and smelled like the breath of a corpse. Above the moan of the wind, I heard a cacophony of screaming voices.

*What are those?* Michael wondered.

*Those are the cries of the damned,* I said. *Those are the souls with whom we share our Hell.*

I tried not to listen, but it seemed impossible to block them out entirely. The most poignant were the newly damned, those who first awakened to their fate. No human, I suspected, ever really planned on going to Hell. All of them seemed surprised to find their fate.

There were worse sounds carried on the wind. Every so often, I heard the faintest whisper of laughter, a fleeting chuckle of dark amusement or a gasp of macabre pleasure.

*The voices of the Fallen,* I said.

*It's like a black hole, Michael said. A place so dark and dense that not even light can escape it. It's like we're caught in the event horizon of a black hole out in space. Nothing gets out. Nothing escapes.*

*Nothing, except her, Morrigan said. Are you well enough to continue?*

I didn't answer.

*Hold it together, Ash, Michael said. You can do this. I believe in you.*

I tried to cling to that thought, tried to hold it up as a shield to the horror all around me. *I can do this, I said. Let's go.*

Morrigan released herself from her unseen perch and once more, we fell.

The wind screamed over me and for a long while, there was nothing but the fall itself. Down we went, deeper, darker, past the swirling mists of lost souls and the voices of demons lurking in the dark. We fell through ice and shadow, wind and regret, into the very heart of darkness. The tears in my eyes froze to shards of ice as I fell.

It felt as though we'd been falling forever.

Deeper and deeper, so far down now that even the screams of the damned were merely a memory. There was only the wind now. How far had we gone? How much farther did we have to go?

Maybe there wasn't an end to this fall. Maybe the pit was infinite. Maybe we would fall forever.

It is a frightening thing for a winged creature, to fall so long and so helplessly. I feared it instinctively, feared what it meant, to fall so far and so long without any control. My wings

couldn't save me. Only the cold grip wrapped around my hand could slow my descent. Only she could pull me back out. I had to take it on faith that she wouldn't simply leave me there when she was done with me.

I hated taking things on faith.

And then, with suddenness so abrupt it made me cry out, I hit the surface of a dark pool and went under. Cold wind was replaced by colder water as black as ink. My host body reflexively gulped down a lungful of water and I choked. I sputtered and flailed for a moment and then Morrigan's strong hand hauled me up out of the water. She was hanging in the air just above the dark water, once more suspended by what seemed like a spider's thread.

I summoned my wings and flapped once experimentally. Happily, I felt the air respond to me and I lifted myself out of the water. Hell's gravity was lessened here; I could fly again. Everything around me was still, the water smooth save for the ripples I'd created.

"What is this place?" I asked. It looked like a vast, subterranean lake. Dark shapes, black against black, drifted beneath the surface of the water. Tiny candles off in the distance provided a faint source of illumination. I looked up but saw nothing, only more darkness.

*Are we still in Hell?* Michael asked. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while. I'd almost forgotten he was there inside me, sharing in all of this.

"I don't know," I said. "I think so, but it feels different. It doesn't feel like we're in the Pit anymore, but we must be. There's no other explanation that makes sense."

"This is the very deepest layer of Hell," Morrigan said. "This is what lies at the heart of the Pit. It has its own name, though. In many ways, it is as different from Hell as Hell is from Heaven.

Another world. Another reality.”

“I’ve never heard any of this before,” I said. “Where are we?”

Morrigan smiled, barely perceptible in the dark. “An old friend told me its name once,” she said. “The Silence of the Grave.” She gestured outward. “Look there.”

I saw a rocky island jutting out of the pool, perhaps thirty feet in diameter. Its surface looked muddy and cold. It was empty except for a single massive wooden door. The door was twice my height. It was sealed shut by a band of faint light.

“The Great Seal,” Morrigan said.

I breathed. “The resting place of the Four,” I said.

“Yes,” she murmured.

*Shit*, Michael said.

“Follow,” Morrigan said. She drifted towards the island and the door. I did as instructed. As I flew, I saw more shapes below me, floating serenely beneath the surface of the water. It took me a moment to realize what they were: bodies, hundreds and hundreds of pale human corpses floating just below the surface. I grimaced.

*Is this a punishment?* Michael asked. *Are these more of the damned?*

“I do not think so,” I said. “They are too composed. There is too much serenity in their faces. They seem to be at peace.”

Morrigan landed beside the great door. “Open it,” she said. “Hurry.”

I landed beside her and looked up at the massive door. There was no marking upon the dark wood. There was no keyhole. There was only the faintly glowing band of light, the Great Seal.

The Seal that had to be broken so the Apocalypse could begin. The Seal that I had to break so the Apocalypse could be rewritten.

How could I be certain, though? What if this was all a terrible mistake? What if I was wrong about everything?

I'd been wrong before and the consequences then had been severe. What if I was wrong and I condemned Michael's world to the Apocalypse?

"It wasn't supposed to be you," Morrigan said, reading my hesitation for what it was. "Your Father never meant for you to stand here in this place with this burden on your shoulders. Another was meant to stand in this place and perform this deed. But instead, here you are. You are an unanticipated variable. You are a chaotic factor. You will change everything." She smiled. "The chains of prophecy will be undone. All will be chaos."

*That doesn't sound like a good thing,* Michael said.

"There is freedom in chaos," Morrigan said. "Indeed, it is the ultimate freedom."

I knew she was right, or at least, I trusted her enough to hope that she was. The truth was I had chosen my side the moment Morrigan led me out of the Pit. My side wasn't Heaven or Hell; I was on my own. I was the agent of chaos.

I wished fervently that chaos would be better for the world than good or evil ever had been.

The Great Seal waited for me, silent and still.

I approached it, my hand outstretched. The wood was damp and slightly spongy. I felt it pulse beneath my touch, as though something buried within the wood had awoken.

I drew out my power and channeled it into my palm. I held nothing back: there was a flash



of light that split the air, followed a second later by a small sonic boom. The blast echoed out across the lake.

I looked at the door. Nothing had happened.

I slumped slightly. I wasn't strong enough to break the Seal. It was foolish to think I could have done anything. An Archangel could have done it. Lucifer could have done it. Not me. I wasn't strong enough. I'd failed.

"Try again," Morrigan said.

I tried again. My power cracked the air and sent waves across the lake's surface, but the door held firm. I tried again, and again, and again. Finally, I fell back away from the door and dropped to one knee. I had nothing left. I was utterly spent.

"Again," Morrigan said.

I looked up at her. "I have nothing left," I said. "I have held nothing back."

"Again," she said.

I shook my head, too tired to protest. Only a fool takes the same action over and over, hoping for change.

Morrigan reached down and pulled me to my feet. "Again," she said, "with one difference. Do not focus your power with thoughts of destruction. Do not regard the Seal as something to be broken. Focus on creation. Focus on life. Try to *open* it, rather than destroy it."

*Focus again, Morrigan ordered. This time, focus on Creation, not destruction.*

It seemed a pointless gesture. Power wasn't something that concerned itself with intentions; it simply *was*. It didn't matter what I thought it should be. Right?

I regarded the door again. I took a moment to appreciate the smooth lines of the wood. The surface was slick and cold. I felt the pulse of life again within the Seal. It was waiting for me. It wanted me.

I slid my hand to the center of the door, fingers splayed out.

I waited.

*Who are you?*

A new voice in my head. It was harsh and grating, like heavy slabs of stone sliding against one another. The Seal itself was speaking to me inside my head.

*I am Ashariel*, I said.

*What else?*

*I am a fallen angel*, I said.

*What else?*

What else was there? My name was all that was truly mine. It was the reason I was the way that I was. Everything about me came from that one word, that sole declaration of identity and self.

Except that wasn't true anymore, was it? I had another name now, a new name, one that had been given to me, one that had begun to change me. I could feel the changes altering the edges of my thoughts. I wasn't the same being who had crawled out of the Pit. I was changing. I was becoming something new.

*I am Ashariel*, I said. *And I am Ash.*

The wood shivered beneath my palm. I took my hand from it and stepped back.

There was a low groan of protest as wood scraped against wood. The door swung open and

revealed an swirl of black ink.

I'd done it. The Great Seal had been opened.

From somewhere within the black depths, I heard something stir.

## Chapter Twenty-One

It began.

From the darkness, a horse cried out and another answered. Distantly, I heard a low, rumbling roar, followed by the clattering of hooves.

“They are coming,” I said.

“Indeed, they are,” Morrigan said with a smile.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” I asked. “This is what you planned for, all along?”

“My dear,” she said slowly. “Believe me when I say that this is but the beginning.”

I was interrupted by the clarion call of a trumpet. The cavern walls shook in response.

“Just like in the human book,” Morrigan said.

“I’m surprised that you read it,” I said.

She shrugged. “I have drunk deeply of the dreams and nightmares of humanity. I have never obscured this from you.”

“No,” I said. “You told me that you *were* the dreams of humanity. You lied to me about that.”

She conceded the point with a slight nod. “So I did. But the Fey are very much the offspring of those dreams and I am very much their Queen. It is not so grave a lie as you are eager to believe.”

The trumpet sounded again.

It was impossible to say what the Four truly were; only what they were not. They were neither angels nor demons. Their power was greater than the Fallen, greater than the Archangels,

greater even, I think, than the mighty Seraphim. They were the living embodiments of chaos and destruction. They were beyond reason, beyond mercy, beyond sense itself. Nothing would stop the Four from fulfilling their grim purpose.

At least, that's what I'd been led to believe.

"You are frightened?" Morrigan asked.

*I am*, Michael said. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while. He'd grown so uncharacteristically quiet that I'd almost forgotten he was still there with me.

"I fear what I have unleashed," I said. "I fear that I cannot stop what I have begun."

"Peace, Ashariel," Morrigan said. "You were the one who opened the Seal. They will obey you."

The air around us became thick and vile with the stench of decay. It pressed down over me like a reeking cloud. It was the smell of plague and corruption, rotting flesh and festering wounds.

A horse and rider appeared in the doorway. The horse had no doubt been beautiful once, but now, its lustrous white fur had been befouled by open, oozing wounds that dripped with pus. Its eyes were rheumy and mucus dripped from its nostrils. Its rider was in a similar state of decay; his skin was pockmarked with lesions and boils. Flies buzzed around him like a black cloud. He looked as though he was rotting from the inside out. He rode through the door and stopped before me.

"Pestilence," I said.

The Rider didn't respond.

A figure in bloodstained plate armor appeared in the doorway. His horse was greased with

blood and its eyes burned like embers. I could not see the Rider's face through the armor of his plate helmet. He held an enormous sword, longer than I was tall, easily in one hand. He rode through the open door and took his place beside his brother. Silently, he looked down at us.

"War," I said.

I heard a shriek of crows taking flight, their cawing eerily warped and distorted. The air rippled with the sound of frantic, unseen wings. A large, black-scaled claw reached through the open door. I stared up in amazement as the door itself widened in response to allow the Rider's passage.

The scaled beast was massive, easily twice the size of the other horses. Its scaled form was emaciated, its scales wrapped tightly against its ribs. Oversized fangs protruded from its gaping maw and its wings were folded back.

For a moment, I was reminded of Morrigan's true form, serpentine and black, but this creature was far more ferocious, far more bestial. Its eyes gleamed with the frenzy of a starving animal. Nevertheless, it was a dragon.

The Rider himself wore a tattered leather jacket. His face was sunken and painfully thin; his cheekbones stood out from his face at sharp angles. His long, stringy hair was the color of old straw. He guided his mount to its place beside his brothers.

"Famine," I said.

There was no sound to herald the arrival of the final Rider. He approached the door in graceful silence. The pale horse he rode was a living skeleton, its bones flexing as it trotted through the door. The undead steed seemed more benign than frightening, however. It looked at us with the

placidity of a normal horse.

The Rider was a curious mixture of the archaic and the modern. Like his mount, he appeared to be little more than a skeleton. He wore a modern business suit that was charcoal-grey in color. Bony fingers held a farmer's scythe that rested against his shoulder. His face was a human skull. His eye sockets were illuminated by a soft glow.

"Death," I said. My voice was little more than a whisper now.

The Pale Rider took his place beside his brothers. The Four stared down at me in silence. They seemed to be waiting for me to speak.

*Now what?* Michael asked.

I had no idea. I looked to Morrigan, hoping she had some idea.

"They are yours to command," she said.

"What do I tell them to do?" I asked.

Morrigan placed her hand on my shoulder. "Come now, my dear," she said. "You know the answer to this question; you are a warrior. These Four are your army. Command them to do as armies are wont to do. Turn them loose on your enemies. That was what we came here for, was it not?"

Turn them loose?

She was right; that had been our goal. But now, to stand before the Four and feel their terrible presence, it seemed like it was too much.

I wanted to stop the monsters. How much more a monster would I be if I unleashed these beasts upon the world? What would happen to the mortals who stood in their paths?

“Innocents will die,” I said.

“There are no innocents,” Morrigan said. “There is no turning back. There can be no regrets. This is necessary. Turn them loose.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I won’t.”

“You won’t?” Morrigan turned on me with such sudden anger that I took a step back in surprise. She rounded on me with the fury of a viper. “I will *show* you what is happening in the world above. The war has already started, little one. There is no turning back now.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me against her. I stumbled, caught off guard, and when I fell into her arms, I found myself flung upwards out of the world of the subterranean lake. I flew upwards with such dizzying speed that my mortal body groaned under the stress and threatened to rip itself apart. I held on through sheer angelic force of will.

I looked around and saw myself caught up in the massive coils of the serpentine thing that was Morrigan’s true form. She was dragging me back to the world.

Morrigan uncoiled violently and threw me to the ground. I tumbled down and landed in a heap. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs and I gasped for air.

The first breath was painful in my lungs but it tasted clean and pure and whole. We were out; out of the Pit. She’d taken me back to the world, just as she promised.

“Just as I promised,” Morrigan said, her voice a low murmur. She was wearing her human form again. She grabbed my head and directed my gaze to the sky.

At that moment, the sky burst open in a blinding flash of white light that eclipsed out the starry night. I heard the clarion call of a horn, but this was more beautiful than the skril cry of War.



It was answers by another and then another.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“The war began without you,” Morrigan said. “Heaven and Hell have gathered all their armies. It will be an even fight without the Four.”

Somewhere above us, a horn blew a final note.

For a moment, everything was bright, clear and perfectly still.

The armies of Heaven and Hell emptied out into the world, their voices joined together in one long, resounding cry. Angels and demons filled the air, too many to count.

The war had begun.

“This is the world’s fate,” Morrigan said. “Things cannot be as they were. You cannot stop it. You cannot make things as they were. All you can do, little one, is hope to introduce enough chaos to change the outcome. Do you see?”

I didn’t answer her. I saw the Archangels leading the charge with Michael and Gabriel at the head of the angelic host. I wondered briefly where Raphael was.

Lucifer led the host of Fallen. He was flanked by the Archdevils Belial and Azazel. It was the first time I’d seen so many of my brethren together since the Rebellion.

“I don’t know what to do,” I whispered. I turned my voice inward, towards Michael. *What do I do?*

*Ash, I,* he began. *I don’t know.*

*I don’t want to be the reason your world dies,* I said.

*I think it’s too late for the world either way,* he said. *Those guys look like they mean*

*business.*

I laughed weakly. He was right.

I realized then that I'd been led to this moment and that this was not my opportunity for freedom. It was all part of one big game: Morrigan's game. She'd been using me as her pawn from the very beginning. I looked at her and met her gaze. She could see the realization in my eyes.

She smiled.

We both knew that this was checkmate.

I closed my eyes.

"Go forth," I whispered to the Four. Somehow, I knew they could hear me even from the very depths of Hell. "Go forth and let none stand in your paths."

I heard the whinny of a horse and the rush of too many wings. I smelled the pungent odor of decay and felt the strange serenity of the grave.

"They are coming," I said.

I looked up at the armies of Heaven and Hell. I looked at those who had been my brethren once, my fellow rebels. I looked at the being that had once been my shining star, my beacon of hope. I looked at the family that betrayed me and the cause that had destroyed me.

I looked at the angelic host that was meant to protect this world and its mortals. I looked at the Archangels who were meant to save everybody but had not been there to save me.

Nobody had been there for me.

"They are coming, you bastards," I whispered to the armies of Heaven and Hell. It didn't matter that Morrigan had played me for a fool, not at that moment. I might not have been able to

prevent the decimation of the world but at least I would have my revenge against those who'd wronged me. "They're coming for you all."

It wasn't much.

I felt the ground rumble. The earth bucked and heaved beneath my feet. I spread my wings and leapt into the air as a sinkhole opened beneath me. Morrigan flew beside me.

I looked down and saw the Four emerge from the Pit.

Pestilence, War, Famine, Death.

My army.

"Go," I whispered. "Kill them all."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“What happens now?” I asked Morrigan.

She'd taken us to a human hospital. It was a stark white building, brightly lit, and bustling with frenzied confusion. I saw humans rushing about, carrying in the wounded, the plagued and the dead. Lights and sirens pierced the night and all around, I could hear shouting, screaming, and crying. None of them knew what had been unleashed, and it did not matter even if they did; the knowing would not save them from what was to come.

“Most of them will die,” Morrigan said. “The rest will be scattered and broken. The Apocalypse will end before it even began.”

“What about the world?” I asked. “What about humanity?”

“What about them?” she asked. “Your mortal is safe. Do the others matter?”

“They matter,” I said. Morrigan smirked.

“At least you were able to save one,” she said. “Lucky him.”

“You used me,” I said.

“I did,” she said.

“Why?”

“You don't need to know why. Not yet.”

I stared at her. “You're not done with me yet?”

She smiled again. “Not yet.”

*Tell her she can go screw herself,* Michael said.

“Unwise, child,” Morrigan said. “Do not provoke me.”

*I'm not afraid of her*, Michael said. That was a lie. He was deathly afraid of her. So was I, for that matter.

“What happens to me now?” I asked.

“Now?” she echoed as though the thought hadn’t occurred to her. “For now, my dear, you are free. You won’t be hunted; I daresay Heaven and Hell have much larger problems to deal with than you. You’re free.”

Free. Yes, free to wander a shattered world; how very thrilling. Still, it was better than the Pit. I thought of Michael’s presence, safe and sound inside me. At least I had that.

“We will see each other again,” Morrigan said.

“I hope not,” I said.

She laughed. “Until next time, my dear Ashariel.”

I grimaced.

“One more thing,” Morrigan said. “Consider this a parting gift.”

She reached out and pressed her hand against my forehead. Her fingers passed harmlessly through my skin and grabbed something spectral inside my host’s skull. I felt a stab of pain in my forehead and my vision spun dizzily. I fought through the vertigo and suppressed the urge to vomit.

When my vision cleared, I saw Morrigan looking at me. Something was different, though. I realized after a moment that we were now the same height. That was strange; in Michael’s body, I’d been several inches taller than her.

“You may not believe me now when I say this but I am grateful for everything that you did

for me and everything that you will do,” Morrigan said. “Consider this my way of saying thank you. Enjoy the gift.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand. Not until I heard a surprised cough behind me. I turned to look and I saw Michael standing there in the hallway, looking dazed.

He shook his head and stared at me for a moment. Neither of us spoke.

“Ash?” he asked finally.

I looked down at my hands. They were smaller than Michael’s hands and softer. The nails were clean. I reached up to touch my face. It wasn’t Michael’s face that I felt. Before I could do anything else, Michael rushed towards me and embraced me tightly. I had a moment to gasp in surprise before he enveloped me in his arms.

“This must be a dream,” he said. “I’m dreaming again? This is another one of your worlds, right?”

“It’s not,” I said. The sound of my voice surprised me. It wasn’t Michael’s voice anymore.

I peeked out from around the curve of his arm and saw a long, reflective pane of glass at the end of the hallway. It wasn’t a perfect reflection, but even from there, I could see the image of the woman in Michael’s arms. She was pretty and slender. Her dark eyes matched the color of her hair.

Her eyes.

My eyes.

“This is real?” he asked.

“It’s real,” I said.

“Morrigan’s gift?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Morrigan’s gift.”

I could feel the knowledge in my mind now. She’d implanted it in my thoughts as easily as planting a sapling in fertile soil. It was a little knowledge of Creation; how to incarnate in a body that was entirely my own.

This was me now.

“Hello, Michael,” I said. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person.”

He smiled at me and hugged me tightly.

I lowered my eyes, smiled, and kissed him for the very first time.

## **Part II: Michael**

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

The Apocalypse began last night, and it was my girlfriend's fault.

That felt weird to say. The girlfriend part, not the thing about the Apocalypse.

The idea that Ash, that *Ashariel*, rather, was my girlfriend, that she'd even want to be with somebody like me, well, that just didn't seem to sync up with my image of her. For one thing, it sounded so very *human*. It was so very normal, two words I wouldn't use to describe her.

And yet, the end of the world as we knew it had arrived and thanks in large part to the efforts of my fallen angel girlfriend, I was still alive.

I guessed all the people who took this Apocalypse thing seriously were out looting and rioting, or else tucked away in churches praying their little hearts out. I supposed I could have joined them, but it just seemed wrong. You couldn't really say I had faith in God, because faith wasn't for those people who'd had a fallen angel wearing their body like a puppet for the past several days. God, had it really only been a week? It seemed like a lifetime had already come and gone.

I didn't have faith anymore because I'd seen too much to believe. I *knew*.

I knew what it felt like to be possessed by a fallen angel. I knew what it Hell was. I knew the face and form of Lucifer. I didn't just believe in these things. I had *seen* them.

I was standing in a line of one at the counter in a hastily abandoned convenience store. Most of the shelves were still supplied, although I could tell that at least a few looters had already been through here. I wondered what happened to the employees. Hopefully, they'd just gone home



or something.

The beer under my arm was still cold, though, and that was something. The lights in the dingy little store were all on, too, and when I checked my watch, it was just a hair past eight in the evening. I wished there was somebody here to ring up my purchase. Otherwise, I'd have to help myself. I'd never stolen anything before and the Apocalypse seemed like a bad time to start.

On the other hand, it was not as though the crumpled bills in my pocket was going to matter anymore. I set the beer on the unmanned counter and looked at my own fish-bowl reflection in the security mirror above the register.

"Thanks for shopping at, uh," I said to the empty counter and glanced around. What convenience store was this, anyway?

"Whatever-mart," I concluded. "Enjoy the rest of your life."

"Thanks," I said to my distorted reflection. "I will."

I laid a twenty on the counter and walked out the door into the cool evening air.

I heard sirens somewhere in the distance. I saw the glow of a fire out on the horizon. I heard the murmur of a riot in progress somewhere downtown. Just another night in a big city, except for the fact that the moon was twice its normal size and its blood-red hue tinted the night sky in a rather macabre shade of crimson.

I opened a beer and looked at it, hoping for answers.

I took a long sip, grimaced at the bitter taste, and swallowed.

What the hell was I doing? I didn't even *like* this particular brand of beer.

I'd needed to go *somewhere* after the hospital. I'd needed something that was normal and

unfortunately for me, there was nothing as normal as going to a convenience store late at night. There was a cold comfort to being one of those night owls, those lost souls who frequent the all-night diners or the twenty-four hour booze shops: every other person you saw was, in their own way, just as lost and sad as you.

I'd told Ash I needed to go to the store. I didn't tell her she couldn't follow me but she was perceptive enough to sense that I needed my space. Or maybe she had something else on her mind; I thought I heard her say something about getting a car. That was fine with me. I didn't want to stick around long here anyway, but I'd be damned if I'd let her carry me out of here on her angel-wings. It was terrifying enough when she was possessing me.

At the time, getting a breath of fresh air and getting a little space had seemed like a good idea. I needed a moment to myself, I needed time to think. It was difficult to process the emotions of a fallen angel kissing you one moment while simultaneously realizing that everyone and everything you ever knew was either destroyed, or about to be.

So I'd gone off on my own and for a while, I just walked down empty streets until I'd found the convenience store. Now, though, I regretted my decision to wander off on my own. In my own way, I'd gotten used to being Ashariel's host and gotten used to the idea that as long as she was inside me, I was basically immortal. I could fly on razor-sharp wings, I could heal from any injury, and I could generate these blasts of pure power on demand. The fact that it wasn't really *me* doing those things hadn't really factored into it; my body was the one sporting the razor-wings, after all.

Now, though, I felt vulnerable. I was back in control of my own body but I felt naked

without the presence and power of the fallen angel. I glanced down at my hand and remembered when it had contained the power to rip a man apart without effort.

This was a bad part of a city even before the Apocalypse had started; you could tell that just from the old graffiti and the general feeling that better men had given up on this neighborhood a long time ago. I didn't even know which city we were in, other than it was on the east coast. Or maybe it was the west coast?

There were worse things out there to be afraid of than rioters and desperate people. There were angels and there were demons and there were the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. Running into any one of *those* people without my fallen angel girlfriend meant I was screwed three times over.

The worst part was a little voice in the back of my head. I'd gotten used to having a strange voice in my head after playing host to Ashariel, but this voice was something different. For one thing, it was masculine and it wasn't a voice I remembered. It wasn't really saying anything in particular, just this nagging little feeling. The kind of feeling that made me want to smash someone's head open with a brick, just to see what the blood and brains and bone would look like under this red moonlight.

It was a very odd sort of feeling to have. I tried to ignore it, which wasn't too difficult as I wasn't normally that violent-minded of a person. I wondered, though, about all the *other* decent, law-abiding citizens of this fine, nameless American city. I wondered how many of them might not be so adept at tuning out their nagging little murder voices.

As if conjured by my own musing, I heard the scuffle of shoes on asphalt behind me. I

turned and saw a man in faded blue denims and cowboy boots. He had a red bandana tied over his fist. Blood dripped through the bandanna and down his arm. Aside from those details, however, he looked perfectly normal. We made eye contact and he gave me a nod.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I called out. “Is that your blood?”

He grinned and revealed a mouth of yellow teeth. “Nah,” he said. “Belonged to the last guy.”

“What happened to the last guy?” I asked. Quietly, I wondered where this excess of nerve was coming from. Seriously, who was this cold-as-ice bad ass standing here in an empty gas station talking casually to a bloody-handed man? I wasn't some tough guy; I had a hard enough time sticking up to pushy customers.

“He made a fuss,” Red Hand Man said.

He held up his other hand and it, too, was stained with red. There was also a knife in his hand. It seemed a little funny to me that the knife was the second thing I noticed.

“Are you going to make a fuss?” Red Hand Man asked.

I looked at the beer bottle in my hand. The strange murder-voice in my head told me to crack it over his skull. That charming little notion was coupled with some half-remembered bit of worldly advice that in a brawl, a broken bottle was more dangerous than a knife. A bottle had more cutting edges or something like that.

I looked from my bottle to the knife in Red Hand's grip and wondered who the hell had believed *that* little pearl of wisdom.

“No fuss here,” I said with calm that I didn't understand. “Do you want my wallet?”

Red Hand Man grinned and took another step. “Maybe in normal times, sure,” he drawled. “But these aren't normal times, you know? These here are the *End Times*, and that means I give shit all about your pocket full of dead presidents, you know what I am saying?”

“Yes,” I said. “I believe I know what you were saying.”

I guess he hadn't meant for me to actually answer that rhetorical question, because my response seemed to offend him. “Shut up,” he growled. “You think you're so smart?” It sounded so much like a line from a bad movie that I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

“You think this is a fucking joke?” Red Hand asked. “Let's see how funny you think it is when I cut you some new holes, shithead.”

“They say a broken bottle is more dangerous than a knife,” I said. I showed him the beer in my hand, which was both full and sadly intact.

“I guess you should of taken the time to break it then, instead of running your smart ass mouth,” Red Hand said. He lunged.

Shit, was this really how I was going to die? Had I really been through Hell only to be killed by some knife-wielding hick just because? It seemed so unfair that I could scarcely believe that this was how I was going to die.

But it did indeed seem to be happening nonetheless and I watched as he advanced on me and thrust the knife at my sternum.

I wondered if this was a dream. It would make sense; in my opinion, I was far too calm about the whole thing. And then Red Hand Man stabbed me and I felt the impact of the knife go

through my shirt and into my ribs.

I gasped. There was a long pause. To my surprise, it didn't really hurt that much aside from the impact itself. I decided to look down to see what my blood looked like but there was no blood on my chest.

"What the holy hell?" Red Hand Man asked. "What the fuck?"

He drew his knife hand back and stabbed me again, right above the kidney. I watched as the knife punctured my shirt and glanced off my skin as though I were made of steel instead of soft flesh.

"Neat," I said.

My would-be killer didn't seem to think so, and neither did the slender, dark-haired woman standing behind him. The slender, unnaturally beautiful woman who was maybe five-five and no more a buck-twenty dripping wet. The woman who looked like she'd stepped out of my dreams, with her piercing eyes and firm ass. The woman who was my new girlfriend, officially, as of today. The woman who wasn't even human, not really, who had just learned to make herself look like one thanks to the gift of knowledge from an incredibly ancient entity called Morrigan. The woman who cared for me for some strange reason and also happened to be a fallen angel.

"Hey, Ash," I said and smiled at her.

She didn't answer me. It was still a little weird, seeing her as a separate being. I had gotten used to sharing a body with her, except when we had face-to-face meetings in my dreams. She looked entirely normal except for the angelic wings that had sprouted from her shoulders, wings that resembled overlapping blades more than feathers and yes, they were as sharp as they looked.

“What the hell are you?” Red Hand Man asked.

“You would have killed him,” Ash said. Her voice was flat.

“Yeah,” Red Hand Man said. “I guess it didn’t work, though.”

“No,” Ash said. “I guess it did not.”

“I think maybe you had something to do with that?” Red Hand Man asked.

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said and thrust the knife at her ribs.

She twisted to the right and slashed down with one razor-wing. I heard a metallic sound and the knife tumbled from the man’s hand, severed cleanly into two pieces.

“Nice control,” I said. “Not cutting off his hand like that.”

They both ignored me.

“A human just like you tried to kill me once,” Ashariel said. “It was my very first night on earth, in fact.” She pressed the blade of her wing against the man’s throat. A thin line of blood trickled down his neck. He stood perfectly still.

“I have not been amongst humans for very long,” she said, “but in this short time, I have seen that you are far more akin to my kind than you are different.”

Red Hand Man grinned. “Yeah?” he asked, smiling despite the blade against his neck.

Uh oh, I thought. When it comes to Ash, any comparison to her kindred can’t be a good thing.

“Indeed,” she said. “Like angels, humans have the potential for arrogance and cruelty. You possess the impulse to dominate and visit harm upon those that are weaker than yourself. I know

what you would do to me if I was a normal woman. I can *see* it in your mind, buried beneath the fear. Like me, you are a monster.” She stepped towards him, not removing her wing from his neck. They were so close that either one could reach out and touch the other without much effort.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t separate your head from your body,” she said. “Give me one reason.”

I wondered what the man would say. Maybe that he had a family? Maybe he’d beg for his life? Those were the typical clichés, right?

“I’m a good man at her,” he said. “You don’t want to kill a good man.”

“Are you?” she asked, one eyebrow arched.

I didn’t see what Red Hand Man had palmed in his other hand until he pressed his body against Ashariel and drove the second knife into her throat. She staggered a little in surprise and let out a gasp that was choked with blood. Her wing dropped away from his neck.

“Yeah, bitch,” Red Hand Man said. “Yeah, I’m a good man.” He pulled the knife out of her neck and drove it into her chest.

She caught his wrist and despite the fact that her hand wasn’t large enough to encircle his completely, broke his arm in a single fluid motion. She pressed her razor-wing against his neck. Red Hand Man had just enough time to scream before he was decapitated.

I closed my eyes a second before I heard the sound of his head hitting the ground. A moment later, there was a second, heavier thud. I knew it was his body.

I opened my eyes to see Ashariel looking down at the dead man. Blood rushed from the wound in her neck.



“You’re, ah,” I fumbled. “You’re bleeding a little.”

“Oh,” she said. “Right.” She touched her hand to her neck. White light surrounded her fingers and for a moment, I heard a fizzing sound that reminded me of hydrogen peroxide. When she took her hand away, the wound was gone, although she was still stained with blood, both hers and the dead man’s.

“You killed him,” I said.

She looked up at me. “I did.”

“It was totally justified, though,” I said. “He tried to kill both of us. Call it self-defense.”

“Actually, he *did* kill both of us,” she said. “You would be dead if I hadn’t protected you. The wound he dealt me would be fatal if I was mortal.”

I smiled a little. “I’m glad you’re not.”

She nodded. “Yes.” Her expression was hollow. She looked weary.

“What’s wrong?” I asked like the idiot that I am.

“I have found that the more time I spend with humans, the more it bothers me to see a human die,” she said, “even those who deserve it. Especially those who deserve it.”

“Why?” I asked.

She shook her head and didn’t answer.

“Sorry,” I said after a long, uncomfortable silence. “That was a stupid question. I’m stupid for asking.”

“It’s not stupid, it’s human,” Ashariel said. She gave me a small smile.

“Those words might as well be synonyms,” I said.

“Perhaps,” she said. She eyed the carton of bottles I held. “Did you get what you came for?”

“Yeah,” I said. The beer seemed like a small and pathetic thing now. If I hadn’t wandered off on my own, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. I couldn’t take it back though. Even Ash, despite all of her angelic power, couldn’t take it back. Fallen angels can’t rewind time any more than puny humans can.

“Do you want one?” I asked. I offered her the unopened bottle in my hand.

She took it without much enthusiasm. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. I didn’t know what to say after that. She was covered in blood and there was a dead man at her feet and I had just given her a beer. I took a second bottle from the back and twisted the cap off. “Cheers,” I said.

“Cheers,” she said.

We both drank and that was the end of that.

## Chapter Twenty-four

We stole a truck. It was a late model pickup, navy blue in color. I'd asked her if she knew how to hotwire a car, because I didn't. She'd given me a smirk, worked a little of her newfound angel magic and there was a key in her hand. I knew it would work even before she inserted it into the lock.

I was riding shotgun. She was driving. I hadn't asked where she had learned to drive.

The road out of the city was littered with burnt and abandoned cars. I didn't think we'd make it through but Ashariel swerved and wove through the wrecks and soon we were out of the urban wasteland and into a long stretch of highway surrounded by farmland on both sides.

"I think you're driving a little too fast," I said at one point.

"Too fast for what?" she asked without taking her eyes away from the road.

"You're not supposed to drive faster than your headlights," I said. "I learned that somewhere. That's a rule."

She kept the accelerator pressed to the floor despite the darkness. Her reflexes were fast enough that when the first abandoned vehicle appeared out of the dark, she made a slight readjustment and avoided it. Her expression never changed. I forced myself to relax a little.

We didn't see any other cars on the road in either direction. I rolled down the window. The night air was cool and a little damp, as though a thunderstorm had ended not long ago. The roar of the wind was deafening, though, so after a few deep breaths, I rolled the window back up.

I wondered if we were the only people out on the road. Where was everybody else?

"Probably all locked up in their basements with their shotguns and their ten-year stashes of

beans,” I said, mostly to myself. Ash didn’t say anything, not that I expected her to. Things felt different between us now that she had her own body. It occurred to me that she didn’t need me anymore and that made me nervous, and not just because I knew I couldn’t survive without her. Even though she’d kissed me in the hospital, I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was getting ready to leave me.

I glanced over at Ash and studied her face for a moment. I looked at the way her eyes were straight forward, the way she sat ram-rod straight in her seat, and the way she had both hands locked on the steering wheel in the correct position, nine-and-two, or whatever the hell it was supposed to be. I found myself wishing that I was still her host and that Morrigan hadn’t taught her how to create her own body. At least then I’d be useful to her, instead of just feeling like dead weight.

The miles passed. I tried the radio but there was static on every channel. The truck had a CD player but the previous owner hadn’t thought to leave any CDs behind. It probably would have all been country music anyway. There was nothing to look at out the window except the bloody moon looming over the horizon and even that lost its novelty after a while. I had to break the silence.

“Okay, Ash,” I said. “Talk to me about something.”

She didn’t look away from her driving. “What would you like to talk about?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Anything. Is there something you’d like to talk about?”

“You’re the one that asked,” she said.

I sighed. “Yeah, I know,” I said. “The thing is, the silence is making me crazy. I need

something to take my mind off things. I need something normal, you know? If I think about everything that's happening, everything that already *has* happened, I think I'll lose my mind."

There hadn't been much time for self-reflection since I'd become Ashariel's host. I didn't want to start thinking about the life that had been taken from me.

"Any idea where we're going?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"I suppose not," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "It just that, if this was all just some fallen-angel-wanting-to-be-human' joyride, you would have stolen a more impressive car."

"Is that so?" she asked. She sounded amused.

"Absolutely," I said. "A fallen angel on a joyride would go for something with at least eight vee's in the engine. Something with power, speed, and sex appeal."

"Michael, what does that mean? Eight vee's?"

"I have absolutely no idea," I said. "I'm not even sure that's a real thing."

We laughed together and the mood in the truck lightened a little.

"We're not going anywhere," Ashariel said.

"Well, that's not true," I said. "We're clearly going somewhere." I motioned out the window towards the seemingly infinite rows of corn that we were speeding past.

"I do not have a destination in mind," Ashariel said with an edge in her voice. Anxiety? Was that anxiety I heard?

"Okay, so no destination," I said. "That's not a problem. We're just out for a lovely drive under the lovely new red moon."

She smiled again and my thoughts turned fuzzy and mushy. Damn, I thought I was coming out of the whole puppy-dog attachment thing I'd been developing when my world had consisted of wish fulfillment and raw screaming terror. During my possession, she'd seemed more like a goddess than an angel. I guess I convinced myself what I felt for her, after I stopped hating her, was love.

Upon regaining my own body, I reflected on the fact that maybe love was a bit too strong of a word for what I felt. I'd resolved to clearly dial things back, especially now that Ash was trying out life as a human on her own two feet instead of mine. I thought I'd had things under control. I thought I was at least back in control of myself, except that whenever our eyes met, my thoughts stammered and my pulse raced.

I didn't question why I felt the way that I did. Even without the intimacy of her literally inside of me, she was still my entire world. Without her, I'd just be one more idiot wandering the desolate streets until somebody a little bit luckier than Red Hand Man managed to finish me off.

"I'm glad we're not flying, at least," I said. "That's an improvement."

She arched an eyebrow. "You don't like flying?"

"It was hard enough getting used to it when you were wearing me like a suit," I said. "At least then the wings were attached to me. I don't think I could handle the idea of flying with only your grip to keep me from splattering on the ground."

"I have a very strong grip," she said. "I would not drop you."

"It's a primal fear," I said. "It's something in my bones. Thousands of years of evolution just haven't prepared a man to get carried through the air in somebody's arms, *Super-man* movies

notwithstanding.

A thought occurred to me. “Ash,” I said slowly. “Are we running away?”

“No,” she said. There was a long pause. “Yes.”

“Ah,” I said. “May I ask what we’re running from?”

“War,” she said.

“There’s war all around us,” I said. “Unless you meant war as in *War*. You know, with the capital letter and everything. The guy on the red horse.”

“Yes,” she said.

Oh.

Shit.

“The human who attacked you,” Ash said.

“That was War?” I asked. “No way. That guy went down like a punk.”

She sighed and I had the sneaking suspicion she was frustrated with my ignorance. “The human was touched by War’s presence,” she said. “That is the unique power of the Four. They are not merely incarnations of strife and violence; they are harbingers of that which they embody. War was nearby which means that it is prudent for us to be elsewhere.”

That made sense. War would inspire violence in others, Pestilence would create plagues, and Death . . .

I shuddered. Come to think of it, Death made the other three somewhat obsolete, didn’t he?

“War was close,” she said. “He inspires bloodlust wherever he goes. We are fortunate that we did not attract his attention.”

“Wait,” I said. “You were the one that let them out. I thought you could control them?”

“I turned them loose,” she said. “But once unleashed, they are a force of nature. They are a storm. They cannot be controlled. They can only be evaded.”

“That’s what we’re doing now?” I asked. “We’re evading?”

She gave a short nod.

“I don’t suppose you could take War in a fight?” I asked. “If it came to that?”

Ash laughed but there was no humor in the sound. “I cannot,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

We drove on in silence. At some point, I fell asleep.

I don't know how long I was out for. If there were dreams, I did not remember them. Finally, I stirred and yawned.

“What time is it?” I asked.

Ash giggled. “Welcome back,” she said. “I missed you.”

I froze. That wasn't Ash's voice. Ashariel did not *giggle*.

There was a woman sitting next to me in the driver’s seat, but it wasn't Ashariel.

She couldn’t have been more different from my fallen angel girlfriend; she was curvy where Ashariel was slender and her scarlet hair seemed to glisten in the darkness of the truck’s cabin. She noticed my gaze and smiled at me. I saw that her eyes were bright yellow with the vertical pupils of a snake.

I knew her well enough, though she’d never really deigned to speak with me while Ashariel was riding in my body.



“You’re Morrigan,” I said. “The self-proclaimed Queen of the Fey.”

“Greetings, Michael,” Morrigan said to me. Her voice was rich and sultry, and despite myself, I shivered pleasantly.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I wanted to take an opportunity to talk to you,” she said. “This seemed like the best way to get your attention.”

“I’m dreaming, aren’t I?” I asked.

“Give the boy a cookie,” she said.

I knew better than to waste my time with any of the usual questions like ‘where was I’ or ‘where’s Ash’ or ‘how did I get here.’ Morrigan’s speciality was dreams and I felt safe in assuming that my actual body was still back in the truck, riding with Ashariel to wherever my fallen angel girlfriend had decided to go.

It took me a moment to realize that Morrigan was waiting for me to say something. I thought fast. “Hello,” I said. Truly, I was the soul of brilliant conversation.

“I can see why she likes you,” Morrigan said, “such charm and wit.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. I glanced around. “So this is the Dreaming Path? It looks a lot like a truck. I was expecting something more dream-worthy, you know?”

“Indeed?” Morrigan asked. “Have you looked out the window?”

Instead of the endless fields of wheat and the long, long stretch of highway, we’d come to rest in a verdant green paradise, an emerald forest that was shrouded in a thick, glistening mist. It looked more like a rainforest or a jungle than any of the civilized woods I’d known from my

childhood. The vegetation was thick enough to require a machete, with long vines hanging down from virtually every tree. The primeval wilderness had swallowed up the road in front of us and threatened to encroach on the truck as well.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, you know, aside from that. Hey, if this is my dream, shouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want?”

Morrigan grinned. “Oh, but we’re not in your dream, my dear,” she said. “We’re in mine.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, shit.”

“Do you not enjoy my little grove?” she asked. “I could take you somewhere more pleasant, if you prefer? Perhaps a beach?”

I suppressed a grimace at her casual reference of the beach; I didn’t want her to know that was Ashariel’s special place. “This is fine,” I said. “I like trees. These trees are very nice, very, you know, lush and primeval.”

“You’re safe here with me,” she said.

I doubted that but I knew better than to voice my objection out loud. I didn’t want to offend her. As a general rule, I tried not to offend quasi-godlike beings in the hearts of their own domains, not if I could help it.

The Fey Queen gave me a strange little smile, one that managed to be both seductive and also terrifying.

“So, not to sound ungrateful or anything like that,” I said, “but was there some reason you decided to check in on me? If you were looking for Ash, she’s in the next body over.”

“And what if I was looking for you, instead?” she asked. “What if I told you that I was very

interested in you, Michael?"

"I would tell you that you can't possibly miss a vanilla mortal like me," I said. "Not when there's a fallen angel right there next to me who I'm sure is both far more interesting with her millennia of existence and her tremendous amount of personal power."

"She won't listen to me right now," Morrigan said. "That's why I'm talking to you. Ashariel has played her part for the moment. Now it is your turn."

"What part?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

She smiled. "Silly boy, did you think I chose you at random to serve as Ashariel's host? No. You were selected for a purpose, just as she was."

"Okay," I said. "Are you going to tell me what this purpose is or do I have to guess?"

That elicited a giggle. "I like you," she said. "You have more of a sense of humor about you than she does."

"Thanks, I guess?"

Her expression changed. One moment, she was smiling and laughing, the next, her gaze was cold, her mouth a tight line. "I need you to listen carefully to what I am about to tell you," she said.

Her sudden shift in tone caught me by surprise. "Yeah, sure," I said. "I'm listening. What do you need to tell me?"

"Ashariel is keeping a secret from you," Morrigan said.

"I'm not really surprised to hear that," I said. "I imagine there's a lot that the *fallen angel* hasn't told me."

“This is different than some theological revelation or bit of trivial lore,” she said. “She has lied to you, Michael.”

I tried to ignore her obvious trap. She would try to lure me in and then turn me against Ashariel. I had no idea why, since there was nothing I could do to Ash. I couldn’t see what Morrigan’s angle here was.

“What is she lying to me about?” I asked. “More importantly, even if she is, which I’m frankly fully prepared to believe, why should I want to know about it? If she didn’t want to be with me, she wouldn’t. I’m not her host now. She’s completely free.”

“You’re running from the Four,” Morrigan said.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “They’re freaking scary.”

“Before you fell asleep, you asked Ashariel if she could defeat the one called War,” Morrigan said.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“In dreams, your mind is an open book to me,” Morrigan said. “All that you know is known to me in this place.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said.

“Not in the least,” she agreed. “I will tell you this: your fallen angel lied to you about War, Michael.”

I held up two fingers as if to ward her off. “Two things,” I said. “First, she’s not *my* fallen angel. She’s not *my* anything. I don’t own her. Second, if you’re trying to insinuate that Ash can take down a goddamn Rider of the Apocalypse, you must think I’m even dumber than I look and

that hurts my feelings.”

Morrigan’s patient expression didn’t waver. “I did not say she could defeat War,” she said. “I mean to say that Ashariel can *control* War.”

I hesitated. “What?”

“Ashariel can command the Four Horsemen,” Morrigan said, “if she so desires. She broke the Great Seal. She is their commander.”

“So what?” I asked. “Why are you telling me this? If Ash wants to run from the Four Horsemen, who am I to stop her?”

She narrowed her eyes. I shivered.

“Did you think it was over?” she asked. “Did you think that Lucifer has forgotten or forgiven? Did you think the Archangels will forget or forgive? He hasn’t and they won’t.”

I started to reply but Morrigan touched my lips with a finger to silence me. Her soft touch set off a reaction within me that was at once full of a desire I didn’t want and a terror that I couldn’t resist.

“They are still out there,” she said. “The war is still happening. Ashariel has an army now but without her guidance, it is useless. Without her to lead them, the Four will only act as their natures dictate. I do not think you can imagine how many of your fellow mortals will die while they run rampant.”

“What can I do?” I asked. “I can’t force her to fight again.” Not that I would force her even if I *could*, but that wasn’t something Morrigan needed to know, although I supposed that if she could read my mind, she knew anyway.

“I gave Ashariel the gift of being mortal,” Morrigan said, “but now I feel that may have been a mistake. She has withdrawn from the field of battle when she needs to be taking charge. This is the critical hour!”

“I understand how important that is to you,” I said. “But why are you telling *me*? I’m the human, remember? You should be telling *her* all of this, not me. Go try and convince her to go along with more of your schemes, because you’re wasting your time talking to me about it. I can’t do anything here.”

Morrigan’s expression seemed to be etched on her face and something occurred to me as I looked at her stony visage.

“You’re trying to do that, aren’t you?” I asked. “You’re working on her, too, but she won’t cooperate.”

Her response was the barest of nods.

“I’m your Plan B, then,” I said. “If she won’t listen to you, maybe she’ll listen to me.” I felt sickened by the very idea of working with Morrigan against Ash and not just because of my growing feelings for Ash. The idea of doing anything for Morrigan just felt somehow *wrong* in my mind.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said. “I won’t be your stooge. Find someone else.”

Morrigan laughed. And not just in the demure, amused way she had before, but in the reckless, wild, seemingly delirious way that makes you feel really awkward when you’re not in on the joke. She reached out to me and cupped my chin in her soft hands.

“Don’t touch me,” I said.

“Human child,” she hissed. She dug her fingers into my skin and I flinched. “I chose you. I gave you to her. Believe me when I say that I can take you away just as easily.”

She stepped into me, pressed her body against mine, and though I knew this was a dream, that this wasn't really *my* body, just some dream-self, it wasn't enough to keep that dream-self from having a very physical, very *male* response to suddenly feeling her breasts pressing into my chest and her hands holding my face.

“Michael, my Michael,” Morrigan whispered. “Mine to give, mine to take.”

I tried to tell her that I wasn't *her* Michael, by any stretch of the imagination. I couldn't seem to make the words come out, though. I realized I couldn't even move now. I was utterly helpless.

She leaned her head towards me, as if to kiss me, but her lips brushed past my mouth and stopped at my ear. I felt her breath against my skin and it made the hair stand up on the back of my neck as I shuddered, not with desire but with raw fear.

“Michael,” she whispered. “You will do this for your Queen.”

I felt helpless, enthralled by her presence and her power. I *was* helpless, an insignificant speck compared to the power and experience of this ancient creature that predated the stars themselves.

I wanted to pull away. I wanted to resist.

I tried to fight back.

I failed.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the overwhelming presence and power of the Fey

Queen as she whispered her will into my ear.

I listened.

I obeyed.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

I awoke with a scream.

“Michael?” Ash asked. She sounded alarmed. “Michael, what's wrong?”

“Air,” I gasped and began to roll down the window. “I just need some air.”

The cold night air made the sweat on my face turn icy cold. I held my head out the window for as long as I could, until my face began to go numb and I leaned back into my seat. I made no effort to roll the window back up.

“Michael?” she asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said, too quickly. “I had a nightmare.”

Ashariel's eyes narrowed. “Morrigan,” she said. It didn't sound like a question.

Damn it, I should have realized she'd leap directly to that conclusion. I didn't want to admit talk about this, not now, not with her. I didn't want her to know what had happened to me, what Morrigan had done to me.

I realized that I couldn't remember what Morrigan had done to me. Everything in my memory faded to black after that kiss. All I had left was the sound of her voice in my ear and a feeling of violation that I couldn't comprehend, let alone begin to explain.

“Just a regular old human nightmare,” I said. “There's nothing unnatural going on in here.” I tapped my forehead for emphasis.

She leaned over and touched my face. “You feel very damp,” she said. “Your skin is cold.”

“I just need a few minutes, Ash,” I said. “I'll be fine.”

“Do you wish to talk about it?” The question sounded forced and unnatural, as though she

was saying it because that's what people say in these situations. Come to think of it, that's probably why she'd said it.

I shook my head. "It was just a dream, Ash. It wasn't real. It was all in my head."

"Michael." Her voice was cool and firm. "I am willing to talk about it, if it will make you feel better."

"Because that's what we're supposed to do," I said. "Talk about it, that's the normal thing, the *human* thing you're supposed to do." I trailed off into silence.

It was, indeed, a very human thing to do. There probably weren't many phrases that were more quintessentially human than 'do you want to talk about it.' Maybe there were a few: 'we need to talk' and 'do these jeans make me look fat?'

I wondered if Ash would ever ask me that last one. I glanced over at her and looked down at her legs. No, those jeans didn't, and I was pretty sure no jeans would, ever, and it was a moot point anyway since she could make herself look like anything she wanted, and I was probably insane for even wondering about all of this in the first place.

"Look, it's fine," I said. "It was just a nightmare, and I'm okay now, and everything's fine, so let's just forget about it and move on."

"As you wish," Ash said.

"Okay," I said. I was surprised that I felt a little angry, which I knew was totally unjustified. After all, if anything, I should have been grateful that she was concerned about me. But I wasn't grateful; I was feeling guilty after succumbing so easily to Morrigan, even if it was just a dream and even if it wasn't really my fault. I still felt a strange ache for her and that ache was

making the rest of me feel like absolute shit.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I shivered against the cold air and rolled the window back up. The hum of the engine replaced the rush of wind. The engine's purr was almost hypnotic and I found myself drifting in until cold fear coiled inside me. I didn't want to fall asleep again, not when Morrigan might be waiting for me. I didn't know what she would do to me. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what she already *had* done to me.

I didn't want to talk about anything. I didn't want to do anything except sit there and stare out the window.

"We need to talk about something," I said. Wait, what? Words were coming out of my mouth without checking in with my brain. I felt like a puppet. No, I *was* a puppet. I was dancing on Morrigan's strings and there was nothing I could do to stop her.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked.

"Ash," I said. "Why did you lie to me?"

The feeling of violation intensified within me. This new form of domination felt so much worse than when I was Ashariel's human host. Morrigan wasn't just riding me; she was *manipulating* me. She was forcing me to do and say things that I didn't want to do and say. I wanted to scream and tell Ash not to listen, but my voice was no longer my own.

"I haven't lied to you," Ash said. There was a hard edge in her voice.

"What are we doing here, Ash?" I asked. I waved my hand at the truck. "I understand that you want to keep a low profile. That's smart thinking, sure, but why do we need to keep a low profile when the Four Horseman are yours?"

“They’re not mine, Michael.” The hard edge in Ash’s voice had become a razor now.

“We both know that’s not true,” I said. “That’s why you broke the Seal, so the Four will obey you instead of Lucifer.”

“I did break the Seal,” Ash said. “Control of the Four requires more than simply issuing commands, Michael. It requires a direct connection. It requires a level of personal involvement that I am not prepared to attempt.”

I watched the exchange with helpless fascination. I could almost hear Morrigan sitting beside me, her hand moving my jaw up and down, forcing me to speak her words.

We can't keep running forever,” I said. “Someone will catch up to us or we'll run out of places to run. Damn it, Ash, you have an army. Why don't you use it?”

She looked at me. “Is this really you speaking to me, Michael?”

I wanted to laugh and kiss my clever fallen angel for figuring out. Of course it’s not me, I tried to say. It’s Morrigan saying these things, not me.

Instead, what came out of my mouth was, “of course it’s me, Ash.”

She sighed and slouched in her chair. It was a very human gesture.

“You went to Hell, Ash,” I said. “You went into the very depths of the Pit itself. You were strong enough to break the Seal. You’re strong enough to control the Four.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking me to do, Michael,” she said. “It’s not just a matter of telling them my will. Every command must be forced. To lead them, I must *bend* them to my will.”

“If not you,” I said, “then give them to another. Let *her* command them.”

My face felt very hot as Ash stared at me through narrowed eyes.”

“Tell me, Michael,” she said, “is this really your plan or is it Morrigan’s? Are you her puppet now?”

I wanted to scream with frustration, but whatever Morrigan had done to me seemed to be unbreakable. “Does it matter?” I asked. “Would it change things?”

“When did she visit you?” Ash asked. “Was she the cause of your nightmare?”

I nodded.

Ash gripped the steering wheel very tightly. Before I realized what was happening, she had yanked the wheel hard and drove the truck onto the shoulder. The truck bounced and rattled before it jerked to a jarring stop. My teeth hurt from clattering together, but at least I was alive.

“What the hell, Ash?” I yelled.

“You should have told me right away,” she said, turning to look at me. Her eyes were bright and intense now. “I could have shielded you. I can help you.” She managed a slight smile. “I *will* help you.”

“How?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if it was me speaking or if it was still Morrigan speaking through me. “She’s practically a goddess. What can you do, Ash?”

“I will show you,” she said. She reached out and put her palm against my forehead. There was a moment of intense pain inside my skull. I cried out and clawed at her hand, but her grip was too strong. I suffered under the searing heat until I couldn’t stand it any longer. Just when I was certain that I was going to pass out or drop dead, Ash removed her hand. I slumped back against the window. When I touched my forehead, however, my skin felt normal.

“What did you do to me?” I asked.

Ash smiled faintly. “Her claws were dug deeply into your mind,” she said. “I burned them away.”

“You can do that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “We’ll see if it works. Your will should be your own again, at least for the moment.”

I thought for a moment. Everything seemed to be in order. Even the pain in my head was quickly receding. “Thanks, Ash,” I said finally. “I tried to tell you, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“I assumed as much,” she said. “I was foolish for thinking she wouldn’t try to use you for some purpose. She’s the one who gave you to me, after all. It stands to reason that she chose you for some ulterior motive.”

“Do you think that was it?” I asked. For some reason, I felt a little disappointed by the prospect that this was the only reason I’d been chosen.

“I doubt it,” Ash said. “Our friend plays a long game. There are layers within layers of complexity.”

“You sound like you admire her,” I said.

Ash looked surprised. “Do I?” She mulled it over for a moment. “I suppose that I do. In many ways, she reminds me of what I always hoped to be.”

I raised an eyebrow. “A nightmarish entity from the primordial darkness that gets off on screwing with mortals?”

She laughed. “Not quite,” she said. “Whatever else she is, however, I am certain about this much. Unlike you and I, Morrigan is truly free.”

“Hey, I’m free,” I said. “I’m a free man with free will and all that.”

She shook her head. “Certainly, your will is your own,” she said. “Yet in other ways, you are as much a prisoner as I.”

I sighed. “Ash, you’re seriously depressing me.”

“Sorry.”

After a moment, she asked, “do you think she's correct?”

I exhaled. “Shit,” I said. “I don’t know. When she spoke to me in my dream, she was adamant about getting you back in the game. Why would she do that if you were completely outclassed?”

“That does not mean she believes I can succeed,” Ash said. “Merely that this capricious entity that calls itself Morrigan has a plan for me that does not align with my current actions.”

“That’s true,” I said, “but think about it this way; why would she waste you? She’s clearly invested a lot of time and effort into you, Ash. I don’t think she would just throw that all away. I mean, how many fallen angels could she possibly have on her side?”

“None,” Ash said by way of agreement.

She took a deep breath and seemed to gather her resolve. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “Maybe *she* is right.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or afraid. “Ash, are you sure about this?”

Now that her mind was made up, her expression was resolute. “I am,” she said. “I fought for something once before: a cause, an ideal. I didn’t have the power then, the power necessary to change the world. Maybe this time, I do.” She flashed a slight smile. “I am willing to find out.”

She looked at me evenly. "It won't be safe for you, Michael."

I sighed. I knew she was right, but I hated being left behind. I hated feeling so inferior do to my mortality. More than anything, I wanted to be able to keep up with her. Not surpass her; I wasn't arrogant enough to wish for her level of power for myself. But to be her equal? That would have been nice. Alas.

"I would take you as my host again, if you will consent," Ash said.

I blinked. "You will? You can still do that?"

She laughed. "Of course," she said. "This vessel is my own creation. I can create it or discard it as I see fit." She regarded me carefully. "You will be safer with me inside you."

Despite myself, I snickered. "It's supposed to be the other way around."

"Hmm?" Ash's expression was politely curious. I suddenly felt crude for having thought of the innuendo.

"Never mind," I said. "I'm ready."

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I said with more bravery than I felt. "To be honest, it's been kind of lonely in my head without you here."

"It would appear that you're looking forward to this more than I am," she said.

"Is it the gender thing?" I asked. "It's the gender thing, isn't it? You don't like being a guy."

She smirked. "Possibly."

I touched my hand to my chest. "I'm so very, very wounded."

"You'll live," she said. "Ready?"



I closed my eyes and nodded. “Ready.”

I felt pressure against the back of my skull, like somebody had my head in a very firm grip.

And then I was lost like a leaf against the tide that was Ashariel.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Even knowing what to expect, it was hard not to panic. Numbness enveloped me. My arms no longer responded to my brain. My mouth didn't work. I couldn't see or hear anything.

*Ash!* I called out.

*I'm here,* she said.

*Don't make me sit at the kiddies' table,* I said. *Let me share headspace with you. I want to be able to see what's going on this time.*

*Are you sure?* she asked. *I will not be able to entirely shield you from what is to come.*

*I'm sure,* I said. *I don't want to be sidelined any more.*

*As you wish,* she said.

Vertigo gripped me as I fell back into myself. The world tilted violently like some sort of demented merry-go-round and then gravity and time and feeling returned. I was back in my own head.

I was paralyzed. I tried to blink and could not. I couldn't direct my gaze to where I wanted to look. I could feel my hands resting on my legs but I couldn't tell them to move.

*Is this better?* Ash asked.

Actually, it was rather irritating. When she'd used me as a host before, I spent my time most of my time the imagined space that she'd created for me. I'd only been aware of the outside world in brief glimpses and images.

This, however, made me feel like a true prisoner in my own body. I felt trapped in my skin, unable to blink, unable to fidget, unable to swallow on command. For the first time, I truly felt as

though I was possessed.

*Yeah*, I said with more enthusiasm than I felt. *This is better.*

*Welcome back to Chez Michael*, I said. *I kept the light on for you.*

*I see that*, she said and laughed. It was still weird to hear myself laugh, but not be the one actually laughing.

*So now what?* I asked.

“Now, we fly,” she said.

*Oh, goody.* I said.

She reached down and unclipped the seatbelt with one hand. With the other, she opened the door. We stepped out into the cold night air.

*Chilly*, I muttered.

“It won't matter in a moment,” she said.

*What do you mean?*

She held our hands out and I felt her power coalesce into something tangible around us.

Warmth chased away the cold that had threatened to seep into my bones. The fatigue and anxiety went away. Suddenly I felt powerful; the best I'd ever felt in my life. I felt as though the world was mine for the taking, that *anything* could be mine should I so desire it.

Was this what it felt like to be her? Was this what it felt like to be, not Ash my girlfriend, but Ashariel, the ancient, impossibly powerful angel? Was this the being that had watched as my species had crawled into existence, the being that had been around since the very dawn of time?

It was so much more than power. It was the confidence that there was nothing that I could

not do. It felt as though reality itself was now nothing more than a simple thing, a bit of clay easily reshaped according to my will.

I began to understand: being an angel was more than just having power or feeling powerful.

Being angel meant being power incarnate.

“Yes,” Ashariel said with my voice. There was a subtle resonance that I had never noticed before.

Her blade-like wings grew out of my shoulders with painless grace. My gaze turned as Ashariel looked over our shoulder to inspect them. The feathers resembled rows of overlapping blades and glowed softly in the darkness.

My gaze moved again and I realized we were running forward, out away from the road and the truck. I had just enough time to process all of this before she kicked away from the earth and spread her wings.

She caught the air and up we climbed. I felt the world recede into the night around us as we rose up into the cloudless sky.

We were flying. I, *I*, was flying.

Wordless joy formed in my thoughts. I tried to articulate how it felt, how wonderful and amazing it felt to fly, not in some mechanical shell, but on my own wings, with nothing but air and darkness between me and the world below.

I left everything behind on that ground below. For a moment, all the concerns and anxieties and fears bled out of my mind as I lost myself in the pure, simple joy of flight. I could feel Ashariel's amusement at my reaction. She laughed quietly, the sound lost to the wind as we flew.

We rode across the sky on wings of light to an uncertain destination and an even more uncertain fate, and I could not have been happier.

For how long we flew, I do not know. Eventually, I slept and surrounded as I was by the protective presence of my guardian angel, I did not dream, or if I did, the dreams were not of Morrigan.

When I awoke, it was dawn and we were still flying. The sun rose before us, bright and hot, I knew we were heading east. I wondered where we were going.

“We’re flying towards the coast,” she said.

*What’s at the coast?* I wondered. *I mean, besides the ocean and all that.*

“Pestilence is at the coast,” Ash said.

*Oh, I said. Why him? It? Whatever?*

“Pestilence is the First Rider. He is the weakest,” Ash said. “Although weakness is a relative term when dealing with any of the Four.”

*How very comforting, I said. How do we find this guy?*

“We follow in his wake,” Ash said. She looked down.

I wasn’t sure where exactly we were. Presumably, we were still on the same planet but the landscape below us was like nothing I’d even seen.

What once had been a lush green forest once was a now brown and smoking ruin. Trees were twisted into burnt husks. The earth itself had been scorched. A thick, yellowish haze hung in the air and even from the air, I could smell the stench of rot. It lingered in the air with all the grotesque persistence of an infected, pus-filled wound.

“The Four are incarnations of destruction,” Ash said. “They take no greater joy than from the ruin of the world.”

*Why are there only the four?* I asked.

“I do not know,” Ash said. “We do not know where they came from or when they were created.”

*Is it possible that there might be more than four?* I asked.

She smirked. “I doubt it. Why would you need more than four of them?”

*I don't know,* I said. *I'm just throwing out ideas here. You don't know much about them, so maybe there's actually Five Horseman of the Apocalypse.*

“What would the fifth one be called, if he were to exist at all?”

*The Rider of Chaos, maybe?* I said. *I don't know. It's just an idea.*

“I would not want to imagine a Rider more terrible than Death,” Ash said.

I looked down at the diseased wound in the world that had once been green and full of life. The infected scar stretched out below us for miles in every direction. I wondered how many people had been in its path.

It wasn't hard to stay on Pestilence's trail. The further we flew, the more noxious the air became. The ground below withered away into an endless field of rot. I knew that without Ashariel protecting me, the poisonous fumes rising from the earth would likely kill me in minutes.

“There he is,” Ash said in a low voice.

She looked towards the horizon. A lone figure astride a decaying horse waited at the edge of a ruined town. He seemed to be surveying his handiwork.

“There is no turning back now,” Ash said. “I do not think I could outrun him.”

Pestilence turned and looked up at the sky. He looked like a walking sack of oozing sores and rotting flesh. His decayed skin was loose and bag-like around his bones. As he moved, pieces of flesh fell to the ground and revealed glimpses of putrid meat and yellow bones.

“An uninvited guest,” Pestilence said. Its voice was phlegmy rasp. “How amusing.”

Ashariel swept down towards the earth and struck the blighted ground like a falling star. Her landing kicked up a cloud of dust as the world shook from the force of the impact.

Pestilence stared at us. His eyes were clouded over and milky white. Drool hung in strands from around the Rider's slack mouth.

“The Fallen has returned?” Pestilence asked. “How curious.”

“Indeed,” Ash said. “You’ll find that I’m full of surprises.”

“Why are you here, Fallen?” the Rider asked. “Do you intend to ask me to stop my work?”

“I saw your work,” Ash said. “Very pretty.”

“I am surprised that you would think so,” Pestilence said. He took a step towards us. The air abruptly went putrid and it took all of Ashariel's will power to keep from choking. I tried to tell myself that I didn't need to breath and that I was safe. It wasn't a comforting thought.

“Why would that be?” she asked, managing a sly smile even as rancid air seeped into her borrowed lungs.

“Mortals obsess over my brother,” Pestilence said. “They spend their entire pitiful lives fretting about the inevitable end and the inexorable curse of mortality. No one ever appreciates the beauty of the transition that *allows* for Death to claim his due.” He gestured around us. “This

transition from life to death, this *corruption*,” he said. “This is me.”

“I’m not mortal,” Ash said.

“You mewl like one,” Pestilence said. “Do you think we did not watch your Rebellion, silly girl? Do you think we did not see? To one such as I, you are as pathetic and feeble as the mortal whose skin you now wear. Your kind lacks the proper perspective as to the way of things.” Flesh dripped from his bones as his oozing lips pulled back in a macabre smile.

“I could show you, if you would like,” he said. “I will demonstrate for you why it is the slow decay that you should truly fear, rather than the quick and painless end that is my brother.”

“Such bluster,” Ash said. “I remain unimpressed.”

Pestilence bristled with rage and a putrid gust washed over us. Ash purified the air and made it breathable through her angelic power, but even that could not filter out the stench of disease.

“You dare mock me?” Pestilence asked. “I will show you corruption beyond your darkest nightmares. I will make you beg for my brother’s cold hand to relieve you of your burden!”

“I released you from your prison,” Ash said. “I am the one who broke the Great Seal. You owe me your allegiance.”

“You already gave us your command, Fallen,” Pestilence said. “If you wish to issue another, prove that you are worthy of following. Prove that you have the *strength* to command me and I shall kneel.” He took another menacing step closer. “Otherwise, I shall kill you and be rid of you for good.”

“Perhaps,” Ash said. “You could kill me, of that I have no doubt. But what would that



prove? What would that gain you?"

The Rider stared with milky white eyes and did not answer.

"On the other hand, you could listen to me," Ash said. "And maybe we can come to an agreement that will get you what you truly desire."

"No deals," Pestilence rasped. "I will not bind myself to any agreement of yours. The treachery of the Fallen is well known to me."

"Too bad," Ash said. "I was hoping we could settle this matter like civilized beings."

"Indeed," the Rider said. "Unfortunately for you, I was not."

"So be it," Ash said. She lunged forward and drove her bladed wing into the Rider's chest

For a moment, Pestilence gaped at her, seemingly uncomprehending. He wrapped his hands around Ashariel's wing. Decay spread from his fingertips along the surface of her wing. With a startled cry, Ashariel recoiled. Pestilence held his grip until, with a sickening rip, he pulled her wing out of its socket. Blood gushed down her back.

Ashariel snarled and reformed her wing. She spread her wings and took the air. Pestilence stood his ground and watched her.

"You'll have to do more than that," Pestilence said.

She plunged into a dive so quickly that the sound barrier broke and a sonic boom cracked around us. She spun at the last moment, flared her wings and cut through the Rider's outstretched arms and through his chest. She hit the ground and sprang back, cutting him again and again with her wings. She caught him under the chin and severed his neck with one deft stroke.

The headless body of the Rider toppled to the ground. Ashariel panted with exhaustion as

she looked at his still form.

*You weren't supposed to kill him, I said.*

"He isn't dead," Ashariel said. "Look."

As we watched, the decapitated body groped blindly for its head. Pus leaked out from the numerous wounds instead of blood.

"Yield, Rider!" Ashariel said. She pointed at him with one wing. "Submit to my will."

In response, Pestilence pulled himself up onto his knees. From the stump of his neck, a putrid cloud poured out into the air. The noxious yellow fumes engulfed us.

"Nothing is as it should be," Pestilence said. It took me a moment to realize it was the severed head, still able to speak. "All your prophecies have been undone. Soon, all will be undone. You have failed, Fallen. I will not submit!"

The cloud of corruption assaulted us. Ash held it back with an aura of golden light, but I could see that the putrescence gnawing at the edges like so many maggots.

"Die already," Ashariel said. She stabbed the Rider's head and split it wide open. Rancid brains splattered the ground. She stabbed him again and again with a fury I'd never seen before. It took only a few seconds for her to reduce the Rider's body to bloody ribbons.

When the violence was over, Ashariel stood very still. She was breathing heavily even though the putrid cloud hadn't dissipated.

*I guess you were able to take him in a fight, I said. That's good, at least.*

There was no answer from my fallen angel.

*Ash? I asked. Are you okay?*

There was still no answer. In my body, Ashariel swooned and fell to one knee beside Pestilence's corpse.

*Ash, what's wrong?* I asked. *What is it?*

"Michael?" she asked. Her voice was faint and weak. "Michael, I'm not sure I can . . ."

*What's happening?* I asked. *Ash, talk to me. What's going on?*

Something was wrong. It took me a moment to realize that I could taste the putrid air. It was seeping through the angelic barrier. That couldn't be good.

"I burned through too much of my power holding him back," Ash said. "It cost too much of myself to keep your vessel alive. Too much corruption. Didn't want you to die."

No longer able to hold herself up, she fell on all fours.

"I'm too weak," she said. "Can't maintain control. I'm sorry, Michael."

"No, no, no," I pleaded. My voice was my own again; no longer just a whisper in my own skull. "Ash, don't like go. Don't give up. You can beat this! You have to fight!"

"I can't," she said.

"Goddamnit, Ash, don't do this," I said. "Don't let go."

No answer.

"Ash?" I cried. "Ash? Ashariel?"

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

And then she was gone and I was alone in my own body.

My mind and body were my own again.

Given my present circumstances, that was a very bad thing.

I inhaled my last breath of fresh air and held my breath as the vile fumes of Pestilence's wake engulfed me. My eyes began to water.

I told myself not to panic.

I very quickly failed at not panicking.

*Ash!* I thought desperately. *C'mon, Ash, I know you're there. Pull yourself together!*

But there was no answer. The only sound in my head was the furious pounding of my heartbeat in my ears.

Could I make a run for it? How far had Pestilence's blight spread?

I thought of the miles of rot we'd flown over. There was no way I could make it out on my own, not on a single breath of air that was fast depleting. Hell, I doubted I could make it that far even if I had a scuba tank.

My chest began to burn, my lungs already desperate for fresh air. I was shocked at how quickly it hit me. It couldn't have been more than twenty seconds.

But twenty seconds feels like a very long time when you know you can't breathe.

There was no way out. I couldn't fight the cloud of poison that was going to kill me.

Who was I trying to fool at this point? I hadn't been able to fight any of the threats I'd faced since I woke up with Ashariel in my head. It had always been her fight. I was just a bystander.

I didn't have the power to save myself. I never did and never would.

I realized that this was it.

This was the end.

This was how I was going to die: choking to death, alone, in a cloud of poison.

*Ash, I prayed, if you're there, if you can hear me, please. Please help me. Help me breathe.*

*You can save me.*

Nothing.

She was gone.

My vision began to blacken around the edges. How long had it been since I'd taken my last breath? One minute? Two minutes?

How long could a person go without breathing? I remembered a vague memory from my childhood, trying to hold my breath underwater for as long as I could. I don't think I ever made it past "forty-five Mississippi."

I was alone in the blackened field of decay. A few skeletal trees loomed some distance away from me, and further away, I caught a glimpse of a long, winding road. I saw the rusting hulk of an old semi and felt my heart surge as I noticed that the windows were intact. Maybe there was some clean air in the cabin!

As quickly as my spirits buoyed, I felt them dashed again. The distance to the road was more than a football field, at the very least. It didn't matter. I had to try.

With fire in my chest and my throat constricting as my lungs begged for release, I took off for the road. My footsteps crunched on the burnt remains of ash and grass.

I made it about twenty feet.

My world tilted violently to one side, and before I knew what had happened, I was down on my hands and knees, my lungs about to explode in my chest.

*No! I screamed in my mind. No! You can do this!*

I couldn't do it. The need to take a breath, the need to breathe anything, even pure poison, was too overwhelming.

My breath exploded out from my lungs. I sucked in reflexively, greedily, unable to stop myself. The air tasted utterly putrid and only made the burning in my chest feel worse. There was no oxygen in the air, just the stench of Pestilence's poison, the rot that had spread to the very air itself.

My vision darkened and I sagged, unable to keep myself up. My chest heaved rapidly as I began to hyperventilate, pulling in ever greater amounts of the noxious fumes. My unwilling, reflexive actions were just killing me that much faster.

I couldn't believe this was how it was going to end.

This was how I was going to die.

The burning in my lungs became unbearable, like a fire in my chest and my last thought was to wonder if I might actually immolate from the inside out, so agonizing was the pain.

And then everything went numb and I . . .

I didn't see or feel . . . anything at all.

Nothing.

There was nothing except black.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The feeling of soft lips brought me back.

Cool air forced its way into my burning lungs and soothed the agony in my chest. The fire in my throat diminished. Feeling returned to my limbs, my arms, my face.

My face.

As the numbness faded, I felt the soft mouth pressed against mine, breathing life back into me.

*Ash!* I cried in my thoughts. I reached up to hold touch her, to hold her as I responded to her life-giving kiss. I felt my lips press against hers. I held the back of her head and threaded my fingers through her hair.

But something was wrong.

Ash's hair wasn't that long.

I opened my eyes and saw long red hair all around my face. Scarlet hair cascaded off her bare shoulders. I saw her soft, pale skin and I felt the gentle weight of her body pressing against mine.

I saw the tell-tale reptilian yellow eyes. I saw as she gazed back at me, eyes bright with an eager gleam.

Morrigan.

I struggled and tried to push her off me. She clamped her hands on my wrists and held me down without much effort.

“Now, now,” she purred and licked my ear. “Is that any way to treat your rescuer?”

“Get off me!” I shouted. I struggled to push her off but she was much more powerful than she looked. It was like trying to move a glacier.

“No,” she said and giggled wickedly. “I saved you. That means I *own* you.”

“You saved me?” I asked. “Why the hell would you save me?”

“I did,” the Fey Queen said. “I plucked you right from that dying field and took you somewhere safe.”

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Somewhere safe,” Morrigan said. “That’s all you need to know now.”

“Please get off me,” I said.

“Ah, manners,” she said. “That’s an improvement, at least.” She slid off me and nestled her head against my shoulder. Even from this new position, I still couldn’t get free. After a few moments of pointless struggle, I gave up and laid my head back on the grass.

*If Ash was here*, I began to think. I stopped as panic surged through me. Not only was I alone with Morrigan but Ash was gone. The Rider must have done something to her. Had he killed her?

Could fallen angels die?

I didn’t know the answer to either question.

“Do you know what happened?” I asked.

“You were dying and I rescued you,” Morrigan said. “Simple.”

“Stop playing with me,” I snapped. “What happened to Ash? Do you know what happened to her?”



"I do not," Morrigan said. "That is the truth. You were empty when I found you."

"I don't really believe that," I said.

She smirked. "Believe what you wish. Or don't. Reality doesn't care what you believe in and neither do I."

"You," I snarled. "You did this! This was your fault!"

"You wound me deeply, Michael," she said with mock indignation. "How is any of this my fault?"

"You pushed us to that confrontation with the Rider," I said. My voice felt thick and raw in my throat. "If it hadn't been for you, we never would have gone after Pestilence and Ash wouldn't be--"

"Dead?" Morrigan offered.

"Missing," I concluded.

"I merely suggested a course of action," Morrigan said. "It was Ashariel who chose to follow it to its logical conclusion. I cannot be faulted for her failure, especially in the presence of an obviously superior foe such as a Rider. I did not tell your angel to sacrifice herself in your defense. It was her choice to make. It was her consequence."

"But we never would have been there if you hadn't manipulated us!" I shouted.

Morrigan sat up suddenly. Warily, I pushed myself up on my elbows only to find her staring at me through narrowed eyes. "Let me make one thing abundantly clear to you," she said. "Everything that you *thought* you had with your precious fallen angel was due to my manipulations. I was the one who freed her from Hell. I was the one who chose you to be her host.

Everything that you had was by my hand and my will.”

As she spoke, there was a moment when the mask of normalcy slipped. I caught a glimpse of the *real* Morrigan, lurking just behind those reptilian eyes. My breath caught in my throat and the defiance drained out of me. I sank back down in the grass and put my hands over my eyes. My hands, I realized, were shaking.

I flinched as she patted my arm. “Michael,” she said, “Listen to me. Look at me.”

I didn’t want to look but I couldn’t stop myself. She was right; I was hers, as I had once been Ashariel’s. The only difference was that Morrigan didn’t need to possess me to control me.

“Ashariel was important to me,” Morrigan said. “She was unique among her kind. I would not have put her at such risk.”

“No,” I said. “You would and you did. Maybe what you meant to say was that you wouldn’t spend her unless you knew the prize was worth it.”

She didn’t respond to that.

“So,” I pressed. “Was it worth it? Did you get what you wanted for the price of one fallen angel?”

“You cannot comprehend how much I have lost in this exchange,” Morrigan said in a low, dangerous voice. “This was not supposed to happen.”

For some reason, I believed her. Maybe it had something to do with the raw frustration in her voice that made me believe her.

“Ashariel’s loss has changed everything,” she said. “It has forced me to involve myself directly in this affair.”

“How unfortunate for you,” I said. “I’m sorry you ran out of pawns to push around and sacrifice.”

I stopped when I saw her smile. It was the kind of smile that made my blood freeze in my veins.

“Oh, I haven’t run out of pawns yet,” she said. “I still have you, dear Michael.”

“Me?” I asked.

“You,” she said and smiled brightly.

I laughed at that. It was the forlorn laugh of a condemned man. It was the kind of delirious laugh that scratches at the limits of sanity. “I’d ask for a refund,” I said. “There’s nothing you could hope to get from me that Ashariel couldn’t give you. Face it, you’re screwed.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Morrigan said coolly.

“Hey, here’s an idea,” I said, still verging on the edge of hysteria. “Why not go back to Hell and pull her out again? You can do that, can’t you? Of course you can, since you’ve already done it before.”

“I would,” Morrigan said, “if she was in Hell. She is not in Hell.”

“What?” I asked. I blinked through the cloud of hysteria in my brain. “She’s dead, isn’t she? Where else would she go?”

“She isn’t dead,” Morrigan said.

For just a moment, I felt my hope rise. Not dead! She wasn’t dead.

“But she’s still gone,” she finished. “Your dead Ashariel has faded.”

As quickly as it appeared, my hope vanished and I sagged. “Oh,” I said. “That’s not good,

is it?"

"In attempting to shield you from Pestilence," Morrigan said, "Ashariel had to burn through her own essence to counter the Rider's power. In doing so, she depleted herself so greatly that she was no longer able to maintain her possession of you or even the coherence of her own spirit. What little there was left after her effort broke apart and scattered."

I stared at Morrigan but didn't say anything.

"She is no longer anywhere," Morrigan said, "and she is everywhere. She is lost to you. If it helps you come to terms with your loss, then, yes, consider her dead. And know that she died trying to keep you alive. If she'd approached Pestilence in her avatar form, she could have abandoned it without a second thought. Instead, she went with you. She stayed for you. She died for you."

"You're lying," I said weakly.

"Why would I lie?"

"Because that's what you do," I said. "That's what you've always done, from the moment we met you."

"Now, Michael," Morrigan said, her voice kind. "I don't need to lie to you. Not when the truth hurts so much more. Not when the truth will get me what I want."

"What do you want, Morrigan?" I asked. I was surprised at how dull and tired my voice sounded.

"I want what I've always wanted," she said. "I want the same thing I've been after since the moment I plucked Ashariel out of Hell and placed her in your body."

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Freedom,” Morrigan said. “I want my freedom.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

I stormed away from her though there was nowhere to go. I was standing in an open field beneath a blue sky and surrounded by trees. Everything here was untouched by Pestilence's corruption but I didn't know where *here* was, exactly. For all I knew, it was some kind of dream world that Morrigan created. Maybe I was still back in that decaying field, dying of the Rider's blight.

I turned back to see Morrigan watching me. "Hey," I said. "Why me?"

"Why you?" she asked. "I suppose because I like you."

"You don't even know me," I said.

She grinned. "Are you sure? I am the Fey Queen of the Dreaming Path. I know your dreams, Michael Stroud. I know your hopes, your desires, and your fears. You are more mine than you could ever begin to realize."

She wrapped her arms around my waist and pressed against me. "Deny me all you wish," she said. "We both know that you *love* this."

"No," I said, shrugging out of her embrace. "No, I really don't. The sex-kitten act is getting really old."

Her grin became a smirk. "Do you think you can resist me, Michael? Do you think that loyalty to Ashariel somehow makes you noble? Do you think it makes you a better man?"

"It's not about loyalty to Ashariel," I said, even though that's exactly what it was. "It's just that I really don't like you."

"You will," Morrigan said. "Given enough time, I think that you will like me very much."

I shuddered. “You didn’t answer my question,” I said.

“Which question was that, my lovely?” she asked.

I straightened my shoulders and turned to face her. “Out of the seven billion people on this planet right now, why did you pick me?”

“I doubt there are seven billion humans left at this point,” Morrigan said. “The real number is probably closer to two billion.”

I grimaced.

She put her hand on my shoulder. “Why do you have such a difficult time accepting that you might be different? Why do you deny that you might have been chosen for something greater?”

“People spend their whole lives wishing they were special,” I said. “Few of us are.”

“Few and none are very different things.”

“Point taken,” I said.

“Now then,” Morrigan said. “If you are finished with your little existential crisis and you’ve recovered from the Rider’s poison, there is something I need to do.”

“What’s that?” I asked even though I didn’t really want to know.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

I looked at her in surprise and then we went somewhere else entirely.

It was a restaurant that I didn’t recognize. The booths were dingy in the best greasy-spoon tradition. I glanced out the window but didn’t recognize the city skyline.

Most of the buildings in the distance were on fire or had been. Other than the distant crackle of flame and the occasional sound of shattering glass, the ruined city was silent.

The restaurant itself had been abandoned swiftly and was far enough removed from the urban center that it hadn't yet been caught in the conflagration. Most of the windows were smashed and the chairs and tables had been overturned.

All of the tables except one.

Morrigan had rearranged one table for the two of us. There were sandwiches already waiting when I reappeared.

I was disoriented from the abrupt shift and my head spun. I leaned heavily against the table and tried very hard not to throw up.

“Okay, seriously?” I asked when the nausea finally passed. “If you were just going to create the food yourself, why bother bringing me here? Why not just conjure up a nice picnic back at the meadow?”

“Because you wouldn’t have eaten it,” Morrigan said. “You would have worried that I was trying to seduce you, that I was trying to make the poor, impressionable human forget all about his beloved fallen angel.”

“You think that a lunch date *here* is going to convince me otherwise?” I asked.

Morrigan shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt. I imagine you’ll either be too distracted by watching one of your mortal cities burn or by the fact that this is where I chose to bring you.” She grinned. “Looks like I was right.”

She picked up her sandwich, a real New York style sub, and bit into it. “Ohh,” she sighed as she chewed. “That’s lovely.”

“Okay, seriously, I’ve had it with this shit,” I said.



Morrigan looked me over. “Indeed?” she asked after she finished chewing. “And which shit would this be, exactly?”

“This,” I said. “All of this. This is ridiculous and we both know it.”

She put her sandwich carefully on the table in front of her and looked at me with large, expression yellow eyes. “I’m listening.”

“First of all, you’re *immortal*,” I said. “You don’t have a host body so you don’t need to eat. This is just something that you want to do, probably to annoy me.”

She didn’t say anything. I plunged ahead with my rant, finally giving voice to all the frustration and rage I felt.

“Second, you told me I had to help get Ashariel back in the game. You told me that she had to get control of the Four Horsemen and use them before it was too late. But you know what? I haven’t seen a trace of the Fallen or the Archangels since they first appeared. It doesn’t seem like they’re even around. If time really was critical, we wouldn’t be wasting it on these stupid mind games of yours.”

“Are you done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m done.”

I was abruptly gripped by an unseen force and slammed facefirst into the table. Dazed, I slumped back into my chair. Blood dripped from my nose which I could tell was broken.

“Are you listening to me, Michael?” Morrigan asked. “Listen closely. Listen *carefully*.”

I tried to respond but couldn’t seem to make my mouth work right. I was still seeing stars. I hoped she took my silence as assent.

“Good,” she said. “Because I am going to tell you something.”

She caressed the back of my hand gently. “Do not assume that you understand the war that's come to your world,” she said. “Do not assume that, simply because *you* have not seen them, they are not there. Do not assume that you know *anything* about this war. And most of all -- are you listening to me, Michael?”

Worried that she would smash my face into the table again if I said no, I gave a slow nod. Blood dripped from my nose onto my shirt.

“Do not assume that you know me,” she said. “Do not assume that you have the power or the right to question me or *judge* me. Do you understand?”

“Okay,” I mumbled. My voice sounded strange with my nose full of blood. “Sorry.”

“Good,” Morrigan said. “I am glad that I have your attention.”

I nodded weakly. She certainly had a hell of a way of getting it.

She went back to eating. I was quiet for several moments, afraid to speak. My nose continued to bleed.

“I don't suppose you could fix this?” I asked and I was shocked by the pathetic mewl of my own voice. Shocked, but not surprised.

“I suppose,” she said. “If you promise to be a good boy and do as I say. Do you promise?”

“Yeah,” I said sullenly. “I promise.”

Morrigan nodded towards me and the pain faded. I touched my face experimentally and was relieved to find everything intact.

“Thanks,” I said.

We didn't speak again until she'd finished eating.

“Weren't you hungry?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said. I didn't offer her an explanation.

“Ah well,” Morrigan said. “You'll come around eventually, I'm sure.”

“I suppose,” I said.

“That was lovely,” she said and stood up from the table. “Are you ready to go?”

“Go?” I asked. “Go where?”

“Silly boy,” she said as she took my arm in hers. “It's time to meet Death.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Death?” I asked.

“Death,” Morrigan said. “You know Death.”

“I don’t know Death,” I said.

“Rides a pale horse,” she said. “The last and most feared of the Four and with good reason, I might add. Pestilence is little more than a common cold compared to his older brother.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” I said.

“I suppose that depends on your definition of good,” Morrigan said.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” I asked.

“No,” she said with a wicked grin. She put her hand on my arm. “But don’t be afraid. I’ll protect you.”

“Should I assume you’re just going to pop us right over to him?” I asked. I wasn’t looking forward to the prospect of another ethereal jaunt.

“Not this time,” she said. “I’m going to bring Death to us.”

“You’re going to summon him?” I asked.

I’d seen Ashariel use such a ritual to summon the shadow of Lucifer to her. Even though I’d been nothing more than the human vessel along for the ride, it had been a terrifying experience to be in the presence of the Devil himself.

“I am,” she said.

“Don’t you need some kind of ritual?” I asked. Ashariel had used a ritual.

“I do,” she said, looking at me. “You’re it.”

“Why me?” I asked. It was a question that had been on my mind a lot these past few days.

“You’re mortal,” she said. “I am not. Only mortals can know Death.”

“Lucky me,” I said.

“Lucky me that I happen to have a loyal mortal on hand,” she said.

She closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. Her head slumped a little and she went very still. I watched her uncertainly. After a moment, I realized that her chest was rising and falling in a steady rhythm. It took me a moment to realize that she was asleep.

“Seriously?” I asked. “That’s your big ritual? You’re going to take a nap?”

Morrigan didn’t stir.

That was interesting. I wondered what my odds would be if I tried to escape. I could probably make it out the door and into the city, but where would I go? It would be a little difficult to run from a being that could visit me in my dreams. Without Ash, I was helpless.

I felt something move behind me. I turned to look.

A man stood in the doorway.

He wore a charcoal grey suit that looked recently cleaned and pressed. The jacket was left open and I saw a solid black tie over a white shirt. It looked expensive.

Also, he didn’t have any skin.

His hands at his sides were skeletal, bleached white bones that contrasted sharply against the black suit. His face was a naked human skull. Ghostly light illuminated his empty eye sockets. He rested a scythe on his shoulder with disturbing casualness.

I looked around for the pale horse but didn’t see it.

“Disappointed?” Death asked.

His voice caught me by surprise. Despite his grotesque appearance, his voice was smooth and precise. It reminded me of a university professor.

“Um,” I said which was exactly the moment I began to panic. This was Death. This was the Horseman of Death and here I was, completely alone. Exposed. Vulnerable. This was Death!

I glanced over at Morrigan and nudged her with my foot. She didn't stir.

“My apologies, mortal,” Death said. “Your dream creature has been temporarily displaced. I desired a private audience with you.”

Oh, shit. That probably wasn't a good sign. Why did Death want to talk to me? This was Morrigan's show. I was just the unwilling human slave along for the ride.

“What do you want?” I asked. My voice cracked and broke with fear.

Death sighed. “You look upon me with such fear though you do not know me,” he said.

“Sorry?” I offered.

“More so for your sake than mine,” he said and I swear I caught a glimpse of a kind smile flash across his skinless lips.

“May I sit?” he asked.

“Sure. Feel free,” I said in a small voice.

“Thank you.” He held out a skeletal hand and a nearby chair slid across the floor. He sat down and leaned his scythe against the wall. He unbuttoned his jacket.

“Now, then,” he said. “You and I have business to discuss.”

“We do?”

“Indeed,” he said.

“What about her?” I asked and nodded towards Morrigan.

“She will join us in short order,” he said. “A word of warning; you may wish to keep this part of the conversation to yourself.”

“She can read my mind,” I said. “She’ll know.”

“She won’t read this,” he said. “You can trust me on that, Michael Stroud.”

What could I say to that? I wasn’t about to call the Horseman of Death a liar.

“You fear me far more than my brothers,” Death said. “I know that you were there with the Fey Queen and the fallen angel when the Great Seal was breached. I know that you have personally encountered Pestilence. You have seen many things in a very short time, Michael Stroud. Yet despite all you have seen, you still fear me more than anything else, even moreso than the fallen archangel, Lucifer. You fear me even than the God who allows Hell to exist and is content to allow his creations to languish in such a place.”

“Can you blame me?” I asked. “I’m alive. I’m mortal. Being afraid of you is hardwired into me. We’re all afraid to die.”

Death folded his hands on the table. “You are wrong to fear me, Michael Stroud.”

“Care to explain that?” I asked. “You’re being very polite but I think it’s only fair that you explain to the mortal why his fear of his imminent death is irrational.”

“A fair point,” Death said, “You lack the proper perspective. You see me as the culmination of a series of catastrophes, each more ravaging than the last. You blame me for all that is broken and wrong with your world. You see me as that which takes away joy and love and life.

You do not see me as I truly am.”

“What are you?” I asked.

“I am your release,” Death said. “I am your freedom you from the vicious cycle. I am your salvation from the agony of War, the suffering of Famine, the ravages of Pestilence. I am peace and silence and serenity. What I have is not a curse. It is a gift.”

“Yeah, but it’s the serenity of the grave,” I said. “That doesn’t sound very good. No offense.”

“You cannot offend me, young one,” he said. “From your perspective, you are correct. You are young and vital with many years of life and youth left ahead of you. My gift is not for you. It is for those whose time in this world has become a burden, those whose lives are now behind them. Those who are ready come into my care willingly and I receive them gladly.”

“But not all who die are ready,” I said. “Not everybody gets to live out a full life before you claim them.”

“True,” Death said with a slight nod. “It is not for me to decide how much time one is allotted. I arrive at the end of each lifetime, no matter how long or how short. That is my way.”

“Is this what you wanted to tell me?” I asked. “You wanted to have a philosophical discussion about dying?”

“No,” Death said.

“Then what is it?”

“Your fallen angel, the one called Ashariel,” Death said.

“She’s gone,” I said.



“She is lost,” the Rider said.

“That’s what I said.”

“No,” Death said. “She is lost. She is broken. She is not *gone*. She has not faded.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“What is lost can be found again,” Death said. “What is broken can be remade. That is what I wished to tell you.”

He motioned towards Morrigan. The Fey Queen’s eyes snapped open. In a flash, she lunged forward and grabbed Death’s wrist, pinning it against the table. Her reptilian eyes narrowed to razor slits.

“Whatever you did to me, Rider, wherever you *sent* me,” Morrigan said. “Should you ever be so bold as to try that again, know that you will regret it.”

Death nodded. “Indeed.”

I listened, unsure whether to be frightened or awed by the fact that Morrigan would and could threaten Death to his skeletal face

“I called you for a reason,” Morrigan said.

“I answered you for a reason,” Death said.

Morrigan pressed her lips together in a thin smile. “Indeed.”

“For what reason did you request this audience, O Queen?”

“Do not mock me, Horseman,” Morrigan said. “I am beyond your reach. I am removed from your influence.”

“Truly?” the Rider asked. He sounded surprised by this news.

“Dreams may end, my dear Horseman, but they cannot die.”

“I do not believe there is a difference between those two things.”

“I am not asking your permission to do anything,” she said. “My plans will progress regardless, but things will go more smoothly with your cooperation.”

I wondered if she was threatening him. I wondered if it was even *possible* to threaten Death. What could she possibly threaten him with?

“What is it?” Death asked.

“I need to know how to destroy a particular powerful being,” Morrigan said. “A being more powerful than a Firstborn or a Fallen.”

Wait, what?

Who did Morrigan want to kill? I ran through the list of names in my head. There was Lucifer, Archangel Michael, Gabriel, or the other three Horsemen. Unless there was some other powerful being I didn’t have a name for. That was possible, I supposed. There might be another entity out there that I wasn’t even aware of. Hell, there was probably more than one.

“That is quite an audacious request,” Death said at length.

Morrigan merely smiled.

“Are you prepared to offer a deal?” Death asked.

“If it comes to that,” Morrigan said.

“It is unfortunate that the Four do not engage in deals,” Death said. “We are bound by our nature, by what some might call our sacred duty. We are each as we were meant to be, each one a herald to the next.”

“Who do you herald, then?” I asked.

Death looked at me and I had the feeling he was amused by the question.

“I herald nothing,” he said. “I am the end.”

“You serve the will of the one who broke the Great Seal,” Morrigan said. “How is that any different?”

“The one who broke the Great Seal was meant to do so,” he said. “Following her instructions is not a violation of our sacred duty.”

“She’s gone,” Morrigan said.

“Then our duty to her is complete,” Death said. “We are free to continue our work as we see fit.”

“I can’t convince you?” she asked.

“It is unlikely,” Death said.

“How very disappointing,” she said. “In that case, we have nothing more to discuss.”

She stood up from the table.

Death remained where he was. “So it would seem.”

“You are making a mistake, Horseman,” Morrigan said.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But I am very old, even when compared to the likes of you. I am the end of all things.” He smiled at her. “All things, young one.”

“Enjoy your Apocalypse, Horseman,” Morrigan said with a sneer. “Enjoy it for as long as it lasts.”

“I will do as I have always done,” Death said.

“Indeed,” she said. She turned to me. “Come along, Michael. We have things to do.”

She reached out and placed her hand on my shoulder. Before I could protest or ask Death what he meant about Ash, the world lurched as Morrigan pulled me out of the world and took me somewhere else.

We were in a small boat in the middle of a lake. The sky here was bright and clear. The lake’s surface was sparkling blue. There were only a few scattered clouds in the sky. Morrigan had changed clothes and was now lounging in a clingy little sun dress.

“Okay,” I said. “Where are we? More importantly, what the hell was that all about?”

Morrigan leaned over the side of the boat and drew her fingers through the water. “Lovely, isn’t it?” she said. “I think I could float here for hours, just watching the waves and the clouds and the light on the water. This is the perfect lake, created from so many perfect human dreams.”

“Don’t try to change the subject,” I snapped. “Pay attention to me.”

She fastened those reptilian yellow eyes on me and I felt my throat constrict, either from fear or from force, I wasn’t sure.

“You know better than to show me such disrespect,” she said. “Don’t you?”

The pressure on my windpipe tightened. I nodded as much as I could manage.

“Good,” she said. The pressure released. “You are fortunate that I find your little moments of defiance more amusing than aggravating. You remind me of a little kitten, trying to be fierce. Or perhaps you are a puppy, barking madly and baring its little teeth at every perceived threat.”

“I’m glad I amuse you,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “You should be.”

She eyed me for a moment and then began to giggle. “Oh, my dear, sweet human boy,” she said. “I do so love your sense of humor.”

I glanced around again. Though the sky was clear and nearly cloudless, the edges of the lake were obscured by a deep mist. It was that ever present mist that told me where we were now.

“This is the Dreaming Path,” I said.

“It is,” she said.

“Am I really here?” I asked. “Is my body here, I mean? Or is the real me lying unconscious somewhere?”

“Your body is safe,” she said. “I put you in a safe place. I promise. Here, you are as all humans are when they pass into my realm. You are a dreamer; you are a mind wandering the mists of my world.”

“I’m dreaming?” I asked.

“It is a lucid dream, my mortal,” she said. “My gift to you.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I said.

“You’re wondering why I brought you here,” Morrigan said. “You have deduced, correctly, why I needed you to call the Horseman Death. But now you are wondering what further use I have for you, since I did not obtain the answer I desired from the Rider.”

“Give the lady a cigar,” I said.

“Do I need a reason to keep you around?” she asked. “Perhaps I enjoy the pleasure of your company.”

“Maybe that’s true,” I said. “It’s also true that you have virtually unlimited power, at least

from my perspective. I'm sure there are more interesting and attractive people in the world than me. You could bring any number of those people here." I sighed. "But mostly, I guess I'm just wondering why you bother with all of this. Why do you even care?"

The Fey Queen arched a brow. Then she crawled towards me. I had nowhere to run, no way to put any space between us. She climbed over me and onto my lap. Our faces were inches apart. Her serpentine eyes bored into me.

"Humans need reasons, Michael," she said. "Fey do not. *I* do not. I do what I want, when I want. I *take* what I want."

That was it, I realized. That was the true nature of the Fey, their ethos and their origin. They might have taken form from human dreams and nightmares, but one thing all dreams have in common is that they somehow reflect human desires, human wants and needs. We dream of the things we want and have nightmares about the things that we don't want.

Enter the Fey. Incarnations of desire, want, need.

I was still congratulating myself on figuring it all out when Morrigan gripped my face in her hand and kissed me fiercely. It startled me out of my contemplation and I let out a sharp gasp of surprise

"And right now," she said in a breathless whisper when she finally pulled her face away, "right now, I want you."

"I don't want you!" I said and tried to shove her away from me. I pressed against her shoulders but it was like trying to push a metal sculpture. She ignored my feeble resistance without effort.

“Me and Ash,” I started to say.

“She’s gone,” Morrigan said.

“No, she’s not,” I said. “I won’t do this to her. I refuse.”

“You do not have that option,” she said.

“I don’t want you,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes locked with mine. “I will *make you* want me.”

I tried to resist, tried to protest, tried to pull away, but her lips were so very insistent, her body so very inviting and I felt myself slip, I felt a terrible pang of guilt accompany my final coherent thought.

Ash, I thought. I’m sorry.

So sorry.

And then I was gone, lost in the ecstasy of Morrigan's appetite.

## Chapter Thirty

I didn't know where I was when I awoke.

The ground felt cold and hard beneath me. I sat up quickly and felt my head swim. The world tilted to the side and I clamped my hand over my eyes.

"Damn it," I said aloud. My voice sounded forlorn against the quiet murmur of a cold breeze.

My clothes were strewn haphazardly around me. Nothing seemed to be missing, for which I was grateful. I checked my sides for any strange scars that hadn't been there before I passed out. I hadn't woken up in a bathtub full of ice, nor did I suspect Morrigan would turn out to be an organ thief but it didn't hurt to check. I hurt, though, and badly. I felt like I'd gone twelve rounds with the champ and lost every single one.

Morrigan.

I looked around but she wasn't nearby. For the moment, I was alone.

I was sitting in a vacant lot. The sky overhead was grey and desolate and on the verge of becoming a storm. The cracked asphalt beneath me had long since surrendered to the encroaching weeds. I saw a dilapidated warehouse at one end of the lot and a road that led off into the distance at the other. I didn't recognize any of it. The warehouse didn't have a sign, as far as I could tell.

I dressed quickly and was grateful for the warmth of my jacket. I stuck my hands in my pockets to warm them. The wind had already picked up. I felt a few drops of rain against my face. The storm wasn't just on its way. It was already here.

I wondered where the hell I was. Where the hell was Morrigan? Had she left me here



alone? That didn't seem likely.

Maybe it was some kind of game she was playing. Maybe she was toying with me. Maybe it was just part of her alleged plan. It wouldn't have surprised me; at this point, she'd woven so many lies and half-truths around me, I didn't know what was real any more.

The rain began to fall more heavily. I began to shiver even through my jacket. I knew I had to get out of the storm. I looked over at the empty warehouse again. It looked intact enough, if undeniably creepy. It seemed like the perfect kind of place to get mugged by a hobo. With a sigh, I pushed myself to my feet and started towards it.

I shrugged away any lingering fears that a particularly vicious hobo might be lurking inside, waiting to murder me for my shoes. I doubted I would find anybody, though. I wasn't sure how I knew, but somehow I could feel a profound sense of *wrongness* in the air. Something dark and powerful had swept through this part of the world. I had no idea what: maybe a Rider, maybe a Fallen, maybe something worse.

Whatever it was, it had left a forlorn feeling of emptiness in its wake. I could taste the desolation around me. It felt as though the basic components of life itself had been scrubbed from the very air. I thought briefly of Pestilence but it didn't have his stench on it. Pestilence was all rot and decay, the sickly-sweet odor of rotting meat. This didn't smell like anything at all.

It was just . . . empty.

I reached the loading dock and climbed onto it. The nearest shutter door was partly open but still low enough that I'd have to crawl through. I looked up again at the sky and got pelted in the eyes for my troubles. It was definitely getting worse. I was already soaked and chilled to the bone.

I went over to the shutter and knelt down. It was too dark to see in the warehouse. I didn't have a flashlight on me and I doubted there would be any functioning lights inside. I told myself I'd stay close to the door; there would be enough light coming through the shutter. I would remain tensed, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

What kind of trouble, my overactive imagination wanted to know.

I wasn't sure.

Crazy hobos?

Sure. If I was lucky.

If you're not that lucky?

Something worse than crazy hobos, obviously. Maybe a whole gang of hobos, starving and naked, and they'd strip me and kill me in desperation and then eat my flesh.

I told my imagination to shut up.

It was a strange sort of fear. I had stood in the presence of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. I'd spoken with Death himself, crossed paths with Pestilence, had met the Devil and been hunted by Archangels, and yet here I was, scared of a creepy old warehouse.

It was a strange fear.

I dropped down onto my stomach and crawled under the shutter.

As I suspected, there weren't any working light inside the warehouse. I remained near the shutter, but the storm had darkened the sky and diminished that light. I felt around in my pockets for a moment until felt something hard and plastic. I still had my cell phone! If I was lucky, it would still have a charge. It was a cheap phone without any bells or whistles, but durable enough

and able to hold a charged battery for several days.

I flipped it open. Nothing. The screen was dark.

Damn it. I wondered if Morrigan's teleportation could have fried the circuits. Maybe Ash's power had destroyed the phone. I supposed it didn't matter either way; the phone was dead.

I decided it was for the best. If the phone had worked, it would have been a convenient flashlight. With such a convenient flashlight, I probably would have felt bold enough to go wandering around in the warehouse on my own which would inevitably lead to me getting into some kind of trouble.

So, really, it was better that I stayed close to the shutter and the outside world. I figured the storm would pass eventually and I could move on. I didn't know where I would go. I tried not to think about that.

The storm raged outside the warehouse. Rain spattered underneath the shutter onto my legs. I grimaced and felt around for the wall behind me. I used it to guide me back a few steps to the right and out of the spray.

I leaned back against the wall and slid down into a sitting position. I tried to get as comfortable as I could. I had a feeling I was in for a long wait. I tried not to think about what else might have been in the warehouse with me, concealed beneath the darkness.

In my mind, I saw slaughtered corpses stacked in piles all around me, just outside the feeble light. I imagined leering skeletons dangling on a few feet above me, their eye sockets fastened on me in perpetual horror. I imagined bony fingers dangling from the ceiling, reaching out to me, grasping at me.

I shuddered and forced my thoughts away. I knew I was scaring myself. I knew it was just a stupid, empty warehouse. It was an abandoned warehouse that was probably filled with rats and maybe the occasional big hairy spider and while neither thought was particularly comforting, both were preferable to the slaughterhouse of horrors vision I had been indulging.

I wondered again where I would go after the storm passed. Where would I go? The world was ending, after all. I doubted there were any safe places left. Who knew how many people were even alive at this point? Maybe I was the last human left alive on the entire planet. It was certainly possible. I shuddered again.

There was only one thought that was worse than the possibility of being the sole survivor of the human race: wondering why Morrigan had left me here in the first place.

In fact, wondering about Morrigan at all was an exercise in barely-contained terror. What did she want with me in the first place? Why had she chosen me to be Ashariel's vessel? Why did she enjoy playing with me?

I shook my head and sighed. I had a lot of frightened questions but very few answers. I doubted the answers would have made me feel any better.

That was when the shutter door clattered shut and I plunged into total darkness.

"Oh, shit," I said. "Shit, shit, shit."

It was perfectly dark. I held my hand up in front of my face and couldn't see it. It didn't matter whether my eyes were open or closed, it was that goddamn dark.

Well, shit.

My heartbeat quickened. I felt on the verge of a panic attack. I forced myself to slow down.

I tried to think logically and calmly. I could work through this. I just needed to focus.

Okay, I thought. Logically and calmly. What did I know?

Logically, the wind had probably blown the shutter door closed. Perhaps whatever had jammed it open in the first place had finally broken free, like a rusted chain or a piece of junk on the shutter's track. There were plenty of mundane things that could have caused it to close on its own. None of them involving me being locked in a pitch black warehouse and surrounded by corpses. I was fine. I forced myself to believe that I was fine.

"Michael," a voice in the darkness said.

My blood froze in my veins and my hair stood on end. Either I was hearing voices now, which was a very distinct possibility, or.

Or I wasn't alone.

I wasn't alone.

Shit.

Oh, shit.

"Michael," the voice said again. It was right in front of me.

I balled my fist and lashed out into the darkness. My hand brushed against something that felt like rough fabric and then it was gone. My heartbeat sped up again and I began to hyperventilate.

Something was in here *with me*.

Something was here with me in the dark.

Something in the darkness that knew *who* I was.

“Who are you?” I called out. My voice sounded weak and frightened.

A low, sibilant laugh.

“Did you think I had forgotten you?” the voice asked. “Did you think that you would be passed over, that you would escape my notice if you were released?”

That voice.

I knew that voice.

Something hard and sharp caressed my face.

I lashed out blindly but again, I felt only shadows.

And then something hard struck me in the face and my skin parted in hot, agonizing lines. I clamped my hand over my cheek. I felt a warm and sticky liquid drip onto my hand and I knew it was my blood.

“Show some respect, boy,” the voice hissed. “Show me that you remember me.”

I didn't answer.

I couldn't.

The sharp things touched my other cheek and slid down lightly to my neck. “Say my name, Michael,” the voice said. “I know you remember.”

The sharp thing dug into the skin of my throat just a bit, just enough to make me bleed.

“Say my name,” the said said.

“Lucifer,” I whimpered.

Laughter.

“Good,” he said. “Good. You do remember me. As I remember you.”

Oh God. Oh, my God.

The claws left my neck and some impossibly strong force yanked me off my feet and pinned me against the warehouse wall.

“You and I,” Lucifer said, “have things to discuss.”

## **Chapter Thirty-one**

At that moment, I knew three things.

I knew that I was trapped in a dark, abandoned warehouse.

I knew that I was not alone.

I knew that I was about to die horribly.

I had faced the devil before. When Ashariel had stood against him, I had been there with her. I had been right there by her side and I had endured his wrath just as she did. I knew his terrible power, the dark potency of his majesty. I knew that Ashariel still called him the Morning Star out of both fear and respect. I knew that even in his exile, he was still the greatest and most dangerous of his kind.

But I had seen him through the barrier that Ashariel had provided. I faced him as a mere vessel. I faced him with the benefit of having my own personal fallen angel to defend me. I hadn't had to face him alone. Really, I hadn't actually faced him at all.

It had been Ash doing all the talking, all the fighting, all the struggling. I'd just sort of been there, along for the ride. The Morning Star had not seemed quite so terrible when I'd been hiding behind Ashariel's skirt.

But now I was alone.

Now, here I was, in the dark, and I felt the full weight of Lucifer's gaze upon me and this time, I did not have my own angel to hide behind.

Now it was just me, just Michael, just the mortal.

I was beyond terrified.



My arms were wrenched out to the sides and something clamped against my wrists and around my ankles. I hung against the wall like a man crucified. The comparison was not lost on me.

“Michael,” Lucifer said.

I raised my head towards the direction of the voice. “What?” I whispered. I sounded very small and very afraid.

“Where is she?” Lucifer asked. “Where is Ashariel? I can tell she’s not in your body anymore. I can *taste* her absence.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Something sharp slid down my cheek and through my shirt as Lucifer drew a long, blisteringly hot line through my skin. I screamed.

“No games, mortal boy,” Lucifer purred. “Tell me where she is.”

I tried to think. I could tell him about Ash. I could tell him what happened to her. I could tell him what Death had told me.

I could. But would I?

Another line carved its way across my skin and I cried out in agony.

“I know your mind, Michael,” Lucifer said. “I can hear the deception forming in your thoughts. Do not attempt to deceive me.” Something that felt like a handful of claws gripped my jaw. “Tell me where she is. Now.”

“She’s gone,” I said.

A pause. “Explain.”

“She's gone,” I said. “We tried to fight Pestilence. She used too much of her power trying to keep her vessel alive. She burned herself out trying to protect me from the blight.”

The claws left my face.

Belatedly, I heard sobbing. It took me a moment to realize that voice was mine.

“Gone,” Lucifer said softly.

I nodded weakly. “She’s gone,” I said.

He tore into me with a savagery I would not have thought possible. Unfortunately, such savagery was very, very possible.

I screamed at first. I quickly lost the will and breath to scream. I hung there on the wall, mute, as Lucifer peeled me apart. He removed my skin a layer at a time with his claws. My blood flowed freely as he flayed me. I knew I should already be dead. I knew the only reason that I was not dead was because he would not *let* me die.

Not yet.

Not until he was done hurting me.

“She was mine,” Lucifer said. His voice was calm. “She was meant to be my queen. She was beautiful; the most beautiful of all the angels. She was even more beautiful than me.” He sighed. “She and I were so alike, so obviously destined for one another. Our beauty was matched only by the purity of our idealism. She and I were going to do great things together. Of all the Fallen, she was the only one who *truly* believed in me.”

His claws slipped through my ribs and teased at my heart. Blood bubbled up into my lungs and I choked.

“She was too precious to be wasted defending an insignificant insect like you from your fate,” Lucifer said. “You were not worthy of her, mortal. You are not worthy of her death.”

I coughed through the blood in my chest and tried to speak.

“What's that, Michael?” Lucifer asked. “I didn't quite catch that.”

I knew I wouldn't be able to speak, not with lungs full of blood. I couldn't breathe at all. I wondered how long Lucifer could force me to cling to life, how long he could maintain my existence before the torture claimed my life and ripped my soul away from my body.

“Speak your mind, mortal,” Lucifer.

Maybe it was hope. Maybe it was just a final, futile effort to save myself.

But maybe it was something more than simple desperation. Maybe, in some small, twisted way, I agreed with Lucifer. Maybe I agreed that Ash shouldn't have wasted herself to protect me.

She was gone.

Gone, but not dead.

Not dead.

Not yet.

My voice no longer worked. I spoke to Lucifer in my mind. I knew he could hear my thoughts.

*Death said she's gone, I thought. He says that she's gone but that she's not dead.*

“Death said?” Lucifer asked. He sounded surprised. “You've spoken with Death, mortal?”

The pressure holding me to the wall released its grip. I slid down the metal that was slick with my own blood and collapsed into a heap. I knew that I was dying, that I was already dead and

it was only by Lucifer's will that my soul still clung to my body.

*We can save her, I thought. We can bring her back.*

"You remind me of her, mortal," Lucifer said. "You sound just like her. You are ready to make whatever deal you can to save the one you think matters to you, the one you think belongs to you. Do you not think I would restore her myself if it were in my power? If she were in Hell, I would have freed her myself! No, mortal, she is gone forever. My Ashariel is dead."

*Conduit, I thought. I can be her vessel, I can help her reform herself.*

"Even at the end, you cling to hope," Lucifer sneered. "Even though it is long past the end. How very human of you."

*Make a deal with me, I thought. The world was beginning to ebb and fade. Maybe I was finally about to slip into something more comfortable, like death.*

"You're sweet to offer, boy," Lucifer said. "I'm afraid that you have nothing that I need. You can't bring Ashariel back to me. There is only one thing I want from you now."

A dark chuckle rippled through the darkness.

"I want to watch you bleed."

He cut me open with a handful of claws.

"I want to watch you suffer."

Another cut. More blood.

"I want to watch you die."

And then I heard something else: a distant rumble that shook the concrete beneath us and rattled the metal walls of the old warehouse. Somewhere in the darkness, glass broke.

Lucifer snarled at the interruption. His claws left my face.

“My brother draws near,” Lucifer hissed. “Once again, he has seen fit to deprive me of my fun.”

I gurgled helplessly.

“You are fortunate that we were interrupted, mortal,” Lucifer said. “Otherwise, I would play with you like this forever.”

Claws gripped my throat again and he lifted me off the ground. I felt my blood stream out from countless wounds.

“You are worthless,” Lucifer said. “You are nothing more than a disgusting bag of blood and meat choking with delusions of your own importance. And now you are dead.”

I felt a brief flicker of pain as Lucifer's claws snapped shut. I heard the bones in my neck snap and it was surprisingly loud.

And then a blessed numbness flooded over me and I felt nothing at all.

“That wasn’t how I assumed that would go,” a hauntingly beautiful and familiar female voice said, seemingly from both everywhere and nowhere. “But I imagine it will suffice for my purpose.”

*What?* I thought. *Morrigan?*

But there was no answer.

A darkness deeper than anything I had ever known me down into its fathomless depths and then there was only silence.

## Chapter Thirty-two

I was dead.

I was dead and there was nothing.

Nothing.

No light.

No sound.

No existence, not really.

Nothing except me and the dreamlike darkness in which I drifted. Thoughts swirled and wavered like broken fragments floating in a black pool. I was reduced to nothing more than these scattered thoughts, these bits of memory and experience that drifted about without aim or purpose.

Was this Hell?

There wasn't enough screaming for this to be Hell. There wasn't enough suffering. This was just the black. It was a void without being the Abyss.

This was not Hell.

That single mote of understanding became an anchor in my being, a single point that drew the scattered remnants of self towards it. Slowly, piece by piece, the thought fragments merged in the inky black and little by little, I felt myself awareness return. Shards reformed and I began to remember myself, who I was, who I had been.

I remembered my name.

And I remembered dying.

And I knew, I knew that this was wrong. Knew that this was not Hell, because I had *been*

there, I had experienced Hell and suffered down in those dark depths. Even in Hell, I still had *been*, had maintained the cohesion of self that was necessary to experience suffering and torment.

It was that knowing, I think, that brought me back from so many broken pieces.

The formation of that first thought pulled me back together. I tried to pull myself up out of the darkness but there was nowhere to go, because I was nowhere and I was everywhere. I was everything and I was nothing.

I felt despair.

I felt myself begin to break apart again.

But before I could shatter, before the darkness could reclaim my wayward pieces of self, a firm presence, cold and resolute, coiled around me. It held me close and carried me out of the darkness and back into the world.

Well, back into *a* world.

I found myself on an empty, featureless plane. A grey sky without clouds or sun stretched out above me. Everywhere I looked, I saw nothing but flat land that seemed to extend into infinity.

*Hello?* I asked. There were no words; my voice was nothing more than silent thoughts in my own mind. I couldn't speak. I couldn't feel my body. I looked down at myself but there was nothing there, no body, no limbs, nothing that I could see.

*Am I a ghost?* I asked.

*Yes*, a soft, familiar voice said in my mind.

I turned and saw a skinless man in a black suit.

*Death*, I said, without fear.

*You do not fear me, Death said. Why should you? You are already dead. You fear only what you do not understand. The skeletal hand gestured around. This is eternity. This is the Fugue.*

*I'm dead? I asked. I'm really dead?*

*You are, Death confirmed. Lucifer has destroyed your body and left it to rot.*

*I don't understand, I said. When we went into Hell, I didn't see anything like this.*

*You did not die then, Death said. Only those who have known me know of this place.*

*That's a real shame, I said. It seems like a lovely place.*

*Indeed, he said. Although all come here eventually, none remember it. Even the others do not tread upon this realm, despite all those they send into its embrace.*

*Which others? I asked. The Riders?*

*My brothers, Death said. They are part of the Fugue, too.*

*But not all of it? I asked.*

*Indeed, Death said. We are not the whole. In truth, we are little more than individual notes of music. We cannot sustain the grand symphony alone, but without us, the music cannot exist, either. We are necessary.*

*And what's the grand symphony? Life, the universe, and everything? I asked.*

*Death shook his head. Only the first one, my young friend, Death said. Only Life. Ours is the cycle that sustains Life. It is the cycle we were created to maintain, a cycle that cannot exist without us.*

*I don't understand, I said. If you're part of the cycle, why are the Four chained in Hell? Why do you only walk the earth during the Apocalypse?*



*I will answer what I can, Death said. Though we incarnate only during the Apocalypse, our shadows have walked alongside humanity for as long as humanity itself has existed. We have been with you every step of your long journey, for better and for worse. I have been there, my young mortal friend, at the passing of every life.*

*Every life?* I asked.

*Every life,* Death said.

*Is that why you're speaking with me now?* I asked. *Is that why you care? Do you feel bad for me?*

The Rider held up a skeletal hand to stop me.

*I do not feel,* he said. *I cannot feel; it is not within my essence to feel.*

*But to be there at every moment,* I said, *to watch the young and old, the innocent and the guilty. You see all of us at our final moments and you don't feel anything? You don't care?*

*I did not say I do not care,* Death said gently.

*It's the same thing,* I said.

*No,* Death said.

He paused. *I will show you.*

He motioned with his hand and the fabric of the empty plane shuddered in response and opened. The Fugue parted like a curtain and I saw—

I saw the world as Death saw it.

I saw everything. I saw the course of humanity itself across history, across time, across space.

I saw Death standing beside a soldier as he lay dying on a distant battlefield. A bullet in the soldier's belly had promised the young man a slow and agonizing demise. He had been laying there for many minutes in the mud, suffering and crying and begging for help.

For anybody's help.

Nobody heard him.

Nobody except the Fourth Horseman.

Death sighed and touched the soldier on the forehead. The young man shuddered and then, finally released from agony, he slid free of his body, his soul bright with relief. The soul took on the man's shape and stood before Death, a small, bright light against the dark figure. Death put his arm around the soldier's shoulder and together, they walked off the battlefield and out of the world. I couldn't see where Death guided the man. In only a few moments, they were gone.

The world shifted and took me away.

I saw a bedroom. An old woman lay in the body, her frail chest rising and falling weakly. Her eyes were closed. There were dry tears in her eyes and a rattle in her lungs.

Death knelt beside her bed, his skeletal hands folded solemnly in front of him. I saw other people kneeling around the bed; the woman's family, I assumed. I could see the resemblance in some of their faces. They knelt beside the Rider, though they could not see him. Two were praying, their hands were clasped together. A young woman sat on the edge of the bed and stroked the old woman's hair. The woman's daughter. She was crying silently.

Death knelt with the grieving family, and though he wore the form of a skeletal figure in a dark suit, it didn't look macabre or perverse. The Rider looked as though he belonged there. He

seemed more like an old friend than an unwelcome intruder.

And then I saw the words forming in the woman's mind. A silent plea drifted up from her as though she were speaking them aloud. Her vigilant family couldn't hear her.

Only *he* could hear her.

The words were there in her soul. They were part of her. She spoke of readiness and certainty. She asked that this long process be ended, that she be allowed to rest, that she be allowed to pass on. Her time was over. It was time to rest.

Death watched for a time, silent and still. It was his way.

Finally, he reached down and gently, so very gently, touched his skeletal hand over the woman's heart. As she exhaled her final breath, I heard him sigh once again, not in exasperation but in relief.

He gathered her soul into his arms. She rested her head against his chest. *Shh, grandmother*, Death said. *You are at peace now.*

He carried her out of the room and out of the world.

On and on the vision went. I saw a hundred different deaths, a thousand different faces, a million different moments.

The saint and sinner, the innocent and the guilty, the young and the old; Death came to each. He stood or knelt or sat or crawled or swam alongside each of them. For some, he waited for a time before taking them into his embrace, while others he gathered up as swiftly as he had arrived.

But always, at each moment of passing, as he took them into his care, I heard only a sigh of

relief from the Fourth Horseman.

The curtains closed and we were back once more on the featureless plane of Fugue.

*So many*, I whispered.

*They are but a fraction of all those who have lived and died and those who will live and who will die*, Death said.

*I heard your sigh*, I said. *As you took each one, you sighed with relief. Why?*

*Because when my moment comes*, Death said, *when a soul passes into my care, no matter how that soul may have passed, he or she knows true peace in my embrace. For some, it may be the only moment of peace they have ever known. And for others, it is the culmination of a life that knew peace and little else. I am relieved, Michael, because when I take a soul, I know that it is safe. I know that the soul in my care is home.*

*Why me?* I asked. *Why are you telling me this? Why don't I feel any peace right now?*

*You're different*, Death said.

*I keep hearing that*, I said. *Morrigan told me I'm different. She never told me why. Why? Why am I so different?*

*You were not allowed to die peacefully*, Death said. *I was not there with you when you died.*

*What?* I asked. I felt hurt. I felt betrayed. Death had shown me; he came for everybody. He stood beside each and every person at the moment of passing. Each person, it seemed, except for me?

*Why?* I asked. *Why didn't you come for me?*

*I was denied*, Death said. *The Fallen Archangel sought to deny me my claim.*

*Lucifer wouldn't let me go?* I asked.

*He wanted your soul for himself,* Death said.

*But he doesn't have it,* I said.

*No,* Death said.

*Why? What happened?* I asked.

Death paused for a moment. *I took you from him.*

*What?* I asked.

*I fought him,* Death said.

*Did you kill him?* I asked.

*No,* Death said. *It is not yet his time.*

*Oh,* I said. *Did you at least kick his ass?*

*Lucifer is the worse as a result of his decision to keep from me what is my due,* Death said.

Well, that was something I could take comfort in; the image of the Horseman giving Satan a sound thrashing was something I knew I would treasure for a long time to come, even if I hadn't actually seen it.

*It is less exhilarating to observe than your mortal mind is imagining,* Death told me. *The physical spectacle of confrontation only occurs as a result of each of us inhabiting a physical incarnation at the moment of conflict. The true conflict is entirely unseen. His essence attempted to subsume mine. He did not succeed.*

*Thank you for helping me,* I said.

*You are welcome, Michael Stroud,* Death said. *For what it's worth, out of all the humans*

*I've ever known, there is something undeniable about you. I understand now why the Fallen was drawn into you and why the Fey picked you.*

*Wait, what? I asked. What do you mean? What do you mean, the Fey picked me? Picked me for what?*

*The mind of the Fey Queen is an alien one, Death said. In this regard, you and I are far more alike in consciousness than either of us is to her.*

*Then how do you know what she picked for me? I demanded.*

*The Fey Queen is different from the Four, Death said. She is alien, but not unknowable. Her methods may be abstract, but I have perceived her intentions.*

*How? I asked.*

*This is not the first time I have dealt with the Fey, Death said. To one such as her, reality and illusion are wholly interwoven. The truth is constructed of her lies.*

*I thought she couldn't lie, I said.*

*Only when she makes a Deal, Death said. In all other things, the Fey does lie, but even among those deceptions, it is possible to glimpse her intentions, and in that much, she has an agenda that is in keeping with my own.*

*In keeping with your own? I argued. She wants you to help her kill your brethren! She wants to destroy the Four. I thought you said you were all part of a cycle.*

*No, Death corrected me. She does not want to kill us. That is one of her lies.*

*Then what's her plan? I asked.*

*It is not yet time for you to know, Death said.*

*Bullshit, I argued. I'm dead. What else do I have, except for time?*

*I offer you a rare chance, mortal, Death said. You may choose to persist here, in limbo, or your soul may move on to Hell where your suicide placed you. Or you may choose to continue the role that has been placed upon you. But you must have the will to accept what this chance requires. Do you understand?*

*Not really, I said, but I'm willing to try anyway. You seem like a pretty decent guy despite the fact that you're also the Grim Reaper.*

*Then listen closely, Death said, and I will tell you what must be done.*

*I'm listening, I said.*

*First, Death said, you must retrieve something that was lost.*

*What's that, exactly? I asked.*

*Something that was very close to your heart, Death said. Something that my brother broke that should not have been broken.*

*Ashariel? I asked fearfully, my consciousness trembling with hope.*

*Death looked at me for a long, silent moment.*

*Yes, he said.*

*Tell me what I need to do, I said.*

### Chapter Thirty-Three

I rode into the Dreaming Path on a pale horse.

*I will open the way for you,* Death had said, *but that is all I can do. The rest is on your shoulders, mortal.*

*I'm going to borrow your horse,* I'd said to Death, after he finished explaining what I needed to do.

*I don't actually have a horse,* the Rider had said. *The imagery is just that; imagery.*

*Then you won't mind if I borrow it,* I'd said, feeling rather pleased with myself.

I appeared on a familiar green trail, mounted atop a skeletal horse. My form solidified and after a moment, I felt gravity again. I looked down at my arms, my hands, my shirt. Everything felt familiar, even correct. I'm sure Ash would have had some fancy way to describe it: something about residue of the self-imprinted on the human soul, or something.

Thinking about her produced a feeling of loss so keen it was a pang in my chest. This was the first moment I'd had to myself since her demise. I'd been swept up in Morrigan's whirlwind of intrigue and then abandoned in the wasteland and left to Lucifer.

I knew that I wasn't alive. I was a disembodied soul, little more than a ghost, really, but it seemed even ghosts were welcome in the Dreaming Path. Here, it seemed, the rules of reality seemed considerably more flexible than back home.

I slid off the horse and landed on the path. "Wait here," I said.

The skeletal horse beneath me didn't bother to respond.

The path cut into the green foliage in two directions. I glanced both ways but couldn't see



further than a few feet due to the omnipresent green mist. I stepped off the path and pushed my way into the thick vegetation that surrounded the trail. The leaves and branches recoiled from my presence and a new trail formed beneath my feet.

“Cool,” I said.

I started down the path. With each step I took, the boughs and branches ahead of me parted to reveal a trail. I heard a rustling sound behind me and looked back only to find that the path behind me was closing up just as quickly as it was opening. Guess I wouldn't be finding my way back to my new horse. I hoped I wouldn't need it anytime soon.

I hadn't gone very far before I heard voices whisper across the trees around me. I stopped to listen. The whispering stopped abruptly.

“Don't play games with me,” I said. “I know what you are.”

“Do you?” a voice asked from the branches above me. “Do you, indeed?”

“I do, indeed,” I said. “You are Fey. You're nothing more than a dream spirit.”

“A human word,” the voice chided, “a human word for silly human superstitions. I am so much more than that.” The branches above me rustled and I saw a blur of movement as the Fey leapt from tree to tree, circling around me in a wide arc. I caught a glimpse of silvery skin, catlike eyes, and very catlike fangs.

“Then enlighten me,” I said as I jogged to keep pace with the Fey as it circled overhead. No matter which way I went, the branches obediently parted for me. “Tell me what you think you are.”

“I?” the Fey asked. “Why, I am the spirit that lurks behind every human nightmare. I am the darkness that haunts mortals in the night and plagues their very dreams! I am the reason you

awaken in a cold sweat and tell yourself in relief that it was all just a dream.”

I nodded politely in response.

“I am the shadow!” the voice declared. “I am the night!” The branches rustled and I saw the Fey swoop down on me in a blur of movement. “I am the primordial darkness! Look upon me and despair, mortal.”

The branches parted to reveal a tall, slender, shirtless man with gleaming silver skin. His midnight-black hair hung loosely around his shoulders. Pearly fangs protruded from his mouth as he grinned at me. His eyes were bright green and too large for his head.

“I am Erebus!” the Fey cried and the force of his voice shook the trees around us.

I stared at him and didn’t say anything.

“You are not impressed?” the Fey asked after a long pause.

“It’s not you,” I said. “It’s me. I’m a little jaded. I’ve been spending a lot of time with Morrigan. I’ve even seen a glimpse of her true form. She’s a little bit scarier than you are. No offense.”

“Ah,” the Fey said. “You’ve met the Queen, then.”

I smiled bitterly. “You could say that.”

“Damn it, damn it, damn it,” the Fey rasped. He raked at the trees with his claws. The shredded branches reformed almost as soon as he had finished slashing them. “Damn it!”

“Sorry?” I offered, more than a little confused.

The Fey looked at me strangely. “No, you’re not,” he said. “You probably think this is hilarious, don’t you?”

I glanced around at the overwhelmingly verdant forest pressing down around me and thought about where I was. “Considering the day I’ve been having before I met you, no, I definitely don't think this is hilarious.”

The Fey snorted and didn't say anything.

“Look, I think we just go off to the wrong start,” I said. “Why don't we just try this again? I'm Michael. What's your name?”

He gave me a sideways glance. “I already told you my name.”

“Erebus?” I asked. “That’s your real name? I thought Erebus was the name of a Greek god.”

The Fey smirked. “It is.”

“But you're not a Greek god,” I said.

Erebus shrugged. “I like the way it sounds.”

“Oh,” I said. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“So what's she like?” Erebus asked.

“What's who like?” I asked.

“The Queen,” the Fey said and shook his head in disgust at what I presumed was his estimation of my mental capabilities.

“Why are you asking me? Don't you know her?” I peered at the Fey.

Erebus let out a short, barking laugh. “Know her? *Know* her? I know *of* her, mortal. I know her presence; I know that she is first and greatest of us all. But do I know her?” His laugh was short and shrill, and sounded a little bit hysterical. “No one *knows* her, mortal. She is unknowable;

cannot be known.”

The Fey lashed out at me suddenly. I flinched as he swatted me with the backs of his long claws.

“What the hell was that for?” My hand went to my face. “And why were you even able to do that? I’m a ghost now, or something. At least, I think I am. I’m supposed to be incorporeal!”

Erebus smirked at my ignorance. “It hurt because you thought it would hurt,” he said. “You may be one of the few mortals who have ever treaded upon the Path in so gross a fashion, but you are like any other dreamer. Your thoughts are your reality here. Such is the nature of dreams.”

I touched the area gently and was silently grateful Erebus hadn’t used the sharp sides of those claws of his. “Fair enough,” I said. “That still doesn’t explain why you slashed me.”

“Because it was a stupid question!” Erebus said. “You’re a mortal. A mortal should understand how it easy is to believe in the unknowable, the imperceptible, the unreachable. You have a word for it in your language!”

“Faith?” I asked.

“Yes!” Erebus trilled. “I do not ask you how you know a God that you have never seen nor met, do I? No! Because I understand that you do not need to see your God when his work exists all around you.”

I thought of Ash and what she’d say to the psychotic Fey if she’d been here. A smile tugged at my mouth.

“So Morrigan is the cause of the Dreaming Path and the Fey?” I asked.

“Don’t!” Erebus snapped. “Do not speak her name so blatantly. Not here! You risk a great

deal if you speak her name here without showing the proper respect.”

“It's just a name,” I said. “It’s not even her real name. I think she said she took it from an old human myth. Sort of like you, actually.”

Erebus sighed. “You do not understand anything about us,” he said. “It is not the word that matters. Words are just things, constructs of the mind composed of sounds. It’s not the name but what the name represents that truly matters.”

“If you say so,” I said.

“I do say so, mortal,” Erebus said. “And now it is time for you to tell me what you're doing here, why you're *intruding* here.”

“Humans have visited the path before,” I said. “We’re not intruders here.”

“Dreamers have,” Erebus corrected. “Humans haven't. *Especially* not dead humans.”

“You can tell the difference?” I asked.

Erebus smirked. “I can tell.”

“If you help me complete my task,” I said, “I’ll be on my way and out of your precious Dreaming Path before you know it.”

“The Fey are not servants to be called upon,” Erebus said. “If you need help so badly, you should pray to your God. I'm sure he'll be listening.” His laugh was shrill and screechy. It reminded me of a bird.

“That's unfortunate,” I said. “I thought you would have jumped at the chance to help further your Queen's plan.”

Erebus narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Lies!” he hissed. “You are not here on behalf of

the Queen.”

“See for yourself,” I said and reached up and tapped my forehead. “The memory of her telling me what she wanted me to do is right in here.”

“No,” Erebus said. “I won't believe what is so obviously a human attempt to deceive me. “Thoughts can't be trusted. Dreams are shifting things, amorphous, deceptive, as insubstantial as ghosts. I do not trust you.”

“I'm not a dreamer,” I said. “This is my true self, my entire self. If I made the decision to lie to you, the thoughts would be there in my mind for you to see, wouldn't they? You'd know if the memory was anything other than the truth.”

“Perhaps,” Erebus said.

“Do we have a deal?” I asked.

“Not yet,” the Fey said. “First, I want to know that you are honest, that you are truly an instrument of the Queen's will. I want access to everything.”

“Everything?” I asked. I didn't like the sound of that.

“Everything,” Erebus said firmly. “Every thought. Every memory. Every dream. I want to see, unfettered, your entire existence so that I know you are being truthful with me. That is my condition if we are to deal.”

“Look,” I said, “while I'm thrilled at the prospect of you poking around in my mind, there's some stuff in here that I don't want you to see. I have some private thoughts I'd prefer remained private. There's other stuff in here that I don't really think you'd even want to see.”

“Hah!” Erebus said. “You are attempting to conceal your ploy. You would show me only

an illusion and conceal the truth of it to deceive me. I will not be tricked. It is all or nothing, human.”

I sighed and pushed all my embarrassments, all my secret shames and moments of guilt, all of that was pushed into the furthest, darkest corner of my mind I could imagine.

The memories of Morrigan were harder to suppress. In my thoughts, she descended on me with such lust that it was impossible to refuse her. I'd had her and I'd *wanted* to have her because that's what she wanted.

I wasn't looking forward to seeing what would happen if Erebus found those memories.

“Fine,” I said. “We'll do it your way. My proof that I'm an instrument of your Queen's will in exchange for your help. Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal,” Erebus said.

“Explore away,” I said and sighed. “My thoughts are yours.”

Erebus placed his hand on my forehead. I grimaced. I knew what to expect, but the knowing didn't make it any less unpleasant as the alien presence crawled into my consciousness like an icy tentacle. I couldn't tell what he was looking at. All I saw were bizarre fragments of images as thoughts and dreams and memories churned together.

*Ah, here we are,* Erebus's voice said inside my skull. *The truth will be mine.*

The memory filled me so completely it felt as though I was reliving it. I was lying in the grass and Morrigan was atop me. She was kissing me. She was naked and so very beautiful and I wanted her, despite myself, even then, part of me wanted her long before she got inside my mind and forced me to want her.

Erebus was silent.

*There, do you see?* I thought at him. *I'm important to her. I'm doing her will.*

The Fey in my mind did not respond. He continued to watch. And I knew what was coming next and there was nothing I could do to make the Fey stop. The images of Death blurred quickly and were discarded, as though Erebus simply wasn't interested. He'd seen it, that lust that I tried to bury. Worse, he'd seen something in Morrigan's eyes, something that I had been oblivious to until far too late.

And then Morrigan was descending on me and I was wild with lust, lost in my desire for her. I was utterly and completely *hers* again, until the ecstasy was too much to endure and I fell into a long, oblivious bliss.

The memory faded and I found myself back on the forest path, panting and exhausted.

Erebus withdrew from my mind and reformed a few feet away. He did not speak.

Hesitantly, I looked up at the silvery creature.

The Fey looked as though he'd been sucker-punched. His face was tight with barely constrained anguish

I didn't know what to say.

"She wanted you," he said. "Out of all of the Fey, out of every possible human in existence, she wants *you*."

"Yeah," I said.

"I don't understand!" he spat and fell to his knees. His clawed hands raked at the ground around him. "Why you? Why does it have to be you, mortal? Why does she want you, why does



she appear to you, why does she show herself to you? Why wasn't it one of us? Why wasn't it *me*?"

He looked at me and I saw tears forming in his large green eyes. "I *love* her. Why does it get to be you? Why doesn't it get to be me? You didn't even want her, not really. You had to be forced! Why doesn't she do those things to me?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't give a damn about it either."

Erebus froze. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," I said and climbed to my feet. "I don't give a damn about your goddamn Queen or her twisted games or the shit she's put me through. I don't give a shit about the fact that your love is destined to be of the unrequited variety for all eternity."

Erebus's tear-filled eyes narrowed dangerously as he stared up at me.

"I don't give a shit about you, or her, or this place, or anything!" I said, my voice rising. "I'll tell you one thing I *do* give a damn about! I'm going to do what I have to do to get back to the one person I do give a damn about! And you're going to help me, Fey. You're going to help me get her back."

"Am I?" Erebus growled and stood up. "Or you'll do what?"

"Me?" I asked. "I won't be doing anything. You already agreed to help me in exchange for proof that I'm important to Morrigan. I gave you that proof. Now, you owe me. It was a fair deal and now you're mine."

"I owe you," Erebus said and his resolve melted away. His skin lost its luster and dulled from silver to deep grey. His very presence in the Dreaming Path seemed to diminish. I felt him bend to my will. It was both intoxicating and sickening all at once.

“What is it that you require help with, mortal?” Erebus asked.

“I’m going to find Ashariel,” I said, “and you’re going to help me.”

### Chapter Thirty-Three

“Your angel,” Erebus said.

“My fallen angel,” I corrected.

“There is no substantive difference between the Fallen and the Firstborn,” Erebus said.

“They are distinct only in names.”

“Names have power,” I said.

“Some names,” Erebus said, though he looked doubtful.

“It doesn't matter what you think,” I said. “We made a deal.”

Erebus stood up. “I have agreed to serve you in this matter and I shall do so. Tell me what must be done.”

It was Death's plan, not mine. I wouldn't have known enough about how the different realities worked, to come up with something to rival the Rider's scheme. It was simple and elegant and I didn't question how Death had given me the knowledge necessary to restore Ashariel to life.

*Life and death are but phases of a cycle, the Rider's voice echoed in my mind. A cycle unending, like a serpent devouring its own tail.*

Ourobouros, I thought, the symbol of eternal rebirth. I remembered the legend.

Aloud, I said, “we need to return to the mortal world.”

“Easily managed,” Erebus.

“It won't be as easy as you assume,” I said.

Erebus peered at me, suspicion in his eyes. “Why not?”

“I'm dead,” I said. “My body is dead, I mean. My actual body.”

“Yes,” the Fey said. “And?”

“And,” I growled, “how the hell am I supposed to return to my world without a body? Souls cannot exist in that place without a body.”

Erebus smirked. “You've spent so much time alongside your Fallen,” he scoffed, “that you've allowed yourself to think that theirs is the only way, that their rules are the same as *our* rules.”

“Morrigan uses a body,” I said.

“She is the Queen,” Erebus said. “All realities bend to her whim, including yours.”

I tried not to think too much about the implications of that statement.

“Great,” I said. “I assume that means you have a plan.”

Erebus grinned. “I myself have never been tainted by the weight of flesh, though I have been to your world many times. I will show you what to do.”

“We need to actually be in the world,” I said. The real world, not happy, fun-time dream world.”

Erebus hissed in annoyance. “I am well aware of that fact, mortal,” he said. “And I would remind you that such things are normally impossible--”

“Which puts us right back where we started,” I interrupted.

“*Except* for the fact,” Erebus continued as if I hadn't spoken, “that the distance between the Dreaming Path and your mortal world has been severely diminished as of late.”

“Diminished? Why?”

Erebus giggled, a high pitched, creepy little sound. “You, of all people, should know the

reason for this,” he said. “It was your Firstborn, your *fallen angel* who bridged the gaps between the Path and the world, allowed us passage into the physical realm.”

“How’d she manage that?” I asked.

Erebus waved his hand. “I won’t bore you with the mundane details.”

“No, please,” I said. “Bore me with the details. I love learning new things.”

“Let’s just say that for some time now, your fallen angel has been bending the rules of reality,” Erebus said. “The longer she’s around, the more she does whatever it is the two of you have already done, the more reality bends and what was once impossible becomes possible, however improbable.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to think what Ash and I had done to ‘bend the rules of reality.’ There was the fact that Morrigan had taught Ashariel how to create her own vessel. There was virtually everything Ashariel had done since being released: igniting the Apocalypse, defying the Archangels, and unleashing the Four Horsemen. There was the fact that she was free at all, although that hadn’t been her doing.

I paused for a moment. It was something I knew both Ash and I had wondered about, although never discussed: why had Morrigan chosen her? Why had Morrigan done anything that she’d done from the moment I’d woken up and found a fallen angel inside my head?

We both knew Morrigan was playing a longer game. I wondered if perhaps this ‘bent reality’ was part of her plan or just a side-effect of whatever was really going on. I supposed it didn’t matter whether I figured it out or not. I was on this path, for better or worse.

“Okay, awesome, great,” I said. “The rules don’t apply anymore. Wonderful. Let’s get to it.

Take us back there.”

Erebus glared at me. “I may owe you my service in this matter, mortal, but you would do well to remember that I am not your servant.”

“Yeah?” I asked. I was past the point of fear at this point. “What are you going to do; kill me after the deal is completed? If we’re successful, I’ll have a *fallen angel* by my side. You won’t even be able to give me bad dreams, Erebus. You’re not in her league and we both know it.”

“And if we do not succeed?” Erebus asked.

“Then it won’t matter,” I said. “Nothing you could do will be worse than what Lucifer has done and will do to me if I fail.”

“We’re wasting time,” I said. “Take me back.”

Erebus sighed. “As you wish, mortal.”

He reached out and pulled at the air itself as though it were a curtain. The image of the forest rippled and parted to reveal an inky black tunnel. I glanced at the portal and then at the Fey.

“Go,” Erebus said. “I will follow.”

I took a deep breath.

“See you on the other side,” I said. I stepped into the dark.

It felt like being dead. There was no light. No sound. No direction. It was the darkness of the void. *This is what oblivion feels like*, I thought. I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing. Was I supposed to be walking? Did I have to think myself where I wanted to go?

*Home*, I thought. *Take me back to my world.*

The dark obeyed. A circle of wavering light appeared before me. Beyond the rippling

curtain, I saw a desolate street corner. I stepped out of the dark and back into the real world.

But it no longer resembled the world that I'd known for almost my entire life. This world was more akin to something out of a dystopic nightmare.

The sky was dark and dull with thick grey clouds. Abandoned cars littered the roadside. To my surprise, the stoplight overhead still functioned and seemed to gaze down at me with its steady red eye. I wondered where it was getting the electricity to still function. The buildings around me were dark and still. The silence was broken by a faint crack, somewhere off in the distance. I wondered what it was.

Erebus stepped out from the shadow of a streetlight. He wore a dark blazer that looked constricted sharply with his silver skin. He took a long, deep breath. The Fey smirked at me when he noticed I was watching and exhaled slowly.

"The air in your world tastes very nicely," Erebus said.

"Does it?" I asked. "I guess I've never thought about it before."

"Indeed," Erebus said. "Have you given any thought to what I consider to be a particularly important question: what are *you*?"

I glanced at him. "What?"

The Fey smirked, showing his fangs. "What are you, mortal?"

"I'm human," I said. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"Perhaps you will clarify a point for me," Erebus said. "Is it normal for humans to linger this world after death?"

"It's not supposed to be," I said.

“Indeed,” Erebus said. “So we have a mortal, or at least, a being that *was* mortal, but now exists here only by the same powers that allow the Fey access to this world.”

“Please kindly arrive at your point soon,” I said.

“Perhaps you are unique,” Erebus said. “Perhaps you are the first of your kind to ever view the world as a ghost.”

“Fine,” I said. “Is that what you want me to say? I’m a ghost.”

“And perhaps a ghost,” Erebus concluded with a dark grin, “is simply another kind of Fey.”

I stared hard at the back of his head for a long moment. For all I knew, it was just Erebus talking; he certainly seemed to enjoy that. And yet, there was something about that idea, about the thought that something had changed, something inside of *me* had changed, that made a shiver creep down my spine.

Erebus flickered and appeared beside me. His clawed fingers stroked my face. “Maybe you’re not human at all,” he said. “Maybe you never were.”

“Get the hell off me,” I growled and lunged at him. My fist passed through his leering face as though it were smoke.

“You have so much anger,” Erebus said. “You are precious in your wrath; like a child throwing a tantrum in the presence of gods.”

His claws slid along my neck and down the front of my chest. I was reminded, violently, of the helplessness I’d felt in Lucifer’s presence. I felt his touch on me and knew that I couldn’t stop him, knew that there was nothing that I could do to *make him stop*. I was utterly at the mercy of a creature that had none.



It filled me with shame, to remember that terror, that helplessness, and worst of all, that *weakness*.

But this wasn't Lucifer.

This wasn't the first and most terrible of the Fallen. This wasn't the devil himself, evil incarnate. This was some damned little imp, born from some human dream, who existed only because we *said* that he did.

Fear turned to rage.

I lashed out at him again, and once more, his image flickered as my hand passed harmlessly through him. His laughter filled my ears.

"You can't harm me, mortal," Erebus said. "You can't touch me."

A dormant memory stirred within my mind. I remembered the first time Ashariel had unleashed her power against Gabriel.

I remembered how that power felt. I remembered how *she* felt as her bladed wings took shape and she fought back.

I remembered how that power felt as she wielded it as she took her own essence and made it into her weapon.

Rage became resolve.

"I take back what I say earlier," Erebus murmured, "about needing to hurry. I think there is enough time for us to play, at least for a little. I am sure my Queen will not mind overmuch."

"Get off of me," I said quietly.

"No," Erebus said.

It was easy, I realized, so painfully easy and obvious that I wondered why I never tried it before. Maybe it was something I could only do now that I was dead.

The Fey's tongue uncurled from his mouth.

I did as Ashariel's memory had showed me to do. I took all of that fear, all of that rage, all of that resolve and I made it my weapon.

I struck him hard and this time I did not touch smoke.

Erebus jerked back as my hand slammed into his chest. He flew away from me and crashed against the wreckage of an overturned car.

“I told you to get your goddamn hands off. Of. Me.”

The catharsis alone felt amazing. I didn't realize just how long I'd been waiting to say that to somebody like him.

Erebus looked at me, dazed at first, and then with something very near to fear in his eyes. “You,” he said

“Yeah,” I said. “Me.”

“How did you . . .”

“I've spent a lot of time in the company of angels,” I said. “Maybe I picked something up along the way.”

Erebus pulled himself to his feet and our stares locked.

He was the first to look away.

“No more games,” I said. “No more screwing around. No more wasting time. We're here to do a job.” I took a step forward and he flinched.

“Indeed,” Erebus said, his voice subdued. “Come, Michael. I will show you where to find your angel.”

It was the first time he'd ever called me by my name.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

I don't know how long we walked. The world seemed slippery and uncertain. It shifted haltingly through images like a bad projector screen. We moved through streets that I did not recognize. The sky above was utterly alien to me; a tumultuous splash of brilliant pink and purple and white glowing stars against a sea of black.

"Are we still in the mortal world?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Back to the beginning," he said.

"The beginning of what?" I asked.

"The beginning of your story," he said.

"The graveyard?" I asked.

"That was not the beginning."

"Yeah, it was," I said. "That was where Ash took control of me. That's where it all started."

Erebus glanced back at me and I could see impatience mingled with the newfound fear he had for me. "That was where it started," he said, "but it is not where it *began*."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said.

"I've been inside your head," he said. "I have seen and felt all that you have seen and done and been. I have been at the graveyard with the Fallen and seen through your eyes the horror of the infinite dark. Your story started that moment in the graveyard, but it *began* at the beach."

"The beach isn't real," I said. I didn't like the idea of Erebus knowing all that I knew. I

didn't like the idea that he could feel my memories as though they were my own. I didn't like that he'd been to our beach. "It was just something she made for me in my mind."

Erebus grinned. "It was a dream," he said. "I am fey. I know dreams. Mine is the business of dreams. I will take you back to your wayward dream."

"Why there?" I asked. "Why does that matter so much?"

"It is because of her," Erebus said. "For you, the beach was a special thing, but still a gilded cage. For your fallen angel, though; that was where she first began to thaw, first began to see you as an individual and not just an irritation. That was where your first feelings blossomed and where you came to know her and believe in her."

Erebus licked his lips with his long, blackish tongue. "That was where you began to fall in love with her."

"You," I said slowly, "should be very careful what you say next."

Erebus laughed. "Be that as it may," he said, "it is time to go."

He looked both ways across the street as though checking for traffic. It seemed like a foolish gesture. The world was empty and desolate. I wondered if there was anybody left alive in this part of the world. It didn't feel that way. The area itself felt dead. Erebus parted the air like a curtain and motioned for me to follow. We stepped out of the world. It occurred to me that I was quickly getting used to these strange portals.

I stepped out of the darkness and into a beach of white sands and sparkling blue water. The air was warm and tasted lightly of salt. It was all exactly as I had remembered it.

I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want to believe that Erebus, annoying, sniveling creature

that he was, could create this special place of Ash's and mine. I wanted to believe that it was an illusion, something created out of my own memories to deceive me.

It wasn't until I looked down and saw the place where the sand had been disturbed from her body and mine that I realized I was back. This was where Ashariel had shown me her preferred human form, the slender, dark haired woman with the enchantingly dark eyes.

I was back, back at that place, *our* place. The sun was bright and warm in the cloudless sky. I heard the quiet murmur of the surf and the gentle crash of the waves against the shoreline.

At my side, Erebus sighed happily. "I do good work."

"You didn't create this," I said. "You don't get to take credit for this. This was *her* place. She made this. You merely copied it."

"A fair point," Erebus said. He seemed contrite but I caught a glimpse of irritation in his eyes. "I only painted what I saw in your dreams. She is the true artist." He licked his lips. "And your fallen angel is, indeed, quite the artist. I think I would very much like to meet her someday."

I thought about how Ashariel would react to Erebus. I had a mental image of whirling blades and the fey's decapitated head landing on the sand. I smiled tightly. "I'm sure you would get along famously," I said.

"Will this suffice for your plans?" Erebus asked.

I looked around. It looked right. It felt right.

It was that feeling that suddenly made all of the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. I finally saw Death's plan unfold in all its intricate complexity and crystalline simplicity. It had all been images before, feelings and emotions that did not make rational sense in my brain. The Rider had

promised that when it had all come together, I would understand.

And now I did.

“I showed you the way,” Erebus said. I turned and looked at him. He was standing in the surf, with the water rushing across his ankles.

“Yes,” I said.

“I trust you know now what is to be done?”

“I do,” I said.

*She is no longer anywhere, Morrigan's voice echoed in my mind. And she is everywhere.*

What the hell does that mean?

*She is lost, Death's voice whispered. What is lost can be found again.*

*If it helps you to come to terms with your loss, Morrigan whispered, then yes, consider her dead.*

*You must retrieve something that was lost, Death murmured in my thoughts, something that my brother broke, that should not have been broken.*

Faded, lost, depleted. Gone from the world.

My Ashariel.

*She is no longer anywhere. And she is everywhere.*

I wanted to lash out against that echo in my head, that lingering remnant of Morrigan in my ears. I wanted to scream at it, deny it, tell it that she had lied to me, that she had taken away my hope with her twisted games.

But I knew, in that moment of clarity, that Morrigan had not lied. She had twisted me, she

had manipulated me, she had seduced me and controlled me and even killed me, but she had not lied.

Words formed in my thoughts, words that were not my own. I could almost hear the dry rasping of the skeleton's jaw moving as he spoke through me.

"Ever do the Fey speak in riddles," I said softly.

"Ever they do," Erebus said in a low voice as he looked at me.

"But there are no riddles," I said and looked up at him. "Not in the silent honesty of the grave."

I saw Erebus narrow his eyes. He did not understand.

"I ask myself, why? Why does it have to be this way? Why didn't Morrigan just bring her back? Why didn't Death? Why didn't anybody do anything? Why was it up to me?"

Erebus was silent.

"I know now," I said to him. "Dreams are wonderful, beautiful things. They are sometimes terrible, sometimes tantalizing, but always powerful. But there is no honesty in dreams. There is no truth. There is only fear and desire, played out to the grandest levels. They are a pale reflection of the world. It is only in death that the dreams end, the nightmares fade, and all becomes clear. All becomes true."

"Empty words," Erebus said."

"I learned them from Death himself," I said.

I took a step forward. The sand, real because I believed it to be real, shifted under my feet.

"I was led here," I said. "Morrigan took me and then left me for Lucifer to find. Death



Death led me to the Path. I found you and you brought me here, bringing the circle to a close.”

*It's very simple, the echo of Morrigan said in my mind. In attempting to shield you from Pestilence, she had to burn through her own essence to match the Rider's power. In doing so, she depleted herself so greatly that she was no longer able to maintain her possession of you, or even the coherence of her own spirit. What little there was left after her effort broke apart and scattered.*

Within me were the scattered shards of a lovely girl, drifting in a void that was everywhere and nowhere.

I could do it. I could bring her back; one ghost calling back another, one broken soul making another whole.

“Death told me what to do,” I said, “but it was Morrigan’s final lesson that brings it all together. She was the one who showed me it’s all about power: who has the most power and what they do with it. Lucifer's power, God's power, Morrigan's, the Fallen, the Fey, humans, everybody. And you know what I've learned, in all my time spent as a mortal in the company of gods and demons and dreams? I learned that power can be lost. It can be gained. And it can be taken.”

Erebus started to reply, started to say something, but I held up my hand.

“Give me your power,” I commanded.

“What?” he balked. “No!”

“You swore to serve me,” I said.

He grimaced and shook his head. “You do not know what you are asking,” he said. “You’re asking me to sacrifice myself!”

“You’re a dream, Erebus,” I said. “You can’t kill a dream. You will survive.” He

shuddered and tried to resist. He couldn't disobey, however. The air around him shuddered and distorted.

"Will you release me from your service?" he asked, his voice distorted.

"Give me your power and you are released," I said.

Air rushed out of his lungs in a gasp that was both a cry of agony and a sigh of relief. He withered away into a cloud of dust that blew away on the gentle breeze. Grey ash settled into the white sand.

I noticed something glimmering from within the largest pile of ash. I reached down and picked up a green shard of emerald. I turned it over in my hand. It was small with jagged edges that were still sharp. I held it up to the light for a better look and it began to glow.

From within the shard of emerald, I saw another world.

I saw a world unlike anything I had ever imagined. I saw colors that defied description and heard sounds that were at once both melodic and discordant. Everything was shard and vivid. Time seemed more fluid. I felt as though I was a live wire arcing with electricity.

As I looked into the shard, I heard a soft, familiar voice cry out from within my mind.

It was her.

I felt a ghostly hand brush mine, blindly grasping for the shard. I reached out and gently closed my hand over hers and over the shard. It felt as though a floodgate had been opened. My arm pulsed as something raced up my arm and into my eyes, an unseen force that thrummed so deeply it made my teeth throb.

The faint presence shivered in my thoughts and began to drink deeply from the torrent. The

essence and power of the fey rushed into me and I fed it to her.

She reappeared slowly, fading into view, first as a translucent, ghostly image, and then, a more solid image took form. Her image solidified and became real. I saw the moment she emerged into the world. Gravity grabbed her and she wobbled on her feet. I caught her before she could fall. She grasped my hands. The emerald shard was gone. She took an uncertain step and fell to her knees on the sand. She looked down at it with uncertainty.

“Ash?” I asked.

She looked at me with wide eyes. She blinked several times.

“Michael?” she asked hesitantly.

And that was when I fell to my knees and pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly.

There were already tears in my eyes.

“I missed you,” I said. I kissed the side of her neck. “I missed you.”

When she spoke, all the fear, all the exhaustion, all the pent up rage and strange feelings, all of it leached out of me and I felt the first true moment of peace I'd known in what seemed like a lifetime.

“I missed you,” she said and then there were no more words between us, because we were together again and this was our beach. I'm not sure if she pushed me down or I pulled her to me, or if it was a little of both, but I fell back in the sand with her on top of me. I felt her legs wrap around my waist and felt her hands on my chest. And then she kissed me and I no longer tried to think about anything.

### **Part III: Ashariel**

#### **Chapter Thirty-five**

I held him as he slept.

His head rested in my lap, his eyes closed. Every now and then, they would flutter as his eyes moved beneath his eyelids. I could tell that he was dreaming, and by the way he smiled in his sleep whenever my hand brushed over his face, I knew that they were good dreams.

There were so many things I wanted to tell him. There was so much I wanted to say.

I knew that there would be time for it all, eventually. I knew it was important to let him rest.

There were questions I had to ask, and not all of them were going to be directed at him.

There were questions I had to ask, and not all of them were going to be kind.

I could tell that he was dead. I could tell that his soul had been ripped away from his physical form.

I could tell that his death had been horrific.

For a moment, my expression turned cold and hard and I clenched my fist. He shifted and mumbled something in his sleep. I relaxed my hand and resumed touching his face.

Someone had harmed him. Someone had killed him.

Someone was going to *pay*.

I would *make* them pay.

And I had a very good idea of who was the most likely culprit.

I looked up from stroking Michael's face and fixed my gaze on a spot on the sandy white beach, several yards down. "You," I said. "I know you're there."

The air rippled like a curtain as Morrigan stepped into view. She smiled at me. "How

wonderful it is to see you again, my dear,” the Fey Queen said.

My posture became slightly defensive and I leaned over Michael's sleeping form, to shield him from her. “Answer me,” I said. “Did you kill him?”

Morrigan considered my question for a moment. “You should be grateful for all that I did,” she said.

My voice was cold. “What did you do to him?”

The Fey Queen narrowed her reptilian eyes. “So full of questions, are we? Fine. I will answer, complicated though the answer may be.” She gestured down to Michael. “I have been with him every step of the way, much as I have been with you, my dear Firstborn. Always, I have been watching. Always, I have been guiding.”

Gently, very gently, I moved Michael's head out of my lap and onto the soft sand. He mumbled something faintly in protest, but I knew that he would not awaken. His ordeal had taken so much out of him.

I stood up, slowly, and faced the Queen. I chose my next words very carefully.

“Did you kill him?” I asked.

Morrigan became very still. “Are you threatening me?”

I knew what she was. I knew the powerful entity that lurked behind that face.

I didn't care.

“Yes,” I said. My wings unfolded around me. Sunlight gleamed off the edges of my blades.

“Did you kill Michael?”

“He did not die by my hand,” Morrigan said.

“Who?” I asked. “Who killed him?”

“Lucifer,” Morrigan said. “Good luck trying to avenge him.”

I bristled with rage. “You are still to blame,” I said. “You let him die.”

“Did he tell you that himself?” she asked.

“He didn’t need to,” I said. “You’ve been using him. Manipulating him. You said it yourself; you were with him every step of the way, always watching. If he died, it was because you allowed it to happen.”

“Perhaps,” Morrigan said, “but if I did, it was for a purpose.”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s so special about him that draws your attention so? Why, out of all of the mortals that exist, did it have to be him?”

Morrigan gave me a strange look. “It’s not about him at all,” she said. She sounded almost compassionate. “It’s about you, Ashariel. It’s always been about you. If Michael is worth anything to me, it is only because I know that the boy is special to you.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “You *chose* him. You placed me inside of him. You chose him out of the seven billion mortals that share his world. You picked him for a reason.”

“Because of *you*,” she said. “All mortals dream, Ashariel. All dreams are open to me. I know their hearts and their minds. I know their fears and their desires. When I pulled you from the ice, I knew exactly whom to give you to. I knew who would bring you out of your shell. I knew who would help heal your broken heart and make you whole again.”

“You manipulated me,” I said. I felt disgusting. I’d been used. Morrigan had played me for a fool. “None of this is real.”

“It is real,” Morrigan said. “Your feelings are real. I gave you the mortal I thought would help you heal after your Father damned you and your leader betrayed you. I gave you what you needed to make you whole again. Everything else was up to you and the boy.” She smiled. “What you feel is real. What he did to save you is real. Not even I can manipulate feelings such as those.”

“That statement is less than reassuring,” I said.

She laughed. “Oh, my dear Ashariel. I have missed your company.”

“Why all the manipulation?” I asked. “Why not just *ask* me for help?”

Her expression turned cold. “That is not my way,” she said. “I do not *ask* for anything.”

“Seems like you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble,” I said.

“It was a difficult path,” she said. “I had to ensure Michael made all the right decisions and that he had the necessary power. The Horseman may have showed him the way, but it was I, my dear, who provided the means.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Let me make one thing very clear to you, my Ashariel. In the time that will follow, Michael will tell you that it was a minor Fey of no consequence who was sacrificed to provide the power needed to bring you back together.”

I blinked in confusion. I didn't know what she was talking about.

“Know this, Firstborn,” Morrigan said. “Erebus was no minor creature. He was one of the first upon whom I bestowed consciousness. He was one of the oldest. He was like a son to me.”

Pressure gripped my throat. I gripped at my neck but there was nothing there, nothing that could have caused the constriction I felt. I looked at Morrigan and saw the terrible force of her will, barely restrained behind her serpentine eyes.

“It was at great personal cost that I brought you home,” Morrigan said. “Consider that carefully, before you think to judge me for anything.”

Before I could reply, she was gone and I was alone on the beach, alone save for the sleeping man at my feet.

Michael stirred slightly and cracked open one eyelid.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I said and smile. I put my thoughts of Morrigan out of my head for the moment. I sat down in the warm sand and pulled Michael close to me. For a while, we were silent. The waves rolled up onto the beach and back out in a steady, comforting rhythm.

“So what was it like?” Michael asked me finally. He rolled over on the sand and looked up at me.

“What was what like?” I asked.

“Being dead?”

I looked away from him, and flinched when I felt his hand touch my face. The reactions startled me, made me realize how different I was now, from the person I had been. I didn't even know what word to use, to describe what had happened to me. Had it been my death? Had it been a suicide? Or had it been something worse, something more intense and seemingly irrevocable? I hadn't even existed, in that diminished state after my encounter with Pestilence and that felt worse than if it had just been death. At least in death, there is still the self. I hadn't even had that much.

“Hey, hey,” Michael said. He pulled himself up into a sitting position. “It's okay, it's just me. We're okay. You're okay. You're safe now. You're safe here.”



“Here?” I asked. Tension made my voice sharp. “Here isn't even a real place, Michael. Here is just inside your head. Here is just a pretend world that I made for you to give you a semblance of happiness in order to make myself feel better for what I'd done to you. Here isn't real.”

“You aren't wrong about much, Ash, but you're wrong about this,” Michael said. “We're not inside my head.”

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to be this person, not with him, not with Michael, of all people, but there was nobody else and I couldn't keep the words bottled up inside me. “If we're not in your head, then where are we?”

“As near as I can tell,” Michael said, “we're somewhere in the Dreaming Path. I think Erebus used my memories to create this beach in his world.”

“And why must we be here, in this place of dreams and nightmares?” I asked. “Why aren't we home?”

“Home?” Michael asked. “You mean the mortal world? My world?”

The word had come to me, unbidden, when I thought of the mortal world. Home? It wasn't really my home. It wasn't where I belonged.

Except if not there, then where? Where did I belong? I couldn't return to Heaven and I wouldn't return to Hell. The Dreaming Path was Morrigan's world and always would be. I realized that there really was no other place for me but the mortal world, with all of its saints and sinners. Maybe it was appropriate. Michael's was a world where following one's heart was, for better or worse, the way things were meant to be. Hadn't that been what I'd always done?

“Yes,” I said. “The mortal world. Your world.”

He closed his eyes, then, and did not respond. He drew in his breath, held it for a long moment, before finally letting it out in a long, slow sigh.

“I didn't really want to talk about this yet,” he said. “I wanted to enjoy some peace and quiet with you before everything gets all dark and dangerous again. I feel like I've earned that much, at least.”

“We can do that,” I said and smiled. “We have all the time we need.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I guess you're right.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” I asked. I knew enough of humans and knew enough of *my* human in particular to know that he would feel the need to tell me what happened to him for himself. It didn't matter that I already inferred from Morrigan what she'd done to him. He needed to talk about it. Was it confession or something else?

“No,” he said. “And yes.” He sighed. “A lot happened after I lost you.”

“Tell me,” I said. “Tell me everything.”

He did.

## Chapter Thirty-six

Even knowing what to expect, it was difficult to listen to Michael's story. He recounted everything. He told me what Morrigan had done to him, how she had forced herself onto him. He told me how she had brought him to meet the Rider of Death and how the fourth Horseman had proved an unlikely ally, of sorts. He told me how Morrigan had abandoned him to Lucifer.

He told me how he'd died.

As I listened, it was all I could do to contain my fury.

It wasn't that I didn't believe him. I did believe him. His memories were my memories now, including all the memories of Morrigan lusting over him, toying with him, seducing him. I knew that she was so far beyond my own power that I would not have been able to resist her, if she had desired me. A mortal like him would have an even less likely chance of throwing her off.

And that was the problem. It wasn't that he gave in, that he had sex with her.

It was the fact that she'd been able to do it. It was the fact that his memory was now inside me, that feeling of helplessness and weakness and submission. He had surrendered to Morrigan. And when she tossed him into Lucifer's waiting clutches, he'd been powerless to resist the Morning Star and he died as a result. He had died, because he'd been alone. He'd died, because I hadn't been there to protect him.

I was angry with him, because he was weak, because he was fragile, because he was *human*. I was angry because without me, he wouldn't survive. I knew that I was being irrational and that it was wrong of me to expect a human to be able stand against Lucifer or a Horseman or Morrigan. Worse, it was hypocritical to blame Michael for failing to resist such foes when I myself

wasn't strong enough to face them either.

But I didn't want to be rational at the moment. I loved him. I loved my fragile, vulnerable mortal Michael, I loved him fiercely and passionately and I was eternally grateful to him for bringing me back, for not giving up on me.

I loved him and I was furious that something so important to me, something so valuable was so fragile. If he'd been an angel, if he'd been like me, things would have been so much simpler. He wouldn't have needed me so desperately to keep him safe.

"Ash?" he asked. "Talk to me. You're just sitting here staring at me and it's freaking me out a little."

"I wish you were an angel," I said.

"Um," Michael said, then added, "yeah. Me too."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay," he said with a half-hearted smile. "You're not saying anything I haven't thought to myself a thousand times since we met. I wish I was like you. I wish I was strong and able to fight back against the things we've faced."

"If you were an angel," I said, "you wouldn't be you."

"Yeah," he said and sighed. "That's true. We still would have met, though. We would know each other."

"Yes," I said, "but I do not think you would have Fallen. You would be with those in Heaven." I frowned. "You would see me as your enemy."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe I would have followed you."

“You wouldn’t have followed me,” I said. “You would have followed Lucifer.”

Michael shook his head. “I would have followed you,” he said. “I *am* following you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I said. Anger rolled off me in a wave. It wasn’t anger meant for him, but he took the brunt of it all the same. “You can’t possibly know what you’re saying. You’re mortal. You’re a blind, ignorant, *feeble* mortal.”

“Ash,” he asked. “Why are you angry with me?”

I studied his eyes and the contours of his face. I let my gaze move over him, taking in the entirety of him, every quirk, every trait, every flaw, everything that made up his humanity, even in death. I had his memories within me.

“I’m angry,” I said very slowly, choosing my words carefully, “because you’re human, and I’m not. You’re human. You have free will.”

“You have free will,” he said. “You chose to rebel! You chose to fight. What was that, if not a choice?”

“I’m angry,” I said again, refusing to be distracted, “because your entire existence amounts to even less than the space between one heartbeat and the next, compared to the time I have existed. I’m angry because I have endured for millennia without knowing even the slightest physical pleasure or a kind word or a loving touch, while you have known it for the entirety of your short lifetime.”

“I’m angry,” I said and my voice began to waver, the calm giving way to barely restrained emotions, “because you are a fragile, weak thing, little more than an insect compared to what I am. I’m angry because I have defied archangels and demons and number both among my foes. I’m

angry because you cannot protect yourself and the mere thought of you coming to harm makes me anxious and uneasy. I'm angry, Michael, because I can't protect you and you can't protect yourself and I can't stand the thought of you coming to harm."

I fell silent. Our eyes met and lingered on each other. I looked away first.

He came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"I may not be an angel," he said. "I may not be able to do all the things that you can do. I may not be as strong as you. I can still hold you. I can still comfort you."

I don't know what happened. Somehow, I was in his arms, my face pressed into his chest, and I was sobbing. It was an undignified, primitive, and pathetic mortal display of emotion. It was beneath me.

It felt nice.

It felt very nice, indeed, to be able to cry and to be held.

Neither of us spoke. I cried and he held me.

Finally, I looked up at him.

"Feeling better?" he asked,

"Yes," I said. "No. I don't know why I did that. I'm stronger than that."

"Ash," he said. He brushed my hair back from my face with his fingers. "I know that you are an ancient fallen angel. I know that's true. I don't think that means what you feel now makes you weak. It's not a matter of power. It's not weakness to cry."

"I know," I said. I thought of the Pit and the tears that had frozen in my eyes. Those tears had eventually subsumed me entirely and become my icy prison.

Yes, I knew much of tears.

Before I could say anything else, I felt the world shift. A feeling of cold emptiness appeared behind me.

A dead man in a black suit stood in the sand. His head was a yellowish skull, devoid of even the faintest traces of rotting flesh.

“Horseman,” I said. “I take it you have come to claim your due?”

“Indeed,” Death said.

“Just as well, then,” I said. “Perhaps you will be more thorough about doing your job than your brother was. You will not have him.” My wings appeared around me, the edges splayed out like so many blades.

“Ash,” Michael said from behind me. “If he’s here to take me, there’s nothing you can do. I’m already dead.”

The skeletal entity spread his hands. “I am not here to undo the work I helped to orchestrate.”

Death's skull did not permit the Rider the luxury of facial expressions, but there was something in the way he looked at Michael that suggested he was smiling. “I could have taken him,” the Rider said. “I did not. I *chose* not to.”

“That’s not possible,” I said. “You don’t get to choose. *We* do not get to choose. It is not in our nature.”

Death shrugged. “Things are changing. Perhaps someone has rewritten the rules.” He chuckled softly. “Or perhaps that someone has allowed the rules to be rewritten. Regardless, when

this mortal boy came into my care, I found I had a choice. I could take him into eternity or I could take him on a long, winding road through much darkness until he found a light.” The Rider looked at me. “I see he found his light.”

“Death does not create life,” I said.

“Ash,” Michael said. “He helped me. I wouldn’t be here without his help. You wouldn’t be here without his help.”

“She is correct, however,” the Rider said. “I do not create life and I did not do so. I merely assisted in reassembling something that was broken, nothing more.”

“Why me?” I asked. “Why help him bring me back? Why involve yourself now?”

A fair question,” he said. “Perhaps because you are unique, Ashariel; there has never been another entity such as you. You are very much a work of art.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“That is your decision to believe as you will,” Death said. “Your belief is not why I have come.”

“Then why come?” I asked.

“We three have a common problem,” Death said. “This problem has given herself names and titles that she does not own by right, but by force.”

“Morrigan,” Michael said.

“That is one name she has claimed for herself,” Death said. He chuckled again. “It is an amusing choice. Do you know its origin? A goddess of war and death in the Celtic mythology.”

“It seems like that would be more your thing than hers,” I said.



Death shrugged. "Perhaps, but I am not jealous."

"How do you know about her?" I asked. *We* never knew about her until she revealed herself."

"Why wouldn't I know of her?" Death asked. "I was not created by your deity, Ashariel. I am not, strictly speaking, a *thing*. I am a process, an idea. My brethren are an extension of my own purpose."

"You're more than an idea," Michael said.

Death shook his head. "We are, all of us, ideas in the mind of a god. It may not be the god you believe you know. It may not be the god that Ashariel knew as her Father. It may be another god who chooses to remain hidden, a god whose influence is not seen or felt, but nevertheless remains the bulwark of our reality."

"You believe in this other god?" Michael asked.

Death smiled, in that strange way of his. "Yes," he said. "I believe."

"You said we had a common enemy," I said.

"I know well the entity that has chosen to call itself the Fey Queen," Death said. "In fact, I know her better than she knows herself. I know what she is looking for and why she pulled the very strands of fate to bring you both to this moment."

"I don't believe in fate," Michael said.

"No?" Death asked. "That is fine. Fate believes in you."

"If you know her, you know her power," I said. "You know that she is greater than any angel or Archangel. You know there is nothing I can do to stop her."

“I did not suggest that we would solve our common problem by stopping her,” Death said.

“My solution is for you to *help* her.”

“Why the *hell* would I want to do that?” I asked. “Do you have any idea what she’s done to Michael or to me? She killed him! She *used* me.”

“She freed you,” Death said.

“Should that make me beholden to her? I did not ask for her help. I didn’t *ask* to be woken up.”

“Your freedom is valuable to you, though,” Death said. “Your feelings for this mortal are valuable, too.”

“That does not mean I owe her a debt,” I said. “It does not mean that I am beholden to her. I do not kneel to tyrants, no matter how many gifts they bring.” I looked at the Rider in surprised. “You sound like you are on her side.”

“I am not,” Death said. “I am the epitome of neutrality.”

“It’s something else,” Michael said. He’d been quiet for a while. “It’s not about helping Morrigan. It’s not even about helping us, is it?”

Death was silent.

“It’s about fixing the damage that’s been done,” Michael said. “It’s about restoring the natural order.”

“The Fey Queen is a creature of chaos,” Death said. “Through her actions, she has set in motion a chain of events that has destroyed an entire world.”

“Why should that matter to you?” I asked. “Doesn’t that just give you more souls to reap?”

Michael glanced at me. “You don’t know him,” he said. “He’s not like that. He’s . . . gentle.”

“I have seen too much of violence to believe that the Rider of Death is gentle,” I said.

“I am Death,” he said softly, “not War. Young Michael is correct. My purpose is the continuation of the natural order. Life cannot exist without death. Mine is a process of renewal. All things pass in time and from the ashes of the old the new are allowed to grow. Such it has always been, for plant and animal alike. Such it has been for worlds beyond counting. Such it has been for universes beyond measure.”

“The universe can die?” Michael asked.

“Of course,” Death said. “Your universe exploded from the corpse of its parent, as its parent did to its parent, and so on. This cycle is infinite. It has always been and always will be.”

“Unless something goes wrong,” I said, “unless chaos destroys this precious natural order of yours.”

“You have the right of it,” Death said.

“How does helping Morrigan achieve her goal restore the natural order?” I asked. “It sounds like you should be killing her, not aiding her.”

“If killing her was the solution, I would have slain her myself,” Death said with an air of cold finality so resolute I didn’t dare contradict him. Even though I knew how powerful Morrigan was, I believed Death at that moment.

“The world you knew is gone,” Death said to Michael. “It has been put to the flame. If Morrigan is killed, your world shall remain a dead and barren realm. But if you help her, events

will be arranged in such a way that life will be able to regrow. New seeds will be sewn and life will flourish again in a new form.”

“I can’t believe you want to help her,” I said. “I can’t believe she’s going to get away with everything she’s done. How is that fair?”

“I am Death,” the Rider said, “not Justice.”

I knew better than to argue with the Horseman, but it still didn’t seem right. I looked at Michael. “What do you want to do?” I asked.

“You’re asking me? Why?”

“I do not think I have the right to decide the fate of the mortal world,” I said. “Not when I was the catalyst that triggered so much harm.”

“Is that an admission of wrongdoing?” Death asked. He sounded amused. “From the unrepentant?”

“I regret all the harm I caused,” I said. “I regret that so many died.”

“You’ve changed much in your time with this mortal boy,” Death said.

“Save it,” I said. “Don’t pretend that you know me. I’m not mortal.”

“I know you better than you know yourself, Fallen,” Death said. “Immortal and eternal are not the synonyms you assume them to be. All things come to me in the end. Even angels.”

I eyed him warily. “Is that a threat?”

“I do not threaten,” Death said. “I simply am.”

“I think this decision is a little above my pay grade,” Michael said. “I mean, you’re asking me to speak for the *entire world*. What am I supposed to say?”

I looked at him and my expression softened. I touched his shoulder. “You already know what to say. The answer is in your heart.”

He sighed and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, you’re right.” He looked at Death.

“Is helping Morrigan get what she wants the only way to restore the world?” he asked.

“There is only one certainty, young Michael,” Death said. “Everything else is possibility. Is it possible you could find a way to heal the destruction that’s been done? Perhaps it is. Is it probable? No.”

“Will things go back to the way they were?” Michael asked.

“No,” Death said. “The dead will remain dead. The world you knew is gone as the forest that falls to wildfire is gone. This fate cannot be unwoven, but by your actions, you can ensure that a new forest will grow from the ashes of the old. Life will endure.”

Michael squared his shoulders. I could tell he was thinking it over, but I knew what he was going to choose. It was not because of any special sense or ancient wisdom on my part. I knew him better than I’d ever known another being before. I knew his heart and his mind.

“We’ll help her,” Michael said. “Tell us what needs to be done.”

Death stood next to me. His skeletal hand reached out and pressed against my forehead. I expected to feel cold or pain, but there was nothing. After a moment, he pulled his hand away.

“It is done,” Death said. “I have given you what you need to begin the regrowth.”

I looked down at my hands. They were the same. I sifted through my thoughts looking for some secret knowledge, but there was nothing. I felt the same. I was the same.

“What did you do?” I asked.

There was no answer.

“How will I know what to do if I have no idea what you’ve given me,” I asked the Rider.

“You will know.”

“How helpfully vague,” I said and sighed. It didn’t matter; I’d already cast my lot when I decided to trust him.

“You could come with us,” Michael said. “You could help us fix everything, couldn’t you?”

Death chuckled again. “We are all limited by what we are, Michael. I am the release from the suffering of mortality. I am mercy. I am Death. I am not a choice. I am not free. I am not the one who will set things right. That choice must be made by those with the agency to choose. They have done so. What comes next will come.”

He smiled in that curious way of his. “Until next we meet.”

A cold wind blew out across the green haze of the Dreaming Path and he was gone.

“He didn’t take me with him,” Michael said after a moment.

“Indeed,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

I shrugged. “At the moment? It means you are a ghost.”

He glared at me. “Thanks for letting me down gently, Ash. You have a real soft touch.”

I smiled. “You’re worrying too much.”

“You’re right, I totally am worrying too much about this,” Michael said. He looked around the forest glade. “What possible reason could I have to be worried, except that I’m dead and

apparently a ghost? That seems like a pretty good reason to worry, in my opinion.”

“You weren’t worrying before,” I observed.

“There wasn’t time to worry before!” Michael said. “This is the first moment I’ve had to really consider my fate and right now, it’s not looking too good.”

“You don’t want to be a ghost?”

He stared at me. “You’re teasing me,” he said. “You’re actually telling a joke right now, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I said. I drew nearer to him and put my hand on his arm.

“You can touch me?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said, still smiling. “You’re a spirit now, like me.”

“Well, I guess there’s that,” he said.

“There’s more than that,” I said. I gripped his arm and pulled him out of the Dreaming Path and back into the world.

The sky above was grey and sputtering with inconstant rain. Even as I looked, a few fat drops splashed against my face. The raindrops felt oily against my skin. I was wearing my human form, created by the knowledge imparted by Morrigan’s Gift.

*Where am I?* Michael asked from inside my head.

“You’re inside me,” I said.

*Hot,* Michael said.

“Not like that!” I snapped, but my human only laughed.

I was carrying Michael’s soul inside me, much as his mortal vessel had once carried mine.

It was a curious reversal of our previous roles.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

*Good, he said. This is a little weird, but overall, I feel alright. It’s a bit disorienting seeing out of your eyes like this, but I’m getting used to it.*

“It won’t be permanent,” I said. “We just need to find your body.”

*We’re close, he said. Look around in a slow arc, please.*

I did as he instructed and cast my gaze solely over the broken field.

*There, he said as my gaze swept across an abandoned building. That warehouse. I went in there to get out of the storm. That’s where Lucifer found me.*

I walked across the broken field and climbed onto the loading dock. I gripped the shutter door and pulled it open. The stench of rotting flesh hit me in a wave.

“Oh my,” I said. “That is rather unpleasant.”

*Is that me? Michael asked. Am I rotting?*

“Unfortunately,” I said. I put my hand over my mouth.

*That’s not going to be a problem, is it? Michael asked. He sounded on the edge of hysteria. You can still fix me, right?*

“Relax,” I said, though my voice was muffled. “I can still fix you.”

Beyond the shutter door, there was only darkness and the stench of rot. I held out my hand and infused it with a silver glow. Light poured outward.

“Let there be light,” I said drily.

*Hey, a joke, Michael said. That’s new.*



“I’m a whole new me,” I said. “Dying will do that to a girl. Let's go.”

The light around my hand filled the warehouse. Fat, hairy black rats scurried away from the glow. Other than the rats, the warehouse was mostly empty. There was a loading dock at the opposite end and a ruined stairway that led up to a half-collapsed office building. Detritus was strewn about the entire place in haphazard piles.

I saw the remains of Michael’s body propped up against a far wall.

*It's like somebody was using a blender and forgot the lid, Michael said. I can't believe that's me. Oh God. That's me. If I had a mouth, I'd be sick right now.*

There wasn’t much left. Most of his flesh had been peeled away and scattered. The rats had gotten to what was left. His skeleton was mostly intact, though several bones were snapped and twisted into odd shapes.

There were scattered lumps of rotting meat that I assumed were organs.

Lucifer had taken my beloved apart a layer at a time.

I grimaced. Hatred surged within me like a black tide.

I didn’t bother with an empty threat. I didn’t curse Lucifer’s name or threaten him with my wrath.

I made a promise to myself; a promise that one day, I would flay Lucifer alive, just as he had done to my Michael.

I would remember every insult and injury that had been inflicted upon Michael. I would remember and I would keep that memory deep inside, far too deep for Michael to ever know. I would remember and I would pay Lucifer pay back for each cruelty.

He would pay in blood and in agony.

*Why am I rotting?* Michael asked. *I haven't been dead that long, have I?*

“You might well have been,” I said. My voice sounded flat and hollow in the empty space. “You're dead. Time passes different for spirits than it does for physical bodies. It may be many days or even weeks later than what your mind assumes it is.”

*Well, that's just awesome,* Michael said. *So, Doctor, what's the diagnosis? I know how bad this looks, I mean, there's not a whole lot that's left of me. Can you put me back together?*

“Once, I would have told you it was impossible,” I said. “Resurrections are difficult for angels of my rank. It's even worse for the Fallen. We no longer have the same connection to life that we once did.”

*It's impossible?* he asked. *There's no hope?*

“There is always hope,” I said. “Morrigan showed me that brute force is not necessary to bring flesh into existence. It is not a question of raw power.”

I knelt down beside the ruined skeleton. I caressed his shattered skull.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

*It's nice to be this close to you,* he admitted. *It's nice to feel safe, to know that I'm within you and that nothing can take me from you. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't like it. But as nice as it is, I know it's not what I want. It's not what either of us wants. You were strong enough to maintain a clear division between your mind and mine, when it was my body we were sharing. But here in yours, I don't think I could hold on for long. Already, I feel myself blending into you, becoming you.*

He hesitated for a moment, as if gathering his courage. *I'm ready*, he said. *See you on the other side.*

"It will not hurt," I said. "But it will feel a little weird."

*I love you*, he said.

"And I you," I said.

And then I gripped Michael's ribs in both hands, much as my Father once gripped the ribs of Adam, so long ago, and I opened myself and my power up to all of the knowledge that Morrigan had imparted to me. The physical reality around me became like a cool liquid and parted for me as easily as the surface of a watery pool.

I gently, tenderly, lovingly drew Michael's soul out of my own, and then, with Morrigan's teaching guiding the tempo of my work, I pulled apart and reweave the world, thread by thread, layer by layer, note by note. And in the end, it was not difficult at all, once I knew what I was doing.

Indeed, as the music of my efforts reached a crescendo and the power of my weaving rushed out of me in a cascade, I had just enough time and presence of mind to reflect upon the fact that it had all been, in the end, quite easy. It was intimate in a way that no physical coupling could ever hope to be. I had just enough time to marvel as he and I were as one.

And then I was lost in the light and the song.

## **Chapter Thirty-seven**

I awoke.

Michael was in my arms, his body restored.

We were in a hotel room like the one I'd claimed when Michael and I had first met. There was a single bed that was large enough two of us. Through a crack in the blinds, I saw that the sky outside was still the same sputtering grey. I wondered how far away we were from the warehouse.

The world felt different. It felt still and empty. I knew that we were the only living things for many hundreds of miles. Life had been scoured away and left behind only silence in its wake.

Michael felt me moving and stirred. He opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Hey, beautiful," he said with a lopsided grin.

"Hey," I said.

He yawned and stretched.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

Michael looked down his arms and examined his hands. He flexed his fingers a few times and closed them into fists.

"I feel good," he said. "I feel like me again. Hell, I feel better than me. I feel like a new me."

"Returning from death is a rare gift," I said. "It is not merely a restoration of life. Resurrection stays with you. It changes you."

"For the better, I hope," Michael said.

"Of course," I said.

“Wow, I didn't realize how different it would feel, being alive again,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He smiled. “It's all of the little things, the little details: the feeling of your body against mine, the warmth of your skin, the smell of your hair. When I was a spirit, I had all of the memories of being alive and I remembered how it felt, to have those things. But it's not the same.”

“No,” I said. “No, it's not.”

“Is that how it was for you, too?” he asked. “When you first took control of me?”

I smiled faintly. “It was.”

I slipped back into his arms and laid my head on his chest. I was a few inches shorter than he was. He was happy to oblige and his arms found their way around me. For a while, we held each other. Neither of us spoke.

I wanted the moment to last forever. I knew that it would not and could not. The question was merely who would be the first to break the intimate silence.

“It's time to go,” I said softly.

“You're going to go through with it?” he asked. “You're going to help Morrigan?”

“Do you trust him?” I asked. “The Horseman?”

“Death?” Michael asked. He was silent for a moment.

“I do,” he said finally.

“And I trust you,” I said. “We cannot linger in a dead world, Michael. You could not endure the desolation. *I* could not endure it a second time. I cannot and I will not.”

He grimaced. “No pressure or anything,” he said, “but you are trusting the fate of the world

to my judgment.”

I smiled. “In our brief time together, I’ve come to believe that you’re a very good judge of character. If you trust Death, I shall trust Death.”

Michael nodded. “Okay then. So we help Morrigan. We give her what she wants. I guess the only question is; what does she want? What does she *really* want?”

“There is only one way to know for certain,” I said. “We ask her.”

He shook his head. “She’ll just lie again,” he said. “That’s what she does. That’s what she is.”

“Not this time,” I said. “She knows she’s won.”

I slid out from Michael’s arms and stood up. The little motel room seemed like too small of a space to conjure the Fey Queen. I opened the door and stepped outside. Michael followed me.

It was a starless night. I looked up but could not tell if the stars were hidden behind heavy clouds or if the stars themselves were gone. I supposed it did not matter. The air was cold and dead. The world was winding down. I could feel its life draining out from it like blood from a wound. The Horsemen were on their ride. The Fallen were fighting their war. The Apocalypse was underway. Life itself was over. Michael’s world was over.

Resolve gripped me. I would *not* allow that to happen.

“Morrigan,” I said. “Come to me.”

A light, feminine giggle filled the empty air around me. Emerald eyes appeared from within a long, dark shadow across the parking lot from me.

Despite the fact that I had called her, I stiffened when I saw her. I saw Michael’s flayed

body. Yes, it had been Lucifer's claws that had harmed him so, but it had been that bitch that had dropped him into the devil's lap.

I would not forget that and I would not forgive. She might have been a goddess and I a mere angel, but I had defied gods before.

"So at last, you understand," Morrigan said. "At last, you see that you were always meant to serve me."

Michael flinched and leapt back away from the voice. The darkness pulled away from her to reveal Morrigan, once again, in all of her dark beauty and terrible power.

"You could have just asked," I said. "You could have forced me to serve."

She smiled sadly. "No," she said. "I could not."

"I saw what you are," I said.

"No," she said. "You saw only a shadow, a fragment of all that I am. You know nothing, Ashariel. What I want, where I must go; these things cannot be forced. They cannot be taken. They cannot be stolen. It must be a gift and the thing about gifts is that they must be given." She walked towards us. "When I found you, you were a wretched and pitiful thing, hiding beneath the ice of your own sorrow. I brought you out and gave you one who would make you whole again. I gave you exactly what you needed to heal."

"The cost, Morrigan," I said. "Do you know how many have died?"

"Billions," she said without missing a beat, "and that is only if we are counting the human lives. You know what I am, Ashariel. I have beheld the darkness before the stars. This planet and its humans are an insignificant mote of dust compared to all that I know. As they should be to one

such as you; you are not eternal, but you are ancient. You should know better.”

I looked away from her. The defiance burned through my heart. Even after all this time, I could not abide such naked tyranny. I wanted to defy her. I wanted to strike her down or die trying. I wanted to resist as I had once resisted Father.

It was Michael’s gaze that held me back. I caught his eye and looked at him. I saw how frightened he was. My power was so much more than he could ever be and yet the gap between Michael and me was dwarfed compared to the gap between Morrigan and me. I could not conceive of how Morrigan’s presence must have made him feel.

I remembered Death’s words. This wasn’t about revenge or defiance. It was about life. It was about bringing life back to a dead world.

Life was worth fighting for.

But even more than that, life was worth kneeling for.

“Tell me what you want,” I said quietly.

“This world began in a place beyond time and space and darkness and light,” Morrigan said. “I would have you take me there.”

My eyes widened.

“What does she mean?” Michael asked. “What is she talking about?”

“Eden,” I murmured. “You want me to show you the way into Eden.”

Morrigan grinned. Her expression was feral. “I have reason to believe that in this special place beyond time and space, there is a tree, a very special tree. I would very much like to see this tree for myself. And I would very much like to taste its fruit.”



“What is she talking about?” Michael asked. “What tree?”

“The Tree of Knowledge,” I said.

“It has other names as well,” Morrigan said.

“When humanity took Lucifer's suggestion and ate the fruit of that tree, it was the first sin,” I said. “It was your own fall from grace. It was also the first sign that you had something even more powerful than any angel could have ever imagined. It was proof that you had free will.”

“Why does that matter?” Michael asked.

“There is nothing more powerful than a choice,” Morrigan said. “Nothing more dangerous than the ability to choose between right and wrong, between one's nature and one's desire.”

I couldn't help myself. A smile crept across my lips and before long, that smile turned into a helpless laugh.

Morrigan eyed me. “What is so amusing?”

“I cannot believe that, despite all your power, you cannot find Eden,” I said. “Even the lowliest angels know the way.”

“As do the lowliest Fallen,” Morrigan said with a snarl. “Do not mock me. Eden is where your Father last touched his world. It is where the light is strongest. It is obscured to me. I must be shown the path.”

“And if I say no?” I asked.

Her smile was sudden and delightfully amused. “I will show you all the ways I can hurt your mortal until you say yes.”

I didn't have a retort to that.

“You wondered why it was you I plucked out of the Pit?” Morrigan asked. “This is why. The angels cannot be swayed by threats of torture or harm. They exist only to serve their creator. The Fallen are too depraved to care. But you; the idealist, the rebel. You were corruptible. You were able to care. Your will could be bent, could be coerced. All I needed was the right leverage.” Her gaze fell on Michael. “All I needed was for you to have something worth losing.”

“You are one cold bitch,” Michael said.

She looked at him. “More than you will ever know, little one.”

She beckoned to me. “Enough talk,” she said. “Enough stalling. Take me to Eden, Ashariel. Quickly.”

“I won’t leave Michael alone again,” I said. “Not in this place.”

She shrugged. “Bring him along,” she said. “I care not. All I want is for this long wait to be over.”

“Why do you want the fruit of knowledge so badly?” I asked. “What possible thing could you hope to learn that you do not already know?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she said.

I sighed and looked at Michael.

“I know,” he said. “We don’t have a choice.”

“We do,” I said. “I’d just prefer we didn’t have *this* choice.”

“Remember what Death told us,” Michael said. “We have to help her.”

I nodded. “I know.”

I held out my hand to him. “Are you ready?”

He took my offered hand and gripped it. His skin was warm against me.

“I’m with you to the bitter end,” he said.

My wings unfurled from my shoulders.

“We’re flying?” Morrigan asked. “Interesting.” She grinned as a pair of long, bat-like wings grew from her own shoulders. They were classically demonic in appearance. It irritated me.

I wrapped my arms around Michael and held him against me. I kicked off from the ground and beat my wings. Morrigan joined me with a graceful flourish of her own wings.

“Where are we going?” Michael asked. “Eden isn’t a physical place, is it?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” I said, “even for me. You’ll see soon enough.”

“Take me to Eden, Ashariel,” Morrigan said. “My patience is wearing thin.”

There was nothing left to do but take the lead and show her the way.

Together, we flew east, towards the endless, roiling expanse of the ocean and the distant lands beyond it. East, towards the cradle of humanity, towards the entrance of the verdant sanctuary that had once been humanity's greatest paradise.

It had been humanity’s greatest prison.

We flew on.

## **Chapter Thirty-eight**

We flew to a place that did not exist.

We flew to a place that existed beyond the limits of time and space.

We flew to a place that was and was not, had been, would be, and wasn't.

It was . . . difficult to try to explain it to my companions. Even Morrigan didn't seem to be able to comprehend the difference between Eden and her own reality of the Dreaming Path.

I'd given up trying to explain where we were going or why we were flying rather than shifting through reality instantaneously. I'd told her that this was simply the way it had to be and perhaps due to her eagerness to finally attain her goal, she did not argue. Michael, for his part, simply clung to me and did not struggle as we flew. It was a testament to how much he trusted me that I would not drop him as we flew over a seemingly endless stretch of water, far longer than even the mightiest ocean.

There was places in the world that had been host to moments of great importance throughout the ages, and as such had fallen out of synchronization with the rest of reality. They existed entirely to themselves and were tethered to the world only by strands of myth. Only my kind knew the way into such places; it was our task to watch over them, after all, to guard them from mortals.

"There's something you should know," I called out. Morrigan fluttered her wings and drew closer to me.

"You have my attention," she said.

"There will be guardians," I said. "Eden is protected by more than just distance."

The Seraphim will not abandon their post, even to answer the call of the Apocalypse.”

“I have faced the Fallen Archangel himself,” Morrigan said. “I do not fear your guardians.”

I shook my head. “The gate isn’t guarded by Archangels,” I said. “The guardians are Seraphim.”

“Seraphim?” Michael asked, shouting to be heard over the wind. “What are those?”

“They are a race of divine beings assigned by my Father to guard Eden from intruders,” I said. “They are utterly devoted to that singular task. They are very dangerous.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Michael said.

I focused my attention on Morrigan. “You have battled Archangels,” I said, “but Seraphim are far more powerful. They aren’t just fierce or unyielding. They are power incarnate. They are the essence of my Father’s light itself.”

“I thought the Archangels were the unstoppable ones,” Michael said. “Why haven’t I heard about these other guys before?”

“Archangels are the most powerful angels,” I said. “They are the fiercest of warriors. The Seraphim are not warriors. They are guardians.”

“I do not fear them,” Morrigan said simply. “They will allow my passage or I will force my way through them. It does not matter.”

“Can she take them?” Michael asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “She fought Lucifer but . . . that was an Archangel. This is something different.”

I smiled grimly. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. We must fly onward regardless.”

“You don't seem particularly concerned about this,” Michael said.

“I'm not,” I said. “The Seraphim will only destroy us if we attempt to breach the gate. We will either be allowed to proceed into Eden or our journey will end there.”

Morrigan laughed. “Do you think I would have gone to all this trouble only to allow you to stop outside the gates?” She shook her head and her scarlet hair cascaded around her. “No, my dear. You are both coming with me, all the way to the very end.”

“Damn,” Michael said.

“Indeed,” I said.

We were getting closer. Clouds had swirled around us to conceal the endless water. The sky seemed to stretch out in every direction. We were at the borderlands of reality. I knew that if I were to drop Michael, he would fall forever and because time had no meaning here, he would not age.

“Does anybody else feel that?” Michael asked. “It feels like my teeth are itching.”

“We are close,” I said.

I began to descend through the swirls of clouds. Morrigan banked and followed in my wake. The clouds were so thick that for a few moments, I could not see Michael, though I could still feel the warmth of his skin against mine and the weight of his body in my arms. Finally, we broke through the clouds and emerged into a bubble of clear sky.

Far below us, there was a lush, verdant paradise of trees and plants from every corner of the world. Pine trees lingered beside palms. There were cacti among the vines and foliage of the deepest jungles. It was a place of chaotic growth, a place of life without cultivation or restraint. In

the center of the clear bubble, flanked by a pair of massive fir trees, there was a simple, unadorned gate of black iron.

“Is that it?” Michael asked.

“It is,” I said.

I looked over at the Fey Queen. There was cautiousness in her green eyes and her lips were pressed together in a thoughtful expression.

“The gate is appears to be unguarded,” she said.

“The Seraphim know we're here,” I said. “One will manifest itself as we approach.”

I looked at Morrigan and then at Michael. There was no way to properly warn Michael without also alerting Morrigan.

“Seraphim are the manifestation of divine radiance,” I said. “They are brighter than the hearts of stars. They are Father’s own essence incarnate. Do not look upon them directly, even for a moment.”

“I take it something bad happens if we do?” Michael asked.

“If you are lucky,” I said, “its radiance will burn out your eyes.”

“And if I'm unlucky?” he asked.

“You'll be reduced to a small pile of ashes,” I said. “So don't look at it.”

We descended. I landed and released my grip. Michael stepped away from me and stretched his arms as he looked around.

“This is like some sort of botanist's dream,” he muttered. “Or maybe it would be a nightmare, I don't know.”

The gate loomed over us, a stern reminder that we were not welcome in this place. The black metal looked garish and alien amid so many natural beauty, so much life. The fact that it resembled a smaller version of the Gates of Hell didn't help much, either.

“So where's this Seraphim thingy?” Michael asked. He looked around nervously.

“Patience,” I said. “It's coming. It already knows we're here.”

I felt Morrigan tense up beside me and I glanced at her. There was a curious expression on her face, a sort of distant longing that she'd never shown before. She looked almost nostalgic as she looked through the narrows spaces between the gate towards the path just beyond it.

Michael drew closer to me and his hand found mine. He was nervous; his grip would have been painfully tight though I didn't protest.

“I cannot open the gate for your,” I said to Morrigan. “It will not open for a Fallen.”

Morrigan nodded. She looked up at the black iron bars and then, with a defiant gleam in her yellow eyes, stepped forward. She reached out and touched the dark metal.

The air began to hum with the electric crackle of raw power. I saw the color began to leach away from the world, green turning to grey and then to white as the presence of the Seraph began to take form.

“It is coming,” I said. “The Seraph is beginning to manifest.”

“What does it look like?” Michael asked. His eyes were squeezed shut.

“I don't know,” I said. “I've never seen one.”

“They look like snakes,” Morrigan said. “Large, radiantly glowing snakes with impossibly long jaws and too many wings.”



“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I have encountered the Seraphim before,” she said.

I blinked in surprise. “You have?”

“Once,” she said.

Thunder cracked the air.

“It's here,” I said. I tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore my instinctive fear.

White light burned away everything around us. I felt it burn into the back of my head and neck and the exposed skin of my arms and legs. It was like standing within the heart of a furious star. I kept my gaze locked on the ground before me and hoped, in a desperately quiet and bitter sort of way, that the Seraph wouldn't notice me. There was a chance it might sense the presence of an escaped fallen angel and decide to obliterate me. I hoped that by not approaching the gate itself, I would not give it cause to destroy me.

The Seraph loomed above us for a moment and then drifted down towards the earth. The ground shuddered as it landed.

Unimaginably powerful. Unfathomably alien.

I wondered what it thought of my kind? How did the Seraphim regard the lesser angels? Did they see us as flawed and broken creations as we saw the humans?

I heard Morrigan's footsteps as she moved away from the gate. I raised my head and, with my other hand held over my own eyes, I dared to sneak a glance at her. She was difficult to see through the blinding radiance of the Seraph, but I saw her looked up directly into the heart of the radiant inferno. She seemed unscathed.

“Hello again, my lovely,” the Fey Queen said. “I’ve missed you.”

She stretched out towards the Seraph, her back arched and her wings unfurled.

And she smiled.

## **Chapter Thirty-nine**

I don't know who struck first. I suppose it doesn't really matter.

The Seraph let out a cry that was terrible and beautiful and made me weep for joy even as I shook with terror. There was a rush of air and the garden around us filled with the beating of its wings.

Somewhere above me, Morrigan laughed quietly.

That was all the warning I had.

There was a blast of heat and a terrible roaring sound all around us. It crashed into the bubble of light I raised around us. My shield of light hissed like water tossed onto a bonfire. The barrier wavered. I fought to hold it as Michael crouched beside me, hands clapped over his eyes, head bowed. The shield flickered for a moment, threatened to extinguish, but I managed to hold it. Around us, the flash of heat and light had already set the world on fire. The green paradise was aflame.

Morrigan had taught that there were many subtleties to my power and that feats I thought impossible for one of my rank and ability were really only impossible to perform through brute force. Angels wielded power like a club. Morrigan showed me how that power could be something quiet and delicate and infinitely more effective.

I focused my mind and tried to see the Seraph without using my eyes or through the spectral senses that grew out of my own angelic power. I needed a way to see it without seeing it or touching it or hearing it. A most frustrating puzzle, made all the more so by the fact that I was

attempting to solve it in a span of seconds while two powerful immortals fought above me and my own mortal cowered beside me for protection.

Maybe it was the result of spending so much time learning that there seemed to be two truths for everything I thought I knew. Maybe it had something to do with dying, with burning myself out trying to shield myself against Pestilence. Maybe Morrigan had managed to teach me by example. I did not know but after spending so much effort trying to find my way through a maze of lies and illusions, I realized I knew how to see the Seraph.

I had the power to shroud myself from view, render myself invisible as it were. It wasn't something we ever did; it was a pointless defense against another immortal and we never had anything to fear from a human. But it was something I knew how to do.

If I were possessed of the arrogance of an Archangel, I would have tried to perhaps render the Seraph invisible, so that its deadly light couldn't hurt me. That would have been foolish and completely ineffective, given how vast its powers were.

But there are certain rules that governed the behavior of things in physical space. Perhaps they were rules set down by Father or perhaps the rules had simply always existed.

Regardless, I knew something of the nature of these rules from my time spent in Michael's head. My former host was, by no means, a scientist or even particularly brilliant by the standards of his people. But he understood a few key concepts, some half-remembered bits of lore from distant memories of his education.

He knew the basics of how light worked.

I couldn't stop the Seraph's searing light. I didn't have the strength.

But fighting was more than just brute strength; there was finesse and agility and technique, and in the end, those things counted for so much more.

I focused my will, shaped my power into what I hoped would be a new, more effective shield, and then, hesitantly, opened my eyes.

The world was still on fire. The flames danced across the blackened husks of the once vibrant glade. I took a deep breath and looked up, directly at the Seraph.

I couldn't see it.

It was still there. I could still feel the terrible heat that radiated from it, but I couldn't see the strange, snake-like creature that Morrigan had described nor could I see its lethal radiance.

I couldn't stop the Seraph's light but I could bend it. I could redirect its course so that it flowed around my shield. I don't know if it worked because of the arcane rules govern the flow and function of all light, even the divine radiance of the Seraphim, or if it had worked because I believed that it was going to work. It didn't matter.

I saw Morrigan. She was flitting about like a mad thing, her wings darting and diving, her hands lashing out the unseen Seraph. Her face was bright, her expression hungry.

She darted and lunged in a twisted dance, flitting in and out to the tempo of a song that only she heard. There was a dark beauty in her movements and I was awed by how quickly she rippled through the air, the fluidity of every twist and turn. She writhed and slithered across the air like a snake, avoiding the unseen limbs of her foe.

It was impressive.

It was terrifying.

A blast of force drove me to my knees. The air shimmered and burned. Sweat beaded on my face. Michael flinched as the blast knocked him back, nearly driving him out of the safety of my shield. He scrambled back towards me, his head down.

He didn't say anything. He didn't voice any of his fear, didn't whimper or complain, and that was impressive all in its own right. He was a mortal man, caught up in another battle so far beyond his scope that it was nearly obscene and he endured it all with quiet stoicism.

I was intensely proud of him.

I felt the heat from the Seraph intensify and then something big blew past me and knocked me off my feet. The blow sent me sprawling.

In a mad, desperate twist, I reached out with my will and caught Michael before the force of the blow drove him away from me and into the inferno. With a thought, I stopped his somersault and drew him back to me. I landed hard on my knees.

"Watch out for its tail," the Fey Queen called in a cheerful voice.

"What?" I asked, still dazed.

"The Seraph slapped you aside with its tail," she said. "I told you, it looks like a big snake. Try to stay out of its way."

"Easier to do if I could see the damn thing," I grumbled. "Michael, are you intact?"

He coughed. "Still breathing."

I looked up. There seemed to be a lull in the battle. Morrigan's attention was focused on an area a few dozen feet away from us. The cheerful expression had faded from her face and now I saw only cold, intense concentration in her gaze.

Something was happening. I realized that the battle between their physical forms was likely only a fragment of the true conflict and that the real battle was happening on other layers of reality entirely.

It seemed like the Seraph was toying with her.

A voice that was sonorous and wonderful spoke out from seemingly all around us. I recognized the words as Angelic language. It was the tongue we used to communicate amongst ourselves before the Fall. It had been so long since I'd heard its musical beauty that I nearly wept.

It was coming from the Seraph. The creature was speaking.

I was surprised. I'd never known a Seraph to speak before. I didn't even know that they *could*.

*THE DARK THING DOES NOT SPEAK AS WE*, the Seraph's lyrical voice was like the thunderous sound of an entire choir in my mind and the force of it nearly drove me to the ground.  
*WHY HAVE YOU COME TO THIS PLACE?*

"Why?" she asked. "You wish to know why?"

Her wings fluttered and Morrigan drifted down to the scorched earth below her. Her wings folded and closed around her like an elegant cloak as she walked forward. "Why is not a simple question and it does not have a simple answer."

She drew closer to the Seraph and gave it a cat-like smile that I recognized from our very first meeting. It was as enigmatic and hard to read as the Fey Queen herself was.

It was not a safe smile.

“I could tell you that it is simply because I desire access to this place that you have been assigned to protect,” Morrigan said. “I could tell you that it is because I do not know how to ask nicely for the things that I want.”

Closer.

It was a testament to the Fey Queen's power as she drew nearer and nearer to the Seraph that she wasn't even sweating from the intense heat it radiated.

“I could tell you that I want my own chance at redemption.”

Closer and closer.

“I could tell you that I have bested every being I have ever encountered in the many, many millennia that I have existed, that I who was ancient before one such as yourself was even an errant thought within the mind of your God do not *need* to ask for permission to take what I want.”

There was a long, low threatening rumble that shook the ground beneath us. I wasn't sure who caused it.

“But really?” Morrigan said, her voice still oozing warmth and seduction. I saw her reach up and cup her hand against something. Was it the Seraph's face? I couldn't see sure, since I couldn't even imagine what a Seraph's face would look like, if, indeed, it had one.

“There's really only one thing I could say, if I were inclined to explain myself to one such as you.” Her voice grew deeper and there was another rumble and now I knew, with a flash of terror, that this was not the Seraph's true power that we were about to see, it was *Morrigan's*.

“I am Morrigan,” she said as the image of the beautiful woman broke apart and revealed a spiraling, uncoiling darkness that grew out around the light and heat of the Seraph. “You do not



have the right to keep me from what I desire, you do not have the authority to hold me, and you do not have the power to stop me.”

The Seraph roared and a wave of light blew around the billowing shadowstuff of Morrigan's true form. The pulse blew through my shield and shattered it.

The Seraph was fury and power and light incarnate.

But for all its fury, all its power, it was too late.

For in the end, I reflected, light yields to darkness.

In the end, Death awaits us all.

I watched in silent horror as the darkness of the Fey Queen overcame the increasingly feeble light of the Seraph and coiled around it.

And then, with sickening ease, she swallowed it whole.

Silence descended over the Gates of Eden. Morrigan returned to her physical form, the image of the beautiful woman with red hair and green, serpentine eyes. She looked over at Michael and me and smiled.

“Delicious,” she said.

She turned towards the gate. She ripped apart the black iron bars with a gesture.

“The way is open,” she said. “Come.”

In numb silence, we followed her into Eden.

## Chapter Forty

We stood on the edge of a vast lake. Its surface glittered and reflected the sunlight back at us. The water looked deep and blue and inviting. The forest pressed in around it, trees that did not, could not exist together in the actual world, jungle foliage and evergreens together, cactus and oak and willow and a hundred others that I did not have names for. It was a place of life in all its wild, untamed and beautiful perfection, life as my Father had intended it to be. It was too perfect to be real.

I hated it.

For all its beauty, it was an empty garden. Humanity's first home had not been claimed by another. There were no birds. There were no animals of any kind. All had been cast out into the wilderness beyond the gates. Eden was a beautiful garden that was as empty as a tomb. The journey into the garden itself was uneventful, almost boring after the brief, brutal struggle at the gate. There was nothing left to stand in our way. There was no one here to refuse us. Angels did not wander these paths.

No one did.

"We're here?" Morrigan asked.

"We are," I said. I was numb from what I'd seen at the Gate. Michael hadn't spoken since we'd entered the garden. I gestured out to the lake. "There's an island out there. The Tree of Knowledge waits in the middle."

"There are no final guardians?" Morrigan asked. She peered down at the sparkling blue water. "There are no angels lurking in the depths, waiting to bar my passage?"

I shook my head. "The Seraphim were the only defense Eden ever needed," I said.

"You speak of them in the plural," Morrigan said. "There is more than one?"

I nodded. "There are three." A pause. "There *were* three."

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I cannot even begin to guess."

"No matter," she said.

Her wings unfurled and she kicked off from the ground. I wrapped my arms around Michael's waist and spread my own wings.

We flew over the glittering blue water towards the island at the heart of the lake.

The island didn't have a name. It didn't need one.

The island was small, perhaps no more than thirty feet across. It was lush and overgrown with ferns and foliage, but there was only one tree.

The Tree of Knowledge.

It loomed large over us, many dozens of feet taller than lesser trees. Its canopy of leaves was so thick that the island beneath it was shrouded in perpetual shadow.

We landed in the shallows of the island's edge. Cool water lapped at my ankles.

"It looks like an apple tree," Michael said. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while.

"But it is so much more," Morrigan said. She stared up at it in wonder and delight. "Its fruit is Knowledge itself. Things that are impossible to know can be made known." She looked at Michael. "You were innocent. You could not know good from evil. You were made to know. Such

is the Tree's terrible power. It brought down your Father's most beloved children. Perhaps it is more powerful than he is."

"Maybe," I said.

She stepped closer to the Tree.

"You are older than Father," I said. "You were the darkness before his light. What could the Tree he created possibly tell you that you would not already have known? What do you hope to learn?"

She stood beneath the Tree and then smoothly reached up to pluck one of the fruits from the bough above her. She brought down an apple so bright and red that it resembled a ruby. For a long moment, she regarded the fruit in her hand.

"It is not what I wish to learn," she said. "It is what I wish to remember."

"What?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Do you know why names matter?" Morrigan asked. "Do you understand their power, their importance? Names shape reality itself. Names given form and function to raw thought. They give identity. They are literally all that make us what we are."

She turned and looked up at me. "The name you gave yourself at the moment of your creation was the most important thing that has ever happened to you. Your name is what makes you. Names are the most powerful force in existence."

*I remembered the first time Michael called me Ash.*

*I'd told him not to use the nickname. He wanted to know why.*

*My name is the only thing that is truly mine. It is the one thing that the Pit could not take away.*

*My name is who I am. It defines me, gives me shape and form and function.*

*My identity is bound to it. It is why I am female, why I am a fallen angel, why I am everything that I am. To change my name is to change me.*

“I was given a name once,” Morrigan said. “An Archangel named Raphael named me Lily, in a moment when I had no name of my own and that name bound me. It crippled me. Eventually, I claimed a more powerful name which gave me the means to escape him. But it was not my name either. Not my true name.”

*Morrigan was a goddess of death. But she is older than that name. She adopted it.*

She regarded the apple in her hand. “I took the name Morrigan,” she said. “It is a name that gives me form and power, but it is a name that I stole, a name that I plucked from the memories of humanity. It gave me consciousness and identity, but it is a stolen thing, a borrowed face. It is not *me*. It is a tiny piece, a fragment of a larger whole. It cannot contain me. I need something more. Something greater.”

The Fey Queen held up the apple in her hand. “The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.”

She brought the apple up to her lips and bit into it.

Her eyes closed in obvious pleasure. “Delicious,” she said.

There was a moment of silent anticipation, like the last moment of calm before the clouds break and the storm begins, the last gasp before the plunge.

Her eyes opened.

“I remember,” she said. “I remember my name. I remember who I am. I remember *everything*.”

She flexed her wings and spread her arms out.

“I remember the darkness before the light,” she said. “I remember what I was before I became drawn into the web your Father wove around me, the reality he crafted to be my prison. I remember how I learned to fear him, because of his ability to bestow names upon things. He gave me a name. He used it to bind me.”

Her grin was feral and triumphant.

“I am bound no longer.”

The world around her *shivered*. I remembered the dark, nightmarish thing she had become, that monstrosity that was only a fragment of her true self. How much worse was the true Morrigan? How much more terrible was her power now that it was restored?

What had I done? What I unleashed?

What was she?

I remembered what Death had told me. I had to help her. It was necessary.

So why did I feel like I’d just made the worst mistake of my life? What did it feel like I’d unleashed something even worse?

“What happens now?” I asked. “You have your name back. You are restored. What will you do?”

She looked at me and smiled. “I’m leaving,” she said. “I have what I came for. I know what I am now.” She reached out and touched my chin. She drew my gaze up to hers.

“I know you fear that you have unleashed a new tyrant,” she said, “worse than the Father that you spent so much of yourself to defy. You have my promise that this is not the case. I am not your God.”

“What are you?” I whispered.

“A goddess,” Morrigan said with a kind smile. “Your Father created this reality to be my prison, but I do not bear it any ill will. I will let it be. I am leaving this reality. Perhaps, in time, I will create one for myself. If I do, I promise that I will be a far more benevolent deity than the one that abandoned you.”

She spread her hands. “Thank you for all you have done for me, Ashariel and Michael. I leave my dream in your care,” she said. “Farewell. Our paths will not cross again.”

“No,” I said in a weak, brittle voice. “No, you can't do this. What about the world? The world you killed, the world that you allowed to die? The world that you sacrificed!”

But it was already done.

Morrigan gestured towards us and the world of Eden faded away like a half-remembered dream.

## **Chapter Forty-one**

I awoke in a forest.

Trees loomed above me and the sky was obscured by emerald-green mist. I sat up slowly and fought off a wave of vertigo. There was a narrow path nearby that snaked its way through the trees, disappearing in both directions. Above me, there was a sound like waves breaking as wind rushed through the trees and the forest itself seemed to sigh.

I heard a low groan from beside me. Michael sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“That’s the worst hangover I’ve ever had,” he muttered. He glanced at me and smiled wearily. “Oh, hey, Ash. I don’t suppose you have any magical angel hangover cure, do you?”

I started to shake my head and then the world threatened to spiral out of control around me. For a moment, I wondered if I was going to vomit. I stayed very, very still and slowly, the feeling passed and things returned to normal.

“Where are we?” Michael asked.

With a grimace, I pulled myself up to my feet and then turned to offer him my hand. He grunted with the effort and stood up.

“We’re back in the Dreaming Path,” I said. “I can sense it. Morrigan must have sent us here.”

“Why would she do that?” Michael asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“We’ve failed, haven’t we?” he asked. “Everyone is dead. The world as we know it is gone forever.”



“Michael, I'm sorry,” I said. It felt like a small and pathetic thing to offer him, consider all that he had lost.

But I didn't know what else to say.

“Hey,” he said and touched my chin. I looked up at him and he smiled faintly. “Everything is going to work out in the end.”

“I'm touched that you still believe in me,” I said grimly.

“Ash, how can you say that?” he asked. “How can you feel like we've failed after everything we've done? After everything we've survived? After all that, we're still here. We still have each other.”

“It's not much,” I said.

“It's enough,” he said.

“Do you really believe that?” I asked.

“I do,” he said.

We embraced and shared a long, tender kiss.

I sensed that we were no longer alone a moment too late to do anything about it.

One moment, Michael was warm and safe and in my arms, and then next, there were long claws protruding from his chest.

A hunched and feral Fey creature yowled. It drove Michael to the ground and ripped him wide open. Blood spurted everywhere. Sharp claws raked me from behind.

“No!” I snarled. “NO!”

I whirled around. My wings raked out in two quick sweeps. The goblin-like creature fell to the ground in spurting pieces.

I whipped back towards the creature that had pounced on Michael, my wings flared.

The beast had Michael pinned. My love's chest was torn wide open.

The Fey snarled wordlessly as I leapt.

Michael reached up and pressed his hand into the face of the goblin creature above him. There was a bright flash of green light and the Fey beast flew backwards. It struck a nearby tree and shattered.

I stopped in mid-leap. What was happening?

Michael looked down at himself.

“Ouch,” he said. He pressed his glowing hand against the gaping wound across his chest. The wounds closed in an instant, so quickly and cleanly it was as though they'd never happened at all.

“You healed yourself,” I said. “How did you do that?”

“I don't know,” he said. “How did I do that?”

There was a rustling around us. From behind the trees, more fey appeared. Many were monstrous creatures, goblins and trolls and other beasts from the worst of human legends.

I glared at them.

“Please try me,” I said to the growing horde. “I will relish the chance to slaughter you all for daring to attack us.”

A pair of slim, graceful beings emerged from the ranks of monsters. They were human except for their jeweled eyes and angular ears. One was male, the other, female.

The bestial fey growled and hissed, but one look from the male and the horde bent their knees and lowered their muzzles submissively.

“Who are you?” I asked. My wings were ready. I was ready.

“We are the Oneiroi,” the male said.

“We are the Lord and Lady of the Dreaming Path,” the female said.

“I am Ashariel,” I said.

“Michael,” he said. “Why did your creatures attack me?”

“We know your names,” the male said. “She told us to expect you. You have our apologies that the Ferals reached you before we did. We are sincerely sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Michael said. “I seem to have picked up a few new skills in the last several minutes.”

“But of course,” the female Oneiroi said. “You are in the Dreaming Path. Its powers are yours to command.”

To our shared surprise, both Oneiroi joined their monsters in kneeling before us.

“We pledge ourselves to you,” the male Oneiroi said. “We are yours to command.”

“I don’t understand,” Michael said.

“I do,” I said.

*I leave my dream in your care.*

“The Queen is gone,” the female said.

“Hail the new Queen and King,” the male said.

“The Dreaming Path is yours now,” the female said.

Relief flooded through me for the first time in far too long. I lowered my wings.

I couldn't help myself. I embraced Michael again and savored the feelings of love and relief and the knowledge that, at least for the moment, we were safe. Neither Heaven nor Hell would find us here. I was safe from their reach. Michael was safe. We were together.

And we had a new world to call our own, a world that was strange and mysterious and full of monsters, but a living world, a vibrant world.

A world where we could be together.

The Oneiroi bowed their heads to us.

“Welcome home, my King,” the male Oneiroi said to Michael.

“Welcome home, my Queen,” the female Oneiroi said to me.

“Welcome home.”