

THE DESCENT

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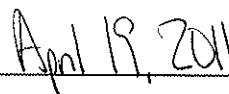
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ABSTRACT

The Descent tells the story of Cassiel, an angel who has been cast out of Heaven and falls into the modern day streets of Baltimore. After being rescued from one of the local gangs, Cassiel is taken in by Gordon, a local police detective, and his sister, Lauren. When Lauren is slain by the gang in retaliation for Gordon's intervention, Cassiel takes up her old sword and sets out for revenge that will draw the attention and wrath of the police department, Heaven, and Hell.

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CHAPTER 1

The worst part of the fall wasn't the impact; it was the descent.

As she tumbled through the frigid atmosphere, she wondered if this was how Lucifer felt when he fell. What had gone through his mind in that blackness? It must have been the not knowing that got to him, Cassiel thought, the not knowing of the fall, of if he would suddenly find himself dashed across some unfeeling landscape or if he would plunge on forever through the perpetual abyss. She had one advantage over him, in that regard. She knew this would end with her crashing into the Earth. She couldn't decide if that foreknowledge made it all a little more bearable or that much more excruciating.

She could make out thousands of tiny lights below. They grew larger, brighter, and more distinct as she plummeted through the night sky, just as the stars above fell further and further away. One human city or another awaited her arrival, and she gave silent thanks for that. She had feared that she'd come down over a body of water. She wouldn't have the strength to swim, but she wondered if maybe that would have been a more merciful fate, in the end. When she hit the ground, she'd survive, she knew, but that

she knew, but that would be her last taste of immortality. From then on, she would begin her terrible spiral toward a permanent, true death.

The burning question, the one she tried futilely to push from her mind, was why? Why exile? He had cast her out, not to face damnation or annihilation, but to eke out a miserable existence on an alien world as a shriveled mockery of the being she once was. Her father had always been a parent of extremes, of both mercy and fury. This sentence stemmed from one or the other, but from which, she couldn't decide.

The streets soared up toward her, an asphalt web cast across the city in which she would soon be caught. Cassiel was close enough to make out the individual vehicles by then. The headlights glided across the dark roads like morning's dew along a strand of silk.

As the ground approached, the real torture set in. Her wings had been taken from her, but she could still feel them, like a set of phantom limbs. The impulse to pull up, to fly, fired over and over in her mind, but she was completely helpless. In all her centuries of service, in all the battles she'd fought tooth and nail, she'd never felt such absolute terror to her core as in those last few moments before the Earth struck her, a slap across the face to herald her into a new existence.

Then came the moment of impact, unceremonious and terrible. She crashed down into the concrete of some filthy back-alley of a city that didn't know her name in a world that was not her own. She lay there in the crater her broken body had made, naked, godless, and alone, trying desperately to imagine how things might have gone differently, and failing.

The rough stone of broken concrete grated against her soft, newborn skin as she braced herself on the edges of the impact crater, trying to stand. It was a shaky process, but she managed, with some trouble. Her eyes darted around the dark, grimy alley that welcomed her to Earth with callous debris and angry graffiti. Even in that empty place, her first urge after standing was to cover herself. She crossed her arms over her breasts, skin crawling, and scrambled behind the nearby dumpster. She stooped down next to it and held herself, shivering and doing her best not to cry. She wouldn't allow herself that luxury, not until she'd found something to clothe herself and had some semblance of shelter from the cold.

She huddled there, knowing she had to come out sooner or later, but she was too frightened to do so. That fear galled her most of all. This shame for her naked body was both sudden and unprecedented. Being exposed, out in the open like that, made her feel as though her insides was overflowing with thousands of worms and snakes, all anxious to wriggle their way out by any means necessary. She was a proud and courageous soldier, but she wasn't. Not anymore. Now she was frightened and pathetic, quivering behind a dumpster in a forgotten alley, a mess she didn't know how she could ever clean up.

It wasn't until her pulse slowed that she realized her heart had been beating at the pace of a war drum. That calm also brought the realization that the dumpster she hid behind smelled as though it had never been emptied.

She was surprised by the magnitude of her revulsion. Her empty stomach twisted, and she barely resisted the urge to vomit right there. She found that here, on Earth, her senses had reached some new, crisp peak of awareness she couldn't yet comprehend. It

was as if everything she'd known before had been experienced through a layer of thin plastic wrapped around her head.

The horrible odor wasn't enough to force her back into the open. Its source, however, provided her with a temporary solution. A small flap of fabric protruded from one corner of the green, metal lid: some soiled blanket or bed sheet, no doubt. Cassiel squeezed her eyes shut, working up the nerve and fortitude to brave the stench of the open dumpster. She breathed in deeply through her mouth, held it, and popped up to lift the lid. Rotting meat and moldy toiletries and day old baby shit wafted up from the garbage, but she yanked the sheets over the edge and let the lid smash back down so quickly she nearly crushed her fingers beneath it.

The musty gray sheet was large enough to cover her, but it was thin and not much protection from the cold. It also smelled vaguely of the dumpster where she found it, yet not nearly as potent. Swaddled in that dirty blanket like a newborn, which, in a sense she was, Cassiel shivered and thought about what she would do next. She was human now, for all intents and purposes, and she needed to start her life as one. She had no friends, no family, not even as much as a parole officer set her on the right path. Worst of all, she couldn't feel his presence there. She'd never felt so alone, so truly alone, in all her days.

Stop this, she told herself. She couldn't clothe herself with her pity. She couldn't eat or drink her grief. She'd have plenty of time, a lifetime in fact, to lament the loss of everything she'd ever known. Surviving would be good enough for now. Let's see what this new world has to offer, she thought, and she stood.

The alley let out onto a residential street lined with town homes. They were slightly less filthy than the alley, but equally dismal. Hazy pools of light pocketed the

road on both sides, originating from street lamps. Many of them were burnt out at irregular intervals, leaving most of the sidewalk draped in shadow. Cassiel picked a direction and started walking.

The sidewalk was freezing under her feet, each step sending fresh chills up her body. She would freeze to death if she didn't find some proper clothes and a place to hole up. She figured if she just walked in one direction long enough she would find some shop she could relieve of a spare set of clothes. She'd already been cast out of her home for her crimes, so what was one more little misdemeanor theft?

After several blocks of the same dreary scenery, she heard voices, deep voices, coming from one of the town home's stoops further down the road. She pulled the sheet more tightly across her shoulders. She didn't want to be seen right now, and she was ready to duck into the next alley and go around when the voices stopped. They saw her.

Three men sat on the steps of the last town home on the corner before the main cross street. They were dressed for the weather, one in a hoodie, the other two in puffy down jackets. One of them wore a knit cap. All three locked their eyes locked on her.

Cassiel could see a commercial district on the cross road – red neon lights in store fronts. If she could just get by them and onto the main street, everything would be fine. She lowered her head and doubled her pace, but she was painfully aware of her long, bare legs protruding from the blanket with each step she took, and she could feel that the men were, too.

* * *

Detective Miller had seen a lot of things on the streets of Baltimore, but that night, he couldn't believe his eyes. He'd been at his post since sunset, on the roof of a vacant at the corner of Fayette and Pulaski, keeping a camera trained on Alton Lowder and his boys.

At the ripe age of 22, Lowder was becoming a big player in a drug ring that had sprung up in Baltimore almost overnight. They'd since recruited or offed all the big name competition and put their hands in some real heavy shit. Heroin, prostitution, murder, you name it. Now, on this side of town, no matter who you bought from, the money found its way into their hands. Lowder never touched the stuff, of course, and he damn sure didn't let anything connect him to the murders, so Miller and his unit were stuck freezing their balls off every night, trying to get a picture they might be able to use to implicate the bastard.

Tonight had been no different than any other. Junkies came up to the porch to speak with Lowder, he sent them down the street where they gave their cash to another kid who sent them around the block to pick up a bag from yet another kid, who sent them on their way. This was one of a dozen safe houses they used as fronts, and that was only counting the ones Miller's people knew about. It was an operation as obvious as it was safe. It left Lowder completely impervious to charges, and none of his boys were worth two shits to the police. Lowder knew the cops would never risk blowing their cover just to pick up some nobody for dealing or possession, so they could operate on the block with impunity.

Things had been quiet for the last half hour. Miller supposed it was too cold out tonight, even for the junkies, and he was getting ready to pack it in early when she appeared. Even the layers he wore under his trench didn't do much to keep out the winter chill.

Lowder and his cronies saw her before Miller did. The surprise on their faces was clear, even from a block away. Surprise shifted to a set of stupid grins. It wasn't every night that a white woman strolled through the neighborhood, alone and covered by nothing but a raggedy old sheet.

"What the Christ?" Miller lifted the camera and zoomed in as far as it would go. The girl was walking down the sidewalk in his direction. She had a pretty face, and a nice body to match, he thought. Something felt wrong about her, though. She looked lost, like she didn't belong here. That's because she doesn't, he thought to himself. There was something more to it, though.

Before he could put his finger on it, the three on the porch started calling out at her. Miller snapped rapid-fire shots of what was unfolding. She lowered her head and sped up, trying to get past them, but one of the three, the one wearing a down jacket, rose and stood in her way on the sidewalk. He backed up as he talked right in her face. She tried to push forward, but he halted and put his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged him off and turned around, but the second man, the one in the knit cap, was right behind her. Lowder sat and watched from the porch.

Miller watched as Knit Cap grabbed her by the wrists. While she struggled in his grip, the other one tore the blanket off her shoulders. She wasn't wearing anything beneath. Lowder, dressed in a plain hoodie, stood with an eerie calm and nodded toward

the house. He opened the door and stepped inside. The two goons dragged the woman inside, dropping her sheet in a crumple heap on the porch, and slammed the door. As he took the final picture, Miller was the only one who could hear the echo of her scream. If he had taken the time to think it through, he would have realized that interfering here could completely compromise the entire operation. It was also likely to get him killed, either right now or later in retaliation. But he didn't take the time to think. He dropped his camera and sprinted for the stairs.

* * *

If Cassiel had been frightened before, now she was beyond terrified.

She stood in the living room of some house, the one in the Hoodie's, she guessed. She wanted nothing more than to cover herself, but Knit Cap still had her by the wrists. When she struggled to break free, he twisted her hands so tightly she thought he'd break her wrists. She stood perfectly still now, and he drew her up against him from behind.

"What's the matter, baby?" Knit Cap said into her ear. "You lose all your clothes out there?"

Jacket licked his lips. "Don't worry. We'll help you find them. We can be real nice. You'll see."

"I don't know what the fuck kind of hooker you think you are, walking around like that," Hoodie said. It was the first time she heard him speak, and his voice frightened her most of all. "Maybe nobody told you, or maybe you're just a dumb bitch, but I'm going to make it clear to you, either way. Nobody does shit on these streets without me."

He stepped closer and closer to her with each word until he was right in her face. When he spoke again, he clamped a hand under her chin, squeezing both her cheeks tightly. “You trying to move in on my territory?”

Cassiel cast her eyes to the floor. She wouldn’t give them the pleasure of hearing her beg or whimper.

Hoodie pulled his hand back and slapped her across the face, hard. “I asked you a question, bitch. You trying to move in on my streets?”

Cassiel looked him in the eye. “No,” she spat.

“Well, I don’t see any other explanation here. Either you’re turning tricks for free, or you’re a damn liar. Either way, you’ve got to pay for the privilege of walking on my street. And since I don’t see no cash on your skanky ass, we’ll have to work out some other kind of arrangement.”

Hoodie nodded to the couch, and Knit Cap shoved her onto it.

Jacket stood over her and began to undo his pants. In that brief moment of freedom, Cassiel leapt up from the couch and got her feet under her. She came up at the underside of Jacket’s jaw with a hard right. He stumbled backward, dazed more than anything. Not without a fight, you bastards, she thought, and swung again. This time, the blow connected with Jacket’s nose. A sickening crunch resounded in the room, and blood spurted down his chin.

“What the fuck?” he spouted nasally as he clawed at his face. “Bitch broke my fucking nose!”

“Got some fight in her, this one,” Hoodie said. When she came at him, he hit her again, with a closed fist this time, right in the stomach. She doubled over, gasping for breath. “How you going to explain getting your ass beat by a girl, Perry?”

Before she could recover, Knit Cap had a fistful of her long, black hair, and he dragged her back over to the couch. He threw her over it, face down, and held her by the wrists over the back of it. She pulled and struggled and screamed, but she was trapped.

She could hear Hoodie behind her, starting to undo his belt, when the front door exploded.

* * *

If he hadn't been scared shitless, Miller would have laughed at how ridiculous he felt kicking in the door, gun drawn like some action hero. He could feel his heart pound against his chest in slow motion, beat after deliberate beat. One of them held the girl down on the couch. Lowder stood with his back to him. The third slouched against the nearby wall, clutching a bloody face.

“Step away from her, both of you.” Miller trained the gun on them.

Lowder turned to face him. A dead calm stood where flustered shock had shown through just a moment ago. “If I was you, I would walk right back outside and keep on walking, boy.”

“I said step away,” Miller replied, cocking the gun. His heart was in his throat.

Knit Cap looked to Lowder. He nodded. Knit Cap let the girl go and stepped aside. The girl stood and rushed to Miller. He shrugged off his trench coat and draped it over her shoulders, keeping the gun aimed at the other men.

“You okay?” he asked her. She nodded. Both of them began backing toward the door.

“You just made your last mistake, motherfucker,” Lowder said. Miller didn’t hear the man behind him until he already had his arm wrapped around his throat.

The cash man, Miller thought. Stupid, stupid, stupid. The kid down the street must have seen him come barging in there and rushed down to help. Now he had Miller by the neck, squeezing the life out of him. He dropped his gun in that instant of panic, trying to claw the other man’s arm away from his throat. As his vision began to blur, he saw Lowder rushing forward for the gun on the floor.

Suddenly, he could breathe again. He heard a muffled grunt from behind him as he doubled over, gasping for breath. He looked down and saw the kid who’d been on him sprawled on the floor, out cold. Who is this girl, he thought, trying to find the air to stand back up straight.

Lowder had her. She’d beaten him to the gun, but he grabbed a fistful of her hair as she bent to pick it up. He tugged down, hard, and she cried out in pain. Miller rushed forward and scooped his weapon off the ground, bringing it up across Lowder’s face. He grunted in pain and fell back onto his ass.

Miller took the girl by the arm and aimed his gun at the other two men who were still standing. The kid with the broken nose and Knit Cap both stood on the other side of the room, unmoving. They looked like they didn’t want any more trouble. Lowder looked

up at him from the floor, a fresh trail of blood creeping down the side of his face from where the gun had connected with his cheek.

“I hope you know who the fuck I am,” Lowder said. His eyes found the badge clipped to Miller’s belt. “Because come tomorrow, I’ll know who you are. Officer.”

With Lowder’s threat lodged firmly in the back of his mind, Miller backed up out of the house, leading the girl by the arm. He checked over his shoulder for any more surprises as they stepped through the door, but it looked like nobody else was coming out to play.

Once they turned the corner onto Pulaski, he holstered his gun and picked up the pace to a jog. “If it’s okay with you, I think we’d do best if we got the hell out of here,” he said. “My car is parked a block over.” The girl kept up with him.

Once they were in the car and safely on their way, Miller’s pulse settled from the freight train pace it’d been keeping. His mind still raced, however. Nobody in the department could know what he’d done tonight. It had been rash, stupid, and selfish, even if it had been the right thing to do. He could have arrested Lowder, he supposed, but then there’d just be one more thug in jail, and they’d have lost their best chance of reaching the higher-ups in the crew. Saying he saved the life of one girl off the street wouldn’t hold up too well in the face of accusations that he’d taken the rug out from under months of hard police work. But he was the only one there tonight. Who would know?

The camera. He had pictures of the girl. It was still on the roof. No way he’d head back that way tonight. He’d have to get back there before Rollins showed up for first shift in the morning, delete the photos taken after she showed up, and then act like it’d been a quiet, piss-poor night to be a detective. Just like always. The only other people that knew

were Lowder and his idiots, and Miller doubted they'd go complaining to the police about a violent man who'd barged in and broken up their rape party. As for Lowder's threat, Miller would just have to lose a few nights of sleep over it.

The girl said something, but Miller didn't hear her through his frenzied thoughts.

"What?"

"I said thank you."

"Yeah, don't mention it." They'd reached what Miller considered a safe distance up Route 1, so he pulled over the car and turned to look at the girl in his passenger seat. "So, you want to tell me what you were doing wandering around west Baltimore in the middle of the night, bare-ass naked?"

She pulled his coat more tightly around her. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Miller hung his head and nodded as if that were perfectly reasonable. "Was it drugs? Did somebody drop you off out there as their idea of some stupid fucking joke?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, you don't want to tell me. That's fine. How about you just tell me where you live so I can get you there? You do have a home, don't you?"

Pain flashed across the girl's eyes. "Not anymore."

Miller slumped in his seat. "What happened?"

"My father threw me out."

"Sounds like a great guy. Think he might change his mind if I brought you back?"

She shook her head. "You don't know him." The pained tone of her voice made that final.

“So, you’ve got nowhere to go then? No other family? Friends?”

She shook her head again.

Miller had the feeling he was about to make his second stupid decision for the night.

“Why don’t you come back to my place? We can get you some clothes, something to eat maybe, and then tomorrow we can figure out what to do with you.”

She nodded shyly, forcing the barest semblance of a smile. Miller guessed she wasn’t used to accepting help. Or maybe she just wasn’t used to it being offered.

He pulled back onto the road. They were ten or fifteen minutes away from his apartment in Charles Village.

“You’ve got some real moves on you, by the way,” he said. “I should be the one thanking you. The one who had me around the neck never knew what hit him. Where’d you learn to take a guy down like that? ”

“My father might be an asshole,” she said, “but he trained me well.”

Miller didn’t really know what she meant, but he was okay with that for now.

* * *

Cassiel wiped a clear streak across the steamy bathroom mirror. Strange eyes peered back through the hole she made. She’d always admired her beauty, as her creator had made her quite beautiful, but now she felt the first pang of loss – the first of many, she was sure. How many years until she noticed the first signs of aging set in? How many days, even? She could never remember looking any different than she did right

now, and the idea of hardening, sagging, and wrinkling clamped a frigid vice around her heart, squeezing tighter with each thought.

This was no exile; it was a death sentence, just the same. She was going to die. Her first encounter with the human race led her to believe that it may, in fact, happen sooner rather than later. She shuddered.

The shower had helped. She felt dirty from the alley grime, from the slimy blanket she'd worn, and from the grips of those monsters. She ran her fingertips across the soft cheek where one of them had hit her. A bruise had begun to rise. It terrified her.

Along with her wings, she'd lost her strength, and now, apparently, her ability to recover rapidly from wounds. She really was one of them, now, and the mark on her face served as a physical reminder of that. She'd not forget again that she was human, nor would she forget what they were capable of.

Miller had been kind to her, though. Gordon. That was his name. Detective Gordon Miller. She told him her name was Cass, which was a name that she knew from her studies of humanity would not raise as many eyebrows as Cassiel. And she was telling the truth, mostly. She didn't like lying to Gordon, but it was necessary. She gained nothing from telling him the truth about herself, and why would he believe her, anyway?

She would have to come up with a story and keep it straight eventually, but she was too tired tonight, and Gordon seemed content to leave her alone about it, for now.

The clothes he'd given her were his own and more than a few sizes too large. He'd handed her a bulky hoodie and pair of sweatpants with a shy grin, promising her he'd find something that fit a little better tomorrow. Now that she was in them and had

the draw strings pulled as far as they'd stretch, she didn't mind. She felt a sense of comfort wash over her when she wrapped herself up in the hoodie. Swimming in its roomy folds reminded her of the robes she'd worn so often in her previous life. Before that thought could paralyze her with another wave of longing, she forced herself to throw open the bathroom door and step out.

Gordon was in the kitchen adjacent to the living room. He pulled two bowls of soup out of the microwave when she appeared in the doorway.

He slid the soup across the counter to her. "Wish I had something a little fancier to offer, but the budget's tight, and the lawman's life is a simple one."

She reached for the bowl and burned the tips of her fingers. They shot up to her mouth with a hiss of pain. This human thing was going to take some getting used to. She tried again, using her sleeve as a buffer this time. She hadn't realized how starving she'd been, and, as with her other senses, the taste of it had been boosted to an intense degree. She drank straight from the bowl, swallowed half of it in a single gulp, and it was amazing.

"Feeling any better?" he asked, picking up his own bowl.

"A little, thank you," she slurped through her last mouthful of soup. She set the empty bowl down on the counter.

Before he could take his first sip, Gordon dropped the spoon back into the bowl with a splash, astonished. He slid that one down the counter to her, too, and she scooped it up eagerly. "You must be beat," Miller said, stepping out into the living room. He tossed some pillows around on the couch. "You can have the bed tonight. I'll sleep out here."

“Are you sure?” she asked. She leaned in the doorframe and tried using the spoon on the soup this time.

“Yeah,” he said. “Let me just grab some stuff out of there for the morning so I don’t have to wake you up on the way out. I’ve got to get an early start tomorrow.” He looked a little distracted when he said that last part. “You’ve got run of the place until I get home, and then we can talk about what we’re going to do with you.”

When he returned with a fresh set of work clothes and a blanket for himself, Cass put her second empty bowl down on the counter and crossed the room to him. She bowed her head. “Thank you again, Gordon,” she said, raising her eyes to meet his. “I owe you my life.”

“Hey, I said don’t mention it.” He threw his clothes over the back of the couch, trying to avoid her gaze. “You would have done the same for me, right?”

As she entered Gordon’s bedroom, Cass shut the door behind her and waited for the wave of loneliness and misery that she expected to feel once she was alone, but, to her great surprise, it never came. She was stranded on a hostile world where she’d barely escaped rape and murder on her first night, and she’d never see anyone she’d known or loved again. So, why did she not feel half as wretched as she believed she should?

She lay down in bed, wrapped herself up in Gordon’s thick, warm blanket, and resigned that that was a question that could wait for tomorrow.

* * *

Shades of purple and red seeped across every surface of the club. Light and shadow played across the dancing women and the men watching. Some of the women were there because they loved to dance. Others just needed the money. Some of the men were there to see something naked. Others just didn't want to go home. Darius Lowder was there to do business. Alton Lowder just wanted revenge.

"It was pathetic," he said to his uncle. They sat in a second floor office overlooking the strip club Darius owned. "This asshole just busts in the door, waving his gun around like he's Rambo or some shit, has the nerve to knock me on my ass, then just leaves like we were a bunch of bitches not worth his time."

"Sounds like you got lucky," Darius said. His eyes flittered around the club as he talked, making sure this girl was getting enough tips to earn her keep, making sure that bartender wasn't skimming anything under the table. If he didn't know better, Alton would have thought he wasn't getting his uncle's full attention, but he knew Darius had the distinct talent of giving everything his full attention.

"Disrespected was what I got, Uncle Darius. It ain't right. You know the worst part? Cocksucker was a fucking police. Can you believe that shit?" Alton rubbed his cheek where the cop struck him. The bleeding had finally stopped. "Ain't they got rules against that? Like police brutality and shit?"

"Yeah, they do. They also got rules against raping bitches, but maybe you forgot about those ones. What were you thinking, snatching some white woman up off the street like that?"

Alton grinned. “Oh, Uncle Darius,” he said. His body language came alive when he thought about her. “That bitch was fine. You should’ve seen it. She just came walking up the street, tits all out and shit, like it wasn’t no thing.”

“Tell me something, Alton,” Darius began. “Are you crazy, or are you just stupid?”

“Uncle Darius, I –“

“I asked you a question, boy.” Darius was nearly yelling. He never yelled.

Alton reverted to the blank expression he’d reserved for being scolded in grade school. “Neither, Uncle. I just –“

“That’s not what I see,” Darius interrupted. “What I see is a privileged little boy who’s had everything handed to him for too long now, and he figures he can stop using his brain and just start thinking with his cock instead.”

“Uncle, I –“

“Shut the fuck up, Alton. You talk when I say you can talk.”

Alton did as he was told.

“Why do you think you never touch the product, huh? Why do you think you don’t have your name on any of the houses or any of the cars? It’s to protect you. It’s all to protect you. We got a nice thing going for us here.”

The strip club, Excapes, was a front for Darius Lowder’s flourishing drug business. It was just one of the legit fronts he’d bought up to feed his dirty money through.

“When your mama died, I promised her I’d take care of you. How am I supposed to do that if you’re off doing dumb shit like this, huh? You’ve got to think.” Darius punctuated that thought by pushing his finger into the side of Alton’s forehead.

“I’m sorry,” Alton said, almost like he meant it.

Darius stared off into the distance, his mind turning and turning behind still eyes.

“You said this hero man was a cop?”

“Yea,” Alton said. “I saw the badge and everything. We got to talk to our man, find out who this asshole is, and make him hurt.”

“No, I don’t think so. We’re taking you off the stash for awhile.”

Alton nearly jumped out of his seat. “What? The fuck why?”

“Calm down, young’n. I told you, you’ve got to start using your brain. You think some police was just strolling down Fayette and decided to stop by and see what you were up to? Hell no. They were watching you, and that means they’re watching us. We can’t have that, so you’re going to take it easy for awhile. Rest up in one of the houses ‘til things smooth over.”

“Uncle Darius, this motherfucker put me to shame. I should be coming down on him hard, and you want me to run and hide instead? What are people going to say about me?”

“Fuck what they say.” Darius stood up. “You’re going to lay low, and that’s it. You ain’t going to fuck up everything I’ve built by messing with some cop who’s already got you on watch. I don’t want to hear another word about this. You hear me?”

Alton set his jaw. “Yes, Uncle.”

“Good boy,” Darius said. He stood up. “Now get up on out of here, and stay cool. Take one of the girls home if that’ll help get your head straight.”

Alton stood and opened the door to leave.

“Hey,” Darius said, putting his hand on Alton’s shoulder. “You’re still my nephew, Alton. Everything I’m doing, I’m doing it for you. You know that, right?”

Alton turned his head around to look at his uncle. “Yeah, Uncle Darius, I know.”

His uncle nodded, and Alton stepped through the door.

Darius collapsed into the plush office chair at his desk, which overlooked the club through a one-way mirror. He pushed the pads of his fingers into his eyes, slowly blowing out the pressure as he’d learned to do over the years. In the club below, horny men spent their money and booze and tits, unwittingly funding his true business. The well-oiled machine he’d constructed whirled away, as it was meant to.

Darius glanced at the phone on his desk. It was a close-circuit, untappable, to Francis, his man downstairs who knew how to get shit done. He picked up the headset.

“Yo,” Francis’s deep, smooth voice hailed over the line after just one ring.

“I need you to clean out and shut down the house at Fayette and Pulaski. Shit’s become a liability. And while you’re at it, there are a couple other loose ends I think we’d best pull.”

“You got it boss man.”

“Francis, one more thing.”

Silence on the line meant he was listening. Francis was a man of few words.

“Some piece of shit police is giving my nephew a hard time. Talk to our man. I want to know who this guy is.”

Down at the bar, Alton was pissed off and frustrated in more ways than one. He decided he'd take his uncle up on that offer and take home one of the dancers. He could take it out on her later, back at his place.

As he sat there, his fingers found their way to the wound on his cheek, and he stroked it. I'll see you again real soon, motherfucker. The mirror behind the booze rack reflected his face back at him across the bar, bloody gash and all.

It looked like it might leave a scar.

CHAPTER 2

Gordon knew telling Lauren about Cass would be a bad idea, but after he'd left the apartment that morning, what he'd done suddenly sunk in. He needed someone to tell him that he was doing the right thing, that he wasn't insane.

"Little brother, you're insane."

He sighed into the cell phone.

"You're just taking people in off the streets now? Is that a new policy for the BDP? I know you guys say you're married to your work and all, but that's still pretty extreme."

"Ha-ha, very funny. Got any more, or are you done? 'Cause I'm asking for your help here."

Gordon was on his cell, parked in the garage of the precinct headquarters downtown. He'd already stopped by the stakeout and picked up the camera early that morning. He'd deleted all the pictures with Cass in them. A dull throb behind his eyes reminded him of how badly the day was going to kick his ass due to lack of sleep, stressful thoughts, and the crick in his neck from trying to sleep on that hard-ass couch.

"Are we seriously talking about this? You don't know anything about this girl, Gordon. She could be lying to you about her family. They might be out there looking for her right now."

“I checked. No missing persons reports in the last couple of months match up.”

“Okay. Then there are plenty of other reasonable explanations. For instance, she could have escaped from the loony bin.”

“Lauren, I’m serious about this.”

“So am I, Gordon. You can’t just bring in some woman off the streets. People just don’t do that.”

“What was I supposed to do, let her get raped?”

“Of course not. But you didn’t have to invite her up for a sleepover.”

“She was naked on the streets and had nowhere to go, Lauren. I couldn’t just drop her off on the corner, you know? Look, I just want you to come over after work, bring her a pair of old clothes or something, and we can figure out what we can do to help her.”

The line was silent for a moment.

“Fine,” she said at last. “I guess I’ll do my good deed for the year and come by for dinner. Assuming she hasn’t robbed you blind while you’re at work, that is.”

Gordon slouched back into the seat with relief. “You really know how to see the best in people.” He paused. “Thanks, sis. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go catch the bad guys, little brother. I’ll see you tonight.”

* * *

Cassiel dreamt of falling.

A great light shone down from above, but it became dimmer and dimmer as she fell deeper into the void. Cold winds crashed into her from all directions, causing her to tumble this way and that, the blinding light in the sky her only point of reference.

From the blackness came a point of light in the distance. It grew and grew. Each time Cassiel's vision swept across it in her downward spiral it became bigger, until eventually it stretched as far and wide as her eyes could see.

The angel twisted there in space, plummeting through the darkness between two great lights which she could no longer tell apart.

She woke with a jerk, not sure where she was. The familiar radiance she expected from the window across the room, the warm glow she'd woken up to every day of her life, had been replaced with a dull grey wash. It made it hard for her to peel away the comforting blankets, even when she saw the time: 2:00 p.m.

She had just resigned herself to sleeping away the rest of the afternoon when she heard a familiar voice.

"One day as a human, and you're already a slothful lout. No wonder they can't be saved."

Cassiel opened her eyes. Remiel stood at the foot of her bed, dressed in a stylish black pea coat and wearing the wry grin she'd seem him sport so often throughout their centuries together in the Silver City and beyond.

"Remiel," she said, not unhappy to see him. "What are you doing down here?"

She sat up and he took a seat at the end of the bed. He hunched forward as he spoke, resting his arms on his thighs.

“Given the nature of your departure, I didn’t get the chance to say a proper farewell, did I?”

“No,” she replied. “I suppose you didn’t.”

Neither of them said anything for a long instant.

“Why’d you do it, Cassiel? Why throw it all away like that? And for what? Did it make you feel better?”

Cassiel didn’t answer.

“I’m sorry. You’ve been punished enough.” Remiel sighed. “It just pains me to see you like this. At least He let you retain your ravishing good looks, for a while anyway.” He smiled sadly. “They seem to be serving you well already, if that fellow you’re bunking up with is any indication.”

She tensed at the mention of Gordon. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Long enough. I’d best stay no longer, however. One more hour away without leave, and somebody’s like to notice I’m gone. Then He’d probably toss me down here with you.” Remiel looked into her eyes. “I just couldn’t bear to let you go without saying goodbye.”

“Then say it and leave me be,” Cassiel choked, crossing her arms. She wouldn’t let him see her cry.

Remiel nodded and stood. “Goodbye, Cassiel. You’ll be missed, by me at least.”

He left the room, and Cassiel wiped at the tears welling in her eyes.

“One more thing,” Remiel said, poking his head through the door. “I thought you might want this, for old times sake.” When he reentered the room, he was holding

Cassiel's service broadsword. It had been created for her and her alone, before even she was.

She stood at the sight of it. "Remiel, how did you... won't you be punished for this?"

He shook his head. "I have my ways. You deserve this. Besides, I thought it could serve you well down here, perhaps in a different way altogether than up there." He presented it to her, hilt first, and she grasped it. The weight of the steel felt good in her hand, and it caused memories of a lifetime of devout servitude to flow from it, stream up her arm, and flood into the forefront of her mind.

"Think of it as a reminder," he said. "Just because you're one of them now doesn't mean you have to forget who you are."

Gentle tears glided down both of her cheeks. "Thank you, Remiel. God damn you. I'll miss you, too."

Remiel smiled that smile that Cassiel had always loved so very much, and then he was gone.

* * *

"Whelp," Rollins said, tossing a set of keys onto his desk, "that sucked."

He came back from his daytime shift at the stash house around four, and he didn't look happy. All day, Gordon had been trying unsuccessfully to occupy his mind with phone records, hand to hand data, and god forbid, the occasional informants willing to

talk. Those were a dying breed in this city. No matter how hard he tried to get his head into the evidence, however, his mind kept wandering back to a certain mystery woman who was still back in his apartment. He hoped.

Gordon hunched over a file at his own desk in the cube he shared with his partner in Narcotics, Ed Rollins. “Something go wrong at the stakeout?” he asked neutrally. He didn’t look up at his partner.

“You could say that. Take a look at these.” Rollins held the camera out to him.

Gordon froze. Had he forgotten to delete one of the pictures? No. He got them all. He’d double checked. Hadn’t he?

He took the camera, prepared for the worst, and turned on the display. It showed a daytime shot of the stash house. The street was empty, and the door had been boarded up. Gordon could breathe again, and he said a silent thank you.

“What do you think happened?” he asked, handing the camera back to Rollins.

He dumped it on his desk in disgust. “Fuck if I know. Maybe they’re on vacation. Nothing weird went down during your shift last night, did it?”

“You know how those guys operate. Same shit, different day,” Gordon lied.

“Yeah, well, not today. The bastards run a dozen of these houses, and they’ve all got lines going around the block waiting for the shit they’re slinging. Except the one that we happen to be sitting outside of. That sound like a coincidence to you?”

“No, it doesn’t. You think they’re on to us then?”

“If they are, we’re in some pretty shit, because it’s our job to be on top of them, not the other way around.”

His partner's phone rang, much to Gordon's relief.

"Rollins," he answered. "Yeah. So? You're kidding me. How many?" He sounded like somebody that was just punched in the gut.

Gordon threw him a questioning look, and he held up his finger, reaching for a piece of paper. He began scribbling down something. As the list grew, his writing slowed until he dropped the pen in disgust.

"Yeah, email them over. Thanks." He hung up the phone and turned to Gordon. "We're fucked."

"What is it?"

"You know those contacts we had? The ones that fed us the few scraps we could actually get about Lowder?"

"Yeah," Gordon said cautiously.

"Yeah, well, we don't have them anymore. They're dead."

"All of them?"

"Yeah, all of them. All of them in one fucking night," he shouted, swatting the list of names and the pen that wrote them off his desk.

The two men sat in silence until Gordon broke it.

"How?"

"Fuck if I know. That was just a courtesy call from Homicide. Bunch of bodies showed up last night, and they all cross referenced to names in our case." Rollins leaned back in his chair. "None of those people gave us anything hard. You don't just drop a

bunch of bodies over rumors like that unless you're scared about something. What do you think Lowder sniffed up?"

Gordon knew. "Well, whatever it was, Lowder couldn't possibly have stumbled onto all those names. He's got somebody snitching. The question is, was it one of them who told him, and then he off'd him, too, just to keep him quiet?" Gordon paused. "Or was it one of ours?"

"Got to be careful with that kind of thinking, Gordy." Rollins was almost whispering. "If IAD gets involved, they'll freeze the whole thing. This investigation would be done."

Gordon snorted. "You kidding? I'm wondering if it's already done."

"Maybe," Rollins said. "But this asshole can't kill every warm body on the street. Give me a few days to shake some folks down. I'll see if I can't figure out who's talking to him, one way or the other."

Gordon thought a moment. How long until the story got around of some crazy cop busting down stash house doors? How long until Rollins hears it? "Alright, man. A few days. I'll keep an eye out for anything fishy at home base, but if we don't find anything, we have to tell somebody there's a leak."

"Yeah, sure, a few days." Rollins had already turned around to his computer and pulled up the email Homicide sent him. "Fuck me. These guys aren't joking."

Over Rollins's shoulder, he could see the photo attached. It was one of their contacts. Gordon had met with him in person. His name was Stewie. Now he was rolled

up in a tarp, naked, with one of his eyes put out and one of his ears cut off. His throat was cut, and there were cigarette burns all over his chest.

“Christ,” Gordon said. He left Rollins alone in the cube and darted for the bathroom.

He hunched over the sink and ran cold water, splashing it up on his face. His stomach twisted in on itself, threatening to send his meager breakfast back up his throat any second. He saw that tortured body again and felt the acid rise in his throat.

I did that, he thought, avoiding his own gaze in the mirror. Snitch or no snitch, it was me. Those people are dead because of me.

He didn’t vomit, but he wished he had.

* * *

After failing to think of a better place to hide Remiel’s gift, Cassiel tucked it away under Gordon’s bed. Based upon the hefty clumps of dust scattered around beneath it, she doubted there was much risk of him poking around down there any time soon.

She took a seat upon the bed then, perched above her precious weapon, and thought about what she should do next. Stay here? Gordon had already helped her more than she ever could have asked. Now, she waited for him to return to the home into which he invited her, a stranger. It wasn’t right of her to ask him for anything more, although, come to think of it, she hadn’t technically asked him for anything. Was it wrong to accept such generous, openhanded kindness?

She wasn't used to such things. For as long as she could remember, she fought her own battles, moved up in the ranks, and accepted charity from no one. The strong helped others; they didn't ask it of them.

She was grateful for what Gordon had done for her, but she wasn't his responsibility. She was only even there because of the mistakes she'd made, and she would be the one to pay for them, not him. But still, it would be unforgivably rude to sneak out in the middle of the day, without saying goodbye or even thanking him properly. And in all honesty, looking the pitiful truth plain in the face infuriated her, but what was she going to do, even if she nobly marched out on her own two feet? Walk the streets scavenging from dumpsters? She needed a plan. She always had a plan. But not this time, and that terrified her.

So she would stay. Just for tonight. It was settled.

She hopped off the bed and wondered into the living room. It would likely be a few hours, at least, until Gordon got home. She wanted to distract herself until then. Then there'd be no more second guessing.

Her first thought was to read a book – any book would have done, really. After an exhaustive search, however, she learned that Gordon hadn't a single book in the entire apartment. Frustrated, Cassiel plopped down on the couch. She rested her head in her hands, growing anxious.

The television sat on a shelf across from the couch. She couldn't help but stare into its glossy, black depths. They reflected the vulnerable being in oversized sweat

clothes before her. With a sudden disgust, she picked up the remote and jabbed at the power button, if only to make the image go away.

The fourth episode in a row of a show called Seinfeld was in full swing when a knock came at the door.

Cassiel switched off the TV with an uncertain panic. Gordon wouldn't knock on his own door, would he? That seemed unlikely, but who else could it be? She wasn't sure why she felt so alarmed at being caught there. She was supposed to be there. Gordon said she was. But who were they, and would they know that?

The knock came a second time.

She stood and crept over to the door, easing her face up to the peep hole. A young woman stood outside, pretty. She had the same smooth, dark skin as Gordon, and her long, wavy hair was pulled back in a tie. Was this a friend of his? Or a girlfriend?

She had a plastic bag in one hand, a paper bag in the other, and when she spoke, Cassiel nearly jumped back from the door.

"Hello? Anybody home?"

Cassiel bit her lip, unsure whether to answer.

"Are you going to let me in, Cass? Or should I just have a seat in the hallway until Gordon's late ass gets here?"

Cassiel opened up.

"Hi."

The stranger bustled in past her, talking and walking. “Hey there. I’m Lauren. Aren’t you cute?” She put the brown grocery bag down on the kitchen counter. “Now I see why my brother was so gung-ho about this.”

“Brother? You’re Gordon’s sister?”

“Cute, but slow on the uptake. That’s okay, I like it. Oh my lord, is that what my brother gave you to wear last night?”

Cass suddenly felt very mousy in her bulk of clothes. “Yes, he said –“

“I don’t care what he said! I’m going to whoop him upside his head when he gets home.” Lauren reached into the plastic bag and produced a stack of neatly folded clothes. “A lady deserves better.”

Lauren swept across the room and took Cassiel by the hand, leading her toward Gordon’s room. “Put these on. You’ll feel much better. I promise.”

Cassiel didn’t remember saying anything about feeling bad, but Lauren was a difficult woman to refute.

While she changed, Lauren talked to her through the closed door.

“So, are you from around here?”

Cassiel smirked. She imagined she was going to get that one a lot. “No, not from around here. How about you?” She added quickly, eager to shift the focus away from herself.

“Didn’t think so. You don’t hold yourself like the typical Balti-moron. I’d know – me and Gordon, we’re Baltimore bred, born, and raised, god help us.”

After losing the sweats, Cassiel slipped on the underwear Lauren had brought for her, along with a pair of jeans and a black tank. The snug fit felt alien to Cassiel, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation, she thought, kind of like the clothes were embracing her.

"Things going okay in there? We can run out and grab you something else if those aren't fitting right, but I bet you're the same size as me, just eyeballing it. How do they look?"

"You tell me," Cassiel said, opening the door.

"Ah, yes, there was a human being under all that, after all. Much better."

Cassiel didn't disagree with her on either count. "Thank you. For the compliment, and for these. Lauren, right?"

"Yeah, that's me. Gordon tells me your dad gave you the old heave-ho. Sorry to hear it. Family business can be real tough. I know."

Cassiel simply nodded.

"So you aren't a local, but somehow you landed in West Balt after getting the boot, huh? Where're you from, exactly?"

Before Cassiel was forced to lie, Gordon opened the door from the hallway, coming to her rescue once again.

"Hey ladies," he said, tossing his keys on the counter. "I see you've met."

"Yeah, we introduced ourselves since you weren't here to do the honors. Because you asked me to come over and then showed up late to your own place. Nice one, little bro."

"Sorry. Calvert was a mess."

“Calvert’s always a mess.”

“Yea, well, what do you want from me? Take it up with the Department of Transportation.”

Lauren grinned evilly. “Geeze, Gordon, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

He rolled his eyes.

“You’re too easy, baby brother.” Lauren turned to Cassiel, who had been silently enjoying the exchange on the side. “You hungry, lady?”

“Very.” Between Remiel’s surprise visit and then the television sucking her in, Cassiel hadn’t even realized until then that she hadn’t eaten at all that day.

“Well then, let’s eat! I brought Chinese.”

“Takeout?” Gordon said, taken aback. “I thought we were going to make dinner.”

Lauren brushed past him into the kitchen. “And eat your nasty-ass cooking? I don’t think so.”

Gordon slumped his shoulders. He knew his sister well enough not to try and prod back. She won every time. Instead, he turned his attention to his guest.

“And how was your day, Cass? Did you have everything you needed here?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, thank you. And how was yours?”

Gordon tried and failed to hide the frown that crept across his face. “Ah, not too bad.”

“Doesn’t Cass look nice in her new clothes, Gordon?” Lauren asked from the kitchen, careful not to look up from unpacking the bag of takeout.

“Oh, yeah, she sure does.” Gordon made eye contact with Cassiel. She tried not to blush.

“Come and get it,” Lauren called. Three packages sat on the counter, forks sticking out of each. “You like pork fried rice, Cass?”

Cassiel had no idea. “Sure, thanks,” she said, taking the box.

They ate on the couch in the living room because Gordon was, according to Lauren, “too damn broke to buy a table.” The Chinese was another new taste for Cassiel, and she swore she could eat nothing but pork fried rice for the rest of her life and be happy. As she watched her hosts eat, she did her best to mimic them, consciously slowing herself to match them, despite wanting to devour the entire box at once.

It didn’t take long for conversation to turn to the subject of Cassiel’s immediate future.

“So,” Gordon said, sitting down his half-eaten box of noodles, “I suppose we ought to talk about what we’re going to do with you.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” she replied. “I gave that some thought today while you were away.”

“You did?” He seemed surprised, as if he had already come to a decision himself.

“I did.” Cassiel braced herself. “I want to thank you for all the kindness you’ve shown me, Gordon, but I really don’t want to be a burden to you. I think it would be best if I just left you by morning.”

“Are you sure? Where will you go?” he asked.

“I’ll find my way.”

“That sounds like a shitty plan, if I ever heard one,” Lauren cut in. “In fact, it doesn’t sound like much of a plan at all.”

“Lauren –”

“Don’t want to hear it, Gordon. Cass here went and made me like her, and then she’s just going to walk out of here with nothing to do and nowhere to go? I don’t think so. You’re staying right here, sister.”

“Lauren, thank you, but,” Cass said, pausing to gather her thoughts. She had just met this woman less than an hour ago, but she found she already cared what Lauren’s opinion of her was, and she didn’t want to sound rude. “I’m just not one to accept charity, that’s all.”

“Who said anything about charity? At my shop, I work my employees’ asses to the bone.”

Gordon grinned, picking up on what Lauren had just offered. “She’s not lying. I’ve seen it. They hate her.”

The look on Cassiel’s face showed she didn’t understand.

“I’m offering you a paying job, lady,” Lauren said, exasperated. “And I won’t take no for an answer.”

Just as she discovered earlier, Cassiel realized Lauren was a difficult woman to refuse. She smiled sheepishly. “Alright. I think I’ll be able to take it. But I don’t want any special treatment.”

Lauren laughed triumphantly. “Listen to this girl. Tough as nails. I like her, Gordon.”

Cassiel felt a sense of relief creep up from deep inside her. She wasn't so sure she'd ever really wanted to leave her new friends after all. The quiet smile Gordon wore told her he felt much the same.

"Well, as pretty as you look in my digs, I'm going to take you shopping tomorrow anyway." Lauren held up a hand when Cassiel opened her mouth to protest. "Don't worry. My good will's all dried up. I'll take it out of your first paycheck. I just can't have you stinking the place up, wearing the same clothes every day. "

Cassiel nodded. She was so excited by the prospect of working alongside this spunky woman that she nearly forgot to ask what she'd even be doing. "What kind of business do you run?"

Lauren piled up the empty containers on the table. "How are your baking skills?"

* * *

He didn't know what kind of game Lowder was up to, and he was going to put a stop to it.

Afterhours, the strip joint looked just like any of the other endless storefronts lining Baltimore Street, but Rollins had no trouble finding it. He strode up to the door and pounded his fist against it three times. Baltimore Street, he thought with a smirk. They say that a town's eponymous street tells you all you need to know about its city. If that's true, god fuck us all.

"What do you want?" a gruff voice called through the door.

“I’m here for Darius. Open up.”

“No Darius here. Get lost.”

“Oh, that’s funny. I could have sworn he said he’d be here. He should be expecting me.”

“Who are you?”

Rollins sighed. “I’m his fucking mother. Just open the goddamn door.” There was a security camera hidden in the wall above the door. He tossed it a friendly wave to show that it wasn’t fooling anyone.

No sound came from within the club for a full minute before he heard the door’s multiple locks click and clack one by one down the line. It jerked open on squeaky hinges, and a dejected-looking bouncer stood in the doorway, looking as though he’d just been thoroughly chastised.

“Come in. Darius will see you upstairs.”

“Thanks, my good man.” Rollins raised his middle finger to the camera before stepping inside.

The inside of the club was dead. The stage was dark, and only a solitary light shone down over the bar. Beneath it, a tall, thick-necked man stood, who Rollins believed almost certainly was not the bartender. He felt his eyes pinned to his back as he wove a path between the empty tables and stools leading to the stairs in the back. At the top of the stairs was Darius’s office, and inside was Darius Lowder himself.

“Detective Rollins,” he said from behind his desk. Folders and spreadsheets were scattered across the desk. Darius wore a suit that looked completely out of place in the

filthy dump he ran. It was a nice suit, though. He might have been able to fool someone who had only the vaguest idea of what a businessman should look like.

He motioned to one of the two chairs on the other side of the desk. "Have a seat."

The detective did not have a seat. Lowder was already a big man, and the guest chairs were deliberately selected because they sat lower to the ground than his own.

Rollins didn't like having to look up at somebody when he chewed them out.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Huh? Is this your idea of give and take, like we talked about? I give, and you stick it in my ass and twist? Is that how we're going to do things now? Because nobody told me. Nobody sent me the memo on that one, Darius."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Edward. Calm down. If I've done something to offend you, please, tell me so that I can rectify the situation." Lowder's poker face was pristine.

Rollins paced as he talked, showing no patience for his pretentious shit. "Seven fucking contacts, Lowder? Are you kidding me? Do you understand how huge that is? You don't just sweep that under the rug."

"Assuming that I knew what you were talking about, detective, I would have to ask, do your colleagues down at the precinct have so much as a fingerprint at any of the crime scenes? Any witnesses? A fucking cunt hair?"

"No," he said.

"What was that? I didn't hear you."

Rollins clenched his jaw. "No."

“No. That’s right. Because I don’t fuck around, Edward. I’ve got my shit together. Now you better calm the fuck down and get your shit together, or I’m going to have to rethink the nature of our relationship.”

“Why? The why’s all I came down here for. I kept the other narcs off your scent, and shit, I could always use a raise, but I wasn’t about to complain about the pay. We had a good thing going.”

“No you had a good thing going. I had crazy motherfuckers knocking down my doors and laying their pig hands on my own nephew.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You tell me, motherfucker. Who was at the Fayette house last night, going all John McClane on our asses?”

“Last night?” No, it couldn’t possibly be. “Is that why you shut it down this morning? I was going to add that little tidbit to my list of grievances as well. I can’t lead guys down the wrong trail if there are zero fucking trails to choose from.”

“Things are going to be different around here until you get your house in order. Now tell me, who was the piece of shit that hit my boy last night?”

“Why? What are you going to do with him?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Darius, selling my fellow cops up the river was never part of our –“

“Let me make this clearer for you, you slimy piece of shit. Give me a name, right now, or I’ll just assume it was you who did it, and I’ll hang your cracker-ass out the window right now.”

Rollins believed he would do just that, and he wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over it either. "It was Miller. Gordon Miller." Sorry, buddy. I tried.

"My partner," he added weakly.

CHAPTER 3

After just a week working at Lauren's coffee shop, Cassiel longed for her days as a soldier. They were far simpler.

She rose at five o'clock each morning, long before Gordon, in order to get herself ready and be at the shop by six. Her morning routine took some getting used to, but she cut down the time required to shower, dress, and apply makeup each day. Lauren had taken the time to clothe her properly and show her the finer points of cosmetics after the first day of work. A little eyeliner went a long way for earning you extra tips, she said. Cassiel hated it at first. Human beings couldn't be shallow and stupid enough to cough up extra money just for a little paint on her face, but she soon found Lauren wasn't wrong. The tips came rolling in more frequently, and the former angel was left surprised and just a little bit more jaded.

Today, just like every other day, she put the baguettes, crescents, and muffins in the oven at six, baked to be warm and ready for the seven o'clock rush. While they cooked, she brewed the coffee, five different flavors rotated every day. She had just filled a dispenser with Pumpkin Spice and was setting up a brew of Bananas Foster when Lauren came back to check on her.

"How's it coming, lady?"

Cassiel kept at her work when she spoke. "Faster than yesterday, but slower than tomorrow."

Lauren grinned, peering into the oven to check on the baked goods. “That’s what I like to hear.”

The job itself was nothing too exciting, but she found that she wanted nothing more than to impress Lauren. The woman was so full of life and had been so kind to her that giving anything less than her all seemed criminal. Cassiel had nothing else if not a sense of duty, and Lauren had earned every bit of it from her.

She came over to stand beside Cassiel and began preparing the next canister of coffee. “I can handle this. Why don’t you take that first batch of rolls up front? They look about done.”

“Sure,” Cassiel said. She grabbed the oven mitts and opened it up. The sweet smell of butter on fresh bread wafted out of the open oven, and Cassiel reflected, not for the first time, that she would easily eat all the profit if she ran her own bakery. Luckily, this was Lauren’s business, not hers, so she began stacking the crescents on a clean plate for display up front, instead.

When she brought the rolls through the door from the kitchen, Gordon startled her, standing at the counter.

“Hey there,” he said, hands in his pockets.

She smiled, setting the plate down on the counter next to the display case. “Fancy seeing you here, stranger.”

“Yea, well, with you getting up in the middle of the night for work, and me slaving through every evening this week, I haven’t seen much of you. How’s it been going here? Lauren drive you crazy yet?”

“Not yet,” Cassiel said. “But it’s only Thursday. Give her time.”

“Good, good. How is your setup back at the apartment?” Gordon reached for a crescent. “Is there anything else you need?”

Cassiel swatted his hand before he could snatch up a roll. “What I need is for you to stop distracting me at work, before I get fired. My boss is a real jerk.”

“Yeah, I’ve been putting up with her my whole life. You get used to it.”

“Was there anything else, Mr. Detective? Or did you just come by to harass me?”

“Yeah, actually. I thought the three of us could go out tomorrow night, as a sort of celebration for your first week on the job. What do you think?”

“I’d like that very much,” Cassiel said sweetly.

“Good. Me too,” Gordon said. He swiped a roll and turned for the door. “I’ll meet you ladies here after work tomorrow.”

After he’d gone, Cassiel put the remaining baked goods on display, and she met the morning rush with a little extra spring in her step.

* * *

After a mind-numbing ninety-six hours in the safe house, Alton Lowder was going stir crazy.

The place was nice, he couldn't deny that. They'd set him up in one of the new condos they built on the east side of the harbor, far from the daily comings and goings of the trade. He had a big-ass TV, all the games he could play, and a stereo with enough bass to make the furniture vibrate. The view of the waterfront alone would have made the average guy go mad with envy. But Alton Lowder was not the average guy. His place was on the street, not in some cushy condominium, and the street called to him.

"Shit, how much longer does my uncle expect me to sit in this place? I feel like a fucking prisoner." He reclined on a plush couch in the living room, legs crossed in the air. Perry had come to visit, and he was playing Call of Duty on a lounge chair set up by the flat screen. "Man, you even listening?"

"Yeah," Perry said nasally, staring intensely at the screen. His nose was still bandaged up tight from the shot that bitch had given him.

Alton watched Perry ignore him with a mounting impatience that stewed into annoyance and soon boiled over into rage. He bound off the couch and planted himself in front of the TV with arms crossed.

"Yo, man, you're in the way," Perry cried, bending his head to the side to try and see around his friend.

Alton stabbed his finger at the X-Box's power button, and the screen went black.

Perry dropped the controller, looking equal parts frustrated and distraught. "Man, what the fuck? I was winning!"

"You come here to see your boy or to play his games, asshole?"

"Damn, chill out, Alton. I didn't mean nothing by it. What's got you wound so tight?"

“This fucking place, man. And where the fuck has Omar been? One bad night and he too scared to come around or something?” Alton strode to the window as he spoke, looking out over the skyline of the city that he’d been locked out of him. “It’s my uncle, man. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. He thinks I’m some kind of fuck-up or something, like he can’t trust me. Shoved me in here so he didn’t have to worry about me messing up his business, I guess. Well fuck it, and fuck him, too.”

“Naw man, it’s not like that, and you know it. Darius is just being careful. He’s your uncle, man. He cares about you, that’s all.”

Alton didn’t have anything else to say to that. “So what’s been going on since I’ve been gone?”

“Same old shit, man. Darius shut down the Fayette corner because of what happened the other night, so I’ve been chilling over on Warwick instead.” He shook his head. “Even I think that place is a shithole. I don’t know how anyone actually lives there.”

Alton laughed. “Yeah. But fuck man, I liked that Fayette spot. That was our corner, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, man, we spent a lot of nights on that porch. It’s too bad, but at least that pig cop going to get what’s coming to him.”

He got Alton’s attention with that, and he immediately regretted saying it.

“What do you mean ‘what’s coming to him’? My uncle told me to forget about that piece of shit. You telling me he’s going to make a move on him without telling me?”

Perry stood up. “Ah, Alton man, I ain’t really supposed to talk about it. I better go.”

He tried to the door, but Alton cut him off. “You can’t just leave me hanging like that, man. Come on. Just tell me what’s up.”

Perry scratched the back of his head. “Aww, shit. It’s nothing man, really. Francis says the cop has a sister, owns some store or something in the Village. A couple of the boys are supposed to go mess it up this weekend, you know, to fuck with them. It’ll just look like a break-in, but he’ll know it was us, and he’ll be scared shitless that we’re coming back.”

Alton was silent, but Perry could see his mind piecing together a plan behind his eyes.

“Anyway, I better go man. Just forget I told you anything. They’ll take care of it.”

Alton shook his head. “Naw man. Call up Omar. That shit happened to us,” he said. “We’ll take care of it. And we’re going to do a lot more than scare that little piggy.”

Perry’s grandmother always told him she wished he’d learned when to keep his mouth shut. He wished he had, too.

* * *

The day crawled minute by minute, and Gordon thought he could physically feel each second as it lurched past. They had nothing, and they were going nowhere. With all their contacts out of the picture, if they wanted a new lead, they may as well start going door to door asking nicely.

Gordon felt himself slipping into a slow depression over it. The worse it got, the more he blamed himself. Luckily, Rollins still hadn’t turned anything up on the incident

from earlier in the week, as far as he was willing to let Gordon know, anyway. He had been acting strangely, he thought, but he just chalked it up to the case falling through. Rollins seemed skittish, nervous. He didn't look at Gordon when he talked to him. I bet I'm not looking my usual, bright-eyed self either, he thought, dismissing it.

They'd gone back to the basics. Without any insider information, they had no way of getting to the top players, so it was time to start back at the ground level: dealers, runners, maybe even mid-level enforcers, if they got lucky. The final target, the man in the picture at the top of the pyramid on their ever-growing spider web of a corkboard, as Darius Lowder.

They didn't even know what he looked like.

Their best connection, and luckiest break, had been getting on top of his nephew, Alton. He was small beans stuff, but putting the hurt on him was a surefire way to get at his uncle. At least, that was the plan. Until Gordon put an end to all that. Alton had dropped off the face of the earth. They could watch all the stash houses they wanted, but the best it would get them is some punk-ass kid who didn't have the leverage or significance to make a deal to give them someone higher up. All it would get them is one more body in the already jammed prison system. A prison system that would do a nice little number on the kid, transforming their drug dealer into a murderer or rapist in just three to five, like magic.

Around three, at the height of his misery, for each moment was worse than the last, Gordon's lieutenant called him down to his office.

"Sure Lieutenant." Gordon stole a glance at Rollins from the corner of his eye. "What's this about?"

“Just get over here,” Lieutenant Aliprando’s gravelly voice scraped over the line.

Gordon hung up and stood. “Lieutenant wants to talk to me,” he said to Rollins, who was going through old case files on his computer.

“About what?” he said, distracted.

“Didn’t say.” Gordon put on his suit jacket as he left the cube.

“Make sure he wears a rubber,” Rollins called after him.

Walking across the office gave Gordon a sinking feeling of exposure. Was he just imagining the people’s eyes trailing behind him?

Hodges, who had the cube closest to Aliprando’s office, peered at him from around the corner as he approached.

“Not looking too good there, sonny boy. Stay out too late last night?”

“I wish,” Gordon said, entering the office.

Aliprando was a stout man with thick forearms and a thicker neck. He’d built a reputation for himself over the years being tough as nails, and more than a few of the officers around the department would admit to being scared shitless of the man after you fed them one or two drinks. He was, without a doubt, an intimidating man. Fair, but intimidating.

“Close the door,” he said, scribbling something on his desk.

Gordon did as he was told and turned to stand before his commanding officer.

Aliprando put down the pen and looked up. “Have a seat.”

He sat, bracing himself for what he knew was coming: Rollins had gone to Aliprando about the stash house. What else could this be about? He didn't blame him. He knew it had been a mistake.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, Miller?"

"Like what, sir?"

"How about we start with the Lowder investigation."

Gordon studied the lieutenant. Was this a bluff? Should he come clean? No, he thought. If he doesn't know what I did, good. If he does, getting a gold star for honesty wasn't going to save him.

"It's gone to hell, sir. We lost all our IC's, and our main and only lead has gone to ground. I'd be surprised if we can pull even a mid-level guy at this point. It's not good."

Aliprando nodded. "Tell me something I don't know. It's got me concerned, perturbed even, detective."

"You and me both, sir."

Aliprando shifted back in his chair, taking on a distinctly candid manner. "This Lowder business has brought something troubling to my attention though, Miller. How do you think some two-bit street thug like Lowder comes into the knowledge of seven individuals who happen to be aiding us?"

"Well, let's get one thing straight, there's nothing two-bit about Darius Lowder, sir. His operation is the tightest, scariest thing I've seen in this town." Aliprando waved it off. "As for how he knew to hit the IC's sir, we've been trying to figure that out. I've had no luck poking my nose around anyone that may have had access to our files, and Rollins has been tackling it at street level."

“Poking your nose around here, huh? Don’t you think that might be a job better suited for IAD, detective?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I don’t,” the lieutenant said. “Those bloodsucking fuckers would ruin any snowballs chance in hell we had of completing this investigation, and if they didn’t managed to sniff out a real witch, they’d just single out one of us to burn out of spite.”

“That was Rollins reasoning for not going to them first, sir.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” The lieutenant’s demeanor shifted suddenly. “What do you think of Detective Rollins, Miller?”

“He’s my partner, sir.”

“No shit,” said the lieutenant, “but what do you think of him, about his character?”

“His character?” Gordon wasn’t sure he liked where this was going. “I’ve known Ed for years, sir. I trust him with my life.”

“Like every good partner should, detective.” He let out a long breath while rubbing his eyes. “If I were you though, I’d just keep an eye on my partner, for his own good.”

Miller shifted in the uncomfortable chair. “I’m not sure I understand you, lieutenant.”

“If the shit hits the fan, I just want to know who I can trust.” he said, his tone of voice suddenly becoming dismissive, like somebody trying to get off the phone. “It’s probably nothing; I shouldn’t have said anything. Just, keep your eyes open, detective,

that's all. This case is quickly becoming a quagmire, and I don't want to see you sucked down into it. That'll be all."

Gordon stood, saluted, and left the office.

What the hell was that about? he thought, returning to his desk. Rollins was still clicking through year-old files on the computer.

"So, what'd the old bear want?" he asked.

Gordon shook his head. "Nothing."

* * *

Things always got slow around five o'clock. It was the calm before the storm of the after-work rush. Cassiel stood behind the counter, propping herself up with her elbows. The lazy afternoons of a coffee shop were becoming agreeably monotonous already. Next week, she would prepare properly for boredom. She'd have to ask Gordon where the nearest library was.

If you told me this is where I'd be a week ago, she thought, I never would have believed it. She found herself occasionally trying to wake up, as if from a pleasant dream she didn't want to end. She feared, every morning, that she'd wake laying in a crater in that wretched alley, cold and alone. But every morning she woke in Gordon's warm apartment instead, her brain filled with thoughts of the duties she was trusted to perform that day. She missed her friends, family, and home, but she was quickly assimilating to this new life on Earth. She even believed she could be happy here, and sometimes the suddenness of that revelation scared her as much as it comforted her.

“Penny for your thoughts, lady,” Lauren said, emerging from the kitchen.

“Hmm?” Cassiel said, reverie interrupted.

“You look wistful, and when a woman looks that way, she’s got one of two things on the mind. Either she’s imagining something she wants, or she’s missing something she’s lost.” Lauren leaned up against the counter beside her. “So, which is it for you, Cass?”

Cassiel reflected for a moment and then told her the truth. “A little bit of both, I think.”

“That’s a girl. Whatever you want, go get it. And whatever you lost,” she said, pushing off the counter, “fuck it. I’m going to run down to the corner and buy some smokes. Keep an eye on the place, would you?”

“Yes ma’am. I’ll guard it with my life.”

“You better!”

With no customers in sight, Cassiel lay her head down on the counter and looked through the tall windows that lined the front of the shop. She watched as the shadows grew and the colors of twilight bled across the street outside, turning the pavement various shades of purple and red and orange.

A shade passed across the glass, and for a moment, she thought she was dreaming. His blonde hair, that square jaw... it couldn’t be. There’s no way it could have been him. The coincidence was just too great. And, just like that, he was gone.

She rushed to the door and threw it open. His back was to her, shrouded in a black trench coat, but she knew it was him, she knew it. “Zacharael!” she shouted. He froze.

Without looking back, he sprinted down the sidewalk, cutting into the first alley he crossed.

“No! Wait!” she yelled, breaking off after him at full tilt. Another fallen angel, right here in the same city? It was insane, she thought, but she might never have this opportunity again. She couldn’t lose him.

The cold air burned her lungs as she ran, trying to close the distance between them. When she turned into the alley, he was nowhere in sight. It split at the end, going left and right. She guessed right and spun around the corner. No sign of him that way either. Before she could turn to check the other direction, he was on her, forcing her to the ground with his forearm pinning down the back of her neck.

“What do you want?” he spat.

“Zachariel,” she said, struggling beneath him. “It’s me! It’s Cassiel!”

“Who sent you, huh?”

“Nobody! Nobody sent me. Let me go! What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“No, no, I don’t think that will do at all. Heaven’s no friend of mine. Not anymore.”

“Nor mine!” she yelled. Later, it saddened her to remember how easily that came out.

“Fallen? Cassiel the righteous?” he laughed. “For what, I wonder?”

“My crimes are my own,” she growled. “Now get off!” With a sudden burst of strength that came as a surprise, even to her, Cassiel got a knee up against the pavement and pushed with all her might, throwing the other angel onto his back. She spun onto her back and lunged forward, pinning him at the elbows.

The diminished being beneath her only vaguely resembled the mighty angel with whom she once walked the walls of the Silver City. His eyes were sunken and had a harried look, as if he hadn't slept properly in weeks. He was unshaven, and a monstrous scar ran across his left cheek, from mouth to ear.

"Zacharael," she whispered sadly, lifting her arms from his elbows. "What's become of you?"

"You speak of this?" His left hand reached self-consciously to shield his scar. "This is the price I paid for carelessness."

"Who would do such a thing to you?" She remembered her own first encounter with mankind, and a shiver ran up her spine.

"Not who," he whispered. "What."

Cassiel stood and offered him a hand. "What do you mean?" He pushed himself up on his own.

"You'll see," he laughed bitterly. "The Nybbas comes for us all. It moves through the darkness. It swims in the shadow. It tasted of my flesh, and it hungers for the rest of me. I've evaded it for months. It's swift," he said, "but I'm patient."

"The Nybbas? What? You can't be serious, Zacharael."

"You'll see," he repeated. Suddenly, he seemed to become aware of his surroundings, and he frantically looked about, terrified. The sun was setting, and the shadows in the alley loomed ominously. "I've stayed out too long; I must return. Do not follow." He scrambled down the alley, then paused at a junction and turned to face her with his wicked scar. "Stay in the light," he called, and then he disappeared into the next alley.

Cassiel stood there in the middle of the empty alley, painfully aware of how alone she felt, and more than a little jarred by what she'd just seen and heard. Zacharael had always been so strong. Is this what exile on Earth does to you? Is this what it will do to her?

No, she thought. I'm not alone.

She walked back to the shop and found Lauren waiting at the counter.

"What gives? I came back and found the place empty." She saw something in Cassiel's eyes then. "Whoa, are you okay? You look terrible."

"No, I'm fine," she said, pushing to compose herself. She wouldn't let the rantings of an insane angel make her look unreliable to Lauren. "I'm sorry, really. It won't happen again."

"What happened?" she pushed.

"Nothing. I just..." she paused. She had a growing urge to be completely honest with her new friends, the people she trusted now, and she found it harder and harder to resist. "I thought I saw somebody I knew a long time ago, but he wasn't who I thought he was."

That didn't do anything to assuage Lauren's look of concern. "I don't think that was cryptic enough, you might want to be a little vaguer next time. Why don't you take the rest of the night off? You look like you could use the rest."

Cassiel frowned, but Lauren wasn't wrong.

The walk back to Gordon's was a lonely one. The sour encounter with her former comrade left Cassiel just as confused as she was upset. Seeing him that way, scarred and broken, shook her deeply – the scar especially. Zacharael had always been so proud of his

handsome face. In fact, it was that very same pride, vanity even, that eventually led to his own fall. They were all equals in service to the Lord, and sometimes an example had to be made to remind the rest of them of that.

Disgraced, disfigured, and alone, it's no wonder he'd gone a little crazy. The Nybbas, though? Cassiel couldn't believe it. That was a fairytale passed down by the elder angels to frighten the young ones. A particularly nasty demon, loosed from Hell with a blind eye from Heaven, who hunts the fallen on Earth. A wisely constructed tale to scare them into submission, even if it's told with a winking eye. Cassiel had always just assumed it was that and nothing more, a tall tale. Although, angels rarely, if ever, had contact with the fallen. She'd never spoken with another until today, and certainly never before her fall. Remiel had taken a huge, dangerous, risk just coming briefly to say goodbye to her. She hoped he was okay.

As for Zacharael, he was just a troubled angel whose mind had grabbed on to an imaginary fear to help him cope with the terrible reality he faced, that was all. But if was the case, then why did she find herself holding her breath in the shadowy stretches between light posts?

When she finally reached the apartment door, she used the spare key Gordon had given her to let herself in. Inside, she was met with a surprise: a new addition to the living room. The furniture had been rearranged to make room in the corner for a futon, fully adorned with bed sheets and pillows. A privacy screen with an ornate pattern of fall leaves stood pressed to one side of the bed.

There was a note on the pillow: Thought sleeping on that couch must have been getting old.

As she read the note, a sudden voice from behind startled her.

“You’re home early,” Gordon said.

She turned, feeling silly for being so frightened. “I could say the same about you.”

“Well, work’s been kind of a dead end this week. I thought I’d take off early and actually get something useful done for a change. Do you like it?”

“Gordon, you shouldn’t have.”

“I know you don’t take charity,” he said, “but... too bad. This is a present, from me to you.”

She kissed him on the cheek and thought of Zacharael’s scarred face. “Thank you. For everything. I know I’ve said that so much over the last week, but I truly mean it. I have no idea where I’d be without you and your sister.” That was only half true, though. She did have an idea. She came face to face with it earlier that night.

When it came time for bed, Gordon went off to his room, and Cassiel lay on her present, prisoner to her thoughts. After a few minutes in that dark room, she stood, walked into the kitchen, and flipped on the dim light above the stove. It cast a soft glow across the room that splashed across her bed, and she slept with it on that night.

CHAPTER 4

Gordon did his best to shed the nasty mood that gripped him before he got to the shop, but it wasn't going anywhere, so he resolved to do his best to hide it instead.

Rollins was still acting off, even more so than the day before, but that might just have been Gordon's imagination. Despite hearing nothing further from him, he couldn't get the lieutenant's disturbing warning out of his head. With that rattling around in the back of his mind, Rollins could have volunteered at an orphanage and still looked guilty to Gordon.

He pushed the thought away. Rollins was his partner. Unless he had hard proof in front of his face of anything otherwise, he trusted him. He had to.

With that increasingly shaky resolve, Gordon stepped out of the car down the street from his sister's shop. He could see Lauren and Cassiel through the front window, cleaning up and winding down from what was likely their busiest day of the week. Lauren counted the cash in the register while Cassiel wiped a cloth across the inside of the empty display case that usually housed their baked goods.

As he watched Lauren, Gordon marveled at how it still struck him whenever he saw his sister in a position of responsibility. Even though she was the older one, she'd always been such a goof when they were growing up. Shit, Gordon thought, she still was. Just not when she was playing the adult, which she was getting better and better at as the years went on. He guessed most people did.

When he tried the door, he found it locked. It ka-chunked in its frame loud enough for the girls to notice. Lauren set the money down and wandered over to greet him.

“Hi Gordon!” she yelled through the closed door.

“Let me in! It’s freezing out here!” he yelled back.

She put a cupped hand up to her ear. “What’s that? I can’t hear you?”

“The door it’s...” He pointed at the handle when she shrugged like she couldn’t make out what he was trying to say. The grin fights its way across her lips gave her away, and Gordon crossed his arms. He made the “I’m serious” face that had always worked when they were kids, and she clicked over the bolt, letting him in.

“Real nice,” he said, rubbing his arms for warmth as he came inside.

She kissed him on the cheek as he passed. “Love you.”

“The feelings mutual, I’m sure.” Gordon leaned up against one of the tables for customers. “How was your ladies’ day?”

“Oh, the usual,” Cassiel said. She rose from behind the display case, and Gordon noticed she was wearing a black and white dress he’d never seen before. He kicked himself, realizing she must have bought it just for tonight, as she obviously didn’t have any “nice” clothes at home. He shouldn’t have asked her out to such a pricey place...

Lauren had flipped a chair upside down and slid it onto the table, pushing Gordon off of it. “Yeah, you know us women-folk. Nothing note-worthy here. How was catching bad guys?”

“Oh, the usual,” Gordon said with a little more bitterness creeping into his voice than he intended. He changed the subject before either of them had time to press it.

“But,” he said, “your chariot awaits. Are you two almost finished up here?”

“I’ve just got to clean up in back,” Cassiel said, tossing the rag over one bear shoulder.

“You know what,” Lauren said, “just leave that for tomorrow. The mess isn’t going anywhere tonight. We are.”

“Are you sure?” Cassiel asked.

“Your boss demands it! Why don’t you and Gordon go bring the car around while I just wrap a few things up real quick in here?”

“Yes, ma’am. Come on Gordon, you heard the lady.”

He’d just warmed up when they stepped back out into the crisp chill of the night air. The breeze picked up and encouraged a brisk step.

“You two sound like you’re already old partners in crime,” Gordon said to Cassiel once they were safely inside the car.

“You think so?” She smiled warmly. “Your sister is just so easy to get along with. It comes naturally, I guess.”

“I wish I shared that disposition,” he said, turning the car on.

“You two,” she said. “The way you banter and bicker is cute. I miss having that.”

“You never mentioned you had siblings,” Gordon said, probing gently as he pulled the car out into the street.

“A few,” she said in a voice that stated that that was all he was going to get out of her.

He put the car in park in front of the shop and turned on the hazard lights. Lauren had just turned out the lights and was standing in the doorway when he heard the tires screech down the road. He looked up in time to see the white Escalade speeding toward them. As it drew near, the rear window slid down and someone jabbed a dark silhouette through it from within.

“Get down!” Gordon screamed, grabbing Cassiel around the shoulder and shoving her forward as the windows exploded around them.

* * *

Later, when they asked, she would describe it as all happening so fast, as people always said of tragedy. Our memories have a way of blurring suffering around the edges: speeding something up here, leaving out a detail there. Maybe it’s the only way we can cope with the sheer trauma life throws at us. Or maybe it’s the only way we can live with the guilt of surviving.

It didn’t actually all happen so fast. In those terrible moments, time didn’t speed up – it slowed down. Every second became a frame in a ghastly filmstrip, flickering palely on the cracked wall of some dreary basement, and she was powerless to stop any of what unfolded before her. Like the tragic ending of a movie you’ve seen a dozen

times, with each new viewing you hope and you pray and you believe that this time, maybe, just maybe, it will end differently.

It never does.

The distorted images played out in her head over and over: the car, the window, the gun, the car, the window, the gun, the car, the window, the gun.

The scream.

Her mind tried desperately to remember the scream being Lauren's, but it wasn't. The deep, bellowing cry of anguish came from Gordon's lungs.

It all happened in a matter of seconds, and then the SUV was gone, presumably turned down the next street or alley, Cassiel didn't see. She rose slowly and leaned back into the seat. There was broken glass everywhere, but she didn't think she was hurt. As the daze slowly lifted from her mind, she shook her head, sending splinters of glass cascading out of her hair and down her shoulders and back.

Gordon!

She cast a horrified glance to her left, expecting the worst, but Gordon stared back at her with the same panicked eyes.

"You okay?" he asked her. His weapon was in his hand, although Cassiel didn't know from where he had drawn it.

She nodded. "I think so. What the hell was that?"

She didn't get an answer. Gordon's mouth gaped open while his vision hovered over Cassiel's shoulder, and then he was scrambling to get out of the car. The door

wouldn't open, and he slammed his shoulder against it before he realized that it was locked. He pulled the pin and fled from the car. "Lauren!" he screamed, racing toward the entrance of his sister's coffee shop.

Cassiel rushed after him.

The shop windows had burst under the hail of gunfire. Lauren lay on the floor amidst a sea of jagged shards, a pool of red swelling about her and staining the glass. Gordon was on one knee next to his sister, his gun forgotten on the ground next to him.

"No, no, no!" Gordon repeated. He put a hand to Lauren's cheek, staining it red with her own blood. "It's going to be okay, just hold on."

Lauren was still conscious, but it didn't look like she would be for long. Fresh blood seeped from a wound in her shoulder. Her chest and stomach were so soaked red that Cassiel couldn't tell how many times she'd been hit. The former angel hovered in the doorway, clutching at the frame with all her strength just to stay on her feet.

"Gordon," Lauren managed to choke out. Her whole body tensed up, the pain visible on her face, and she reached for her brother's hand. She squeezed.

He held her gaze as long as he could, then looked around the room for something, anything. He turned over his shoulder and saw Cassiel. She'd never forget the look she saw then in his eyes, how frightened they were.

"Cass," he spoke rapidly, "go to the car. There's a radio in the glove box. Go!"

She nodded, willing herself to let go of the doorframe. She couldn't take her eyes off the blood, her friend's blood, her paralyzing blood.

Move! her mind shrieked, and her body listened dutifully.

The frigid air bit at her lungs as she gulped it down in ragged gasps, rushing to the car. The passenger door stood open. Cassiel crawled into the car, hissing painfully as she cut her knee on the shards of glass scattered across the seat. The glove box flipped open with a tug, and the police radio tumbled to the floor. She gripped it tightly as she rushed back to the shop.

Lauren was unconscious, and her beautiful dark skin which Cassiel admired so much had developed a chalky pallor. Cassiel thrust the radio forward with one shaky arm, but Gordon, still kneeling beside his sister, looked like he was somewhere else completely.

“Gordon, here,” she said, holding it out.

She saw him return to his eyes for a second, “Don’t just stand there – call for help!”

Cassiel stared down at the alien object in her hand, at the dozen buttons and knobs littered across its face, and she froze. “Gordon, I don’t... I don’t know...”

Suddenly he was standing, and he snatched it from her grasp.

He spoke clearly into the radio, his professional instincts kicking in momentarily. “167 to CCity, 10-54, civilian down at 29th and Guilford, require immediate assistance.

“I repeat,” he said, no longer able to keep the quiver from his voice, “civilian down.”

* * *

The three of them stood in front of Darius liked school boys in detention, and a wave of horror washed over him. Look at me, he thought. How did I become the Man now? Am I that old? Are these kids that out of line?

Fuck yes they are.

He'd gotten the phone call from Francis just before midnight. He'd wanted to hear from him at some point, just to make sure the shake-down job at the cop's sister's place went smoothly, but the call had come earlier than he'd expected, and it brought with it an irregular tension in Francis's typically chilled voice.

He spoke without introduction. "Problem with the thing, boss." They were forced to talk in vague terms and codes over open phone lines. Never knew who was listening.

"What kind of problem?"

"Looks like somebody beat us to it."

When Darius hung up the phone, he'd feared the worst. As it turned out, the reality of it was just that.

"The woman isn't going to make it through the night," Darius said, pacing in front of them.

The boys remained silent. Perry and Omar had the decency to stare at the floor and at least pretend to look ashamed. His nephew looked him dead in the eyes.

“You boys made the evening news, too. They just can’t stop talking about you and the ‘Assault on the Village.’ Got a fancy little animated graphic made up for you and everything.”

Still nothing. Darius glanced over at Francis. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, stone cold. He’d kill all three of them where they stood without blinking if Darius asked him to.

“What’s the matter fellas? Got nothing to say for yourselves? What am I supposed to think, huh? How am I supposed to cram into those tiny fucking brains of yours and figure out what the hell you were thinking if you won’t tell me?”

“We did what needed doing. That pig cop had it coming, and you know it. You just didn’t have the balls to do nothing, Uncle Darius.”

Darius cracked a smile. “Didn’t have the balls? I like that. I guess you’re right. Fucker had it coming. Never should’ve messed with such a big bad hood like you.” He turned his back to his nephew and braced himself on one of the chairs at the dining room table. “Except with all your big talk, you’re forgetting that you didn’t even put a scratch on the cop, just iced his sister. But I guess that means we can count ourselves lucky. Because maybe now we’ll only have half the cops in Baltimore up our asses instead of the whole motherfucking department.”

As his rage flared, he heaved the chair against the wall, shattering the TV screen hanging there and splintering the wooden chair to pieces. Perry and Omar kept their eyes

locked on the floor, but the echoing fury of his uncle's voice in that tiny room caused even Alton to flinch.

Darius swooped over to Alton and grabbed him under the chin, squeezing his face hard enough that it had to hurt considerably. Good, he thought. "I am not going to take this shit lightly, do you understand?"

Alton just stared at him, fear in his eyes for the first time. "I said do you understand, motherfucker?" He squeezed harder.

"Yeah," his nephew said.

"What?" Darius said, jerking his head around. "I didn't hear you."

"Yeah!" he screamed. Darius let go, and Alton recoiled backwards, rubbing his sore cheeks. Pale marks remained where Darius' fingers had dug into his flesh.

Darius regained his composure. "Now, nephew, tell me how you even knew who this bitch was."

Alton said nothing, peering at him with contemptuous eyes. Contemptuous, but still frightened.

When Darius moved to strike him again, Perry looked up. "Darius, stop! It was me. I told him about the place. I'm sorry, I..." he didn't have a chance to finish before Darius drove a fist into his still-healing nose. The sickening crunch and Perry's howl of pain left no doubt to anyone in the room that his nose had just been broken worse than before. He doubled over and moaned as blood oozed from beneath the bandage, pooling at his feet.

“You kill a cop, the pigs want a body,” Darius said, shaking out his aching fist.

“You kill a cop’s sister? They’ll settle for blood.”

Perry looked up at him, scared and hurting.

“I know a certain detective who wouldn’t mind being the one to bring in the cold-blooded murderer that went and killed his friend’s sister,” Darius said. “Prepare to sacrifice for your friend, young one. I hope he’s made it worth your while.”

Alton stepped forward. “Uncle, no.”

The look Darius shot him was enough to halt him in his tracks. “You’ve got no say in the matter, you ungrateful little bitch. I handed you a job better men than you would kill for, and you pissed it away. I set you up like a king to keep you safe, and you managed to fuck that up too. Now you get the hard way.”

Alton clenched a fist and looked down, defeated.

“You too, you dumb shit.” Omar, ever silent, met Darius’ gaze for a brief second, then dropped it back to the floor.

Disgusted, Darius took his coat from the rack and shrugged it on. “Francis, stay here tonight. Make sure these sorry fucks don’t go nowhere.” Francis nodded to his boss. “And you three,” Darius said, opening the front door, “Clean up that fucking mess.”

* * *

Cassiel found herself perched on the edge of Gordon's bed, once again. The rest of the apartment felt too huge and empty, so she'd fled into the bedroom and shut the door. Without the oppressive weight of all that hollow space closing in around her, the grief seemed easier to grapple. Almost.

Gordon was still at Union Memorial, waiting for his sister to die. They hadn't given her more than a few hours. Cassiel offered to stay with Gordon, but he'd sent her away. He needed to do this alone.

Cassiel understood.

What she didn't understand was what sense it all made. As the shock slowly loosened its grip on Gordon, he knew without a doubt this had been retaliation for his heroics the week before. That made this her fault. He hadn't said it, but Cassiel knew it.

The fallen angel slid down to the floor and reached under the bed. Her hand met the familiar grip of her old weapon. As she drew it out, the schnick of steel against the wooden floor made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. It resembled so much the sound it made when drawing from her sheath, something she'd done more times than she could count over the eons. It was the sound of wrath about to be laid down, of justice about to be dealt.

But where was the justice here? Why hadn't her Father simply obliterated her, made her not-be, and just put an end to it? Why thrust her instead into the life of a good person who she would get killed? Only to add more misery, more hatred, more pain to

this forsaken rock already teeming to the brim with it all. And it had once held such promise.

She sat back down on the bed, laying her sword across her lap. She held a fist around its grip and stroked her other hand along flat side of the blade.

There was no reason, no sane reason, she came to realize. The real justice had never been out there in the universe, waiting for her to mete it out. It had been in her hands the entire time. Perhaps, she thought as she ran a finger up the sharp edge of the sword, I can give myself reason enough. She watched the blood well up on the tip of her finger.

Thunder boomed and lighting flashed as a storm swept over the city later that night. Cassiel would have slept with her sword in her arms, but she didn't want Gordon to catch her with it when he came home, so she stashed it back beneath his own bed and slept alone with her thoughts.

She'd find in the morning that Gordon never came home. Lauren fought all the way through the night, and she died with her brother holding her hand at six in the morning – the same time her coffee shop would have opened its doors for the weekend.

Had he returned that evening, however, he would have been both surprised and alarmed to witness the pulsating glimmer of light emanating irregularly from beneath his bed.

* * *

The storm outside had been raging for quite awhile. For exactly how long though, Zakariel couldn't say.

He was counting lights.

His tiny apartment held floor lamps, table lamps, light fixtures, spotlights, even Christmas lights, and every night he counted each and every bulb. Twice. He had to check the bulbs, to make sure they were all fresh and functioning. There wasn't a shadow in the place, and he intended to keep it that way. He had to, or else he'd die.

And that stupid bitch didn't believe him about the Nybbas. That was fine. She'd see. Just wait. She'd die, too.

In the most distant reaches of his mind, he remembered that they'd been friends once, up there. That was a different time though, a different life – one that he could scarcely recall, like a half-remembered dream. Besides, there was no room for friends down here. They always wanted something from you, or maybe they'd just take it. Or else they would just get in the way, get both of you killed.

To Zakariel, in this God-forsaken place, all paths led to death. All he could do was defy it one night at a time.

On his second sweep of the apartment, he caught one of the table lamps showing a bit dim – a bulb to be replaced. He opened the hall closet, revealing stacks and stacks of diligently organized bulbs, lined up by size and wattage.

He scanned his index finger across horizontally, then down vertically, coming to the exact spot the table lamp's bulb should be. His finger stopped on the boxes for the hallway fixtures. He ran his finger across then down again, but stopped in the same place. The lamp's bulbs weren't there.

That's impossible, he thought, feeling his heart begin to thump against the inside of his chest. How could he be so stupid? He always replaced the bulbs the morning after he used them – in bulk. This should never happen. When had he last replaced that damn light?

He shut the closet and craned his neck to see into the next room. Sweat beaded on his forehead. The lamp looked like it could make it through the night, he judged. He'd stay away from that side of the room, just to be safe. He had contingency plans for nights just like this. He swung the closet open again and reached along the top shelf. His fingers wrapped around the handle of a flashlight. He pulled it down and clicked it on and off – worked just fine.

He leaned up against the wall in the living room and slowly slid down it, coming to rest on the floor. He sat there a good while, wringing his hands on the flashlight's neck, eyes locked on the failing lamp.

The power went out just after two.

Despite the sudden shock of terror that ran down his arms and through his fingertips, he reacted immediately. The flashlight snapped on and swept the room. Nothing.

The rain fell outside, a steady thrum punctuated by the occasional deep, rolling thunder. When the flashes of lightning followed, the room exploded into pale blue light outlined in darkest shadow. The room looked like a different twisted alien landscape with each flash, all of them hostile.

It was in the droning beat of the falling rain that Zakariel first heard it whisper his name. He jerked the flashlight toward the window and saw only the droplets of rain running down the pane of glass.

Zakariel...

The whisper came from the opposite side of the apartment this time, nearest the closet. He aimed his meager beam of light in that direction and again found nothing.

We've been searching for you Zakariel...

The rustling of soft and terrible voices came from directly in front of him this time, like silk and daggers. The darkness of the apartment seemed to pool all in one place, flowing lazily toward him. He wrenched the flashlight around and stabbed it forward and the shadows scattered.

"Leave me alone!" he whimpered, beginning to tremble.

Why do you hide from us, Zakariel? You are ours now.

"No." He shook his head. "It's not fair. I've been so careful."

Yes, so careful. You hurt us, Zakariel. We thought you didn't want to be found. But now we have you, and you will come with us and be part of us, forever.

The voices were closing in on all sides. Zakariel swept the flashlight around the room, catching nothing in its beam. As he felt the dark presence reach to caress him, he lifted the flashlight above his head and aimed down, pooling himself in its light. He squeezed his eyes shut and whimpered nothings to himself, wishing it would go away or be done with it.

The flaring stab of pain in his hand jerked his eyes open and caused him to drop the flashlight. He cradled the wounded hand and felt hot, sticky blood flow between his fingers. He reached for the flashlight with his other hand as it rolled away, but a shower of sparks erupted just out of his reach, and then the flashlight was no more. And then he was in complete darkness, and he could feel the breath of the countless damned rattling against the nape of his neck.

He heard its chains clattering in the air around him, and the sharpness of its hooks ran along the bare skin of his arms, not yet puncturing it.

“I... I’ll make a deal with you,” he said, realizing then how very much he wanted to live. “There is another like me. I can lead you to her. Just don’t take me.”

Where is this other? it whispered, nuzzling a talon beneath Zakariel’s chin.

He began to cry. “If I tell you, you’ll kill me.”

We will kill you anyway.

“No,” he sobbed, shaking his head.

Yes. We will find this other, as we found you. Just as we have always found your kind, and just as we always will. Come now, young one. We have such wonderful things to show you.

The Nybbas sunk its hooks into Zakariel's flesh, allowing him one strangled scream, and then the apartment was empty.

The power came back on moments later. That flickering bulb made it through to morning, after all.

CHAPTER 5

The wintry bite of the wind stopped bothering Cassiel days ago. She welcomed its brittle caress against her bare face now, as she stooped on a narrow ledge above another rundown storefront on another rundown block of West Baltimore. She held a piece of paper in one hand, crumpled from two weeks of folding and unfolding, and a pencil in the other. Three neat columns stretched down the page: location, entry time, and departure time. The departure time of the final line remained blank. Her target was still within the convenience store across the street.

She'd been following this one for four days now, and she knew she was close to her true objective. After all, he'd been there with him when they tried to rape her.

In all the time Cassiel spent with Gordon after he rescued her, she'd never thought to ask about the men who attacked her. She mostly just wanted to forget it ever happened. It wasn't until after they're murdered Lauren that she needed to know who they were.

Alton Lowder, Perry Dale, and Omar Tyrell, Gordon had told her. Three street thugs of little report who took the life of an innocent, honest woman, and in doing so, strangled out one of the few joys Gordon had in his life. For that, Cassiel planned to hurt them.

She'd started out just watching. She'd gone back to the neighborhood where she'd been attacked and asked around. She'd had to pretend to be a junkie looking for a fix, one who hadn't heard the stash had moved. She found out to where, and from there, she

watched the runners for days on end. She followed the product, she followed the cash, and she followed the bit players. She'd questioned at times if it would get her anywhere, all this watching, but after a week, it had paid off.

Perry Dale had been apprehended by Gordon's partner, Ed Rollins. He'd caught him with the murder weapon in the trunk of his car, in fact. Dale confessed and said he'd acted alone. Gordon called him a liar. He saw two guns in that car, and a driver. Dale simply denied it, but with a murderer behind bars, Gordon seemed like the only one in the department interested in proving that two killers were on the loose. One man in jail looked better than two on the run.

Their inaction spurred Cassiel on. These humans seemed far too eager to ignore the corruption eating their city from the inside out, but she would not. And it was the next Sunday, just a week after Lauren's funeral, that Cassiel's hard work paid off.

For days, the red-capped money runner had dropped his brown bag at the same pawn shop, but that Sunday, he walked right past it. He continued three blocks to a residential district, where he set the bag down in the planet box of a vacant townhome. Cassiel waited, and who stepped out not an hour later but Omar Tyrell.

Over the next four days, she watched the vacant, and Tyrell came and went to collect meals three times a day. With the amount he purchased and the frequency of his trips, she knew he had to be shopping for a few people. Given Tyrell's place on the Lawder totem pole, it wasn't hard to guess who he was shopping for.

He came out of the store at 1:22, carrying two plastic bags of food and drink. He had an issue of Hustler tucked under one arm.

Even though she knew exactly where he was going (Vacant/1:31/6:00), still she tracked him. In dealings such as these, it paid to be thorough. The day before, she'd discovered a route between this store and the vacant that let her stay entirely on the rooftops. Later today, she planned to do the same for the Chinese place he frequented.

Soon, she thought, watching the bastard strut down Edmondson Ave like he owned it. That was the problem with men like him. They thought they owned the whole world, and everyone and everything in it was just one means or another to get at whatever fickle thing they wanted that week. No matter the cost.

Lauren's funeral had been an even sadder affair than Cassiel imagined it would be. Gordon had wanted it over with. She was laid to rest Sunday morning, and there were only ten people in attendance. Cassiel, Gordon, his partner Ed, one or two other guys from the force, and two sweet old women who had come to the shop every afternoon to play Scrabble together. Gordon had no remaining family, as far as he was willing to admit to her, and he didn't seem to have much of a social life or circle of friends. His job was his life, and Lauren only seemed able to stay a part of it because she had come first.

Come and gone, Cassiel thought bitterly as her casket disappeared into the earth.

That was the last time she'd seen Gordon. She'd leave early in the morning to do her hunting, and he wouldn't be in his room. Neither would he when she returned in the evening, ready to pass out from a day running along rooftops in the bitter cold. He had hunting of his own to do, she imagined.

On the street below, her prey waited for a little boy and his mother to turn the corner before he knocked on the board serving as the front door of the vacant. He

exchanged words with someone through it, and it was lifted off its hinges. He climbed inside, set down the bags, and carefully placed the wooden slab back in its frame.

She stared at the flimsy barrier between her and the scum inside with growing fury and shrinking patience.

Soon, she thought once more, and then got started on that route to the Chinese restaurant.

* * *

The office was always so quiet early in the morning. You'd never guess what a shit show it became by ten, Rollins thought as he stepped out of the elevator. He liked getting there before anyone else. It gave him a chance to settle in and put on his face for the day. His policeman's face, not his rat-bastard, Benedict Arnold, son of a bitch face. He only wore that one in private or in the company of other sons of bitches, which was why seeing Miller there before him every day this week was slowly driving him insane.

He found his partner in their shared cube, hunched over the transcripts of the Dale kid's confession.

"Morning partner," Rollins said, setting one cup of coffee down in front of Gordon. He took a sip of his own. "What time you get in?"

Gordon didn't look up from the reams of paper. "Early."

Rollins just stood there, expecting maybe he'd say more, but he didn't. "What are you looking at, there?" he tested.

“Something. Anything,” he said. “Dale is a goddamned lousy liar, that’s plain enough, but as long as his story stands, nobody’s out there on the streets looking for these other two pieces of shit. I thought maybe I could catch a weak link in his story, but there’s fucking nothing here.” He crumpled up the sheet of paper he had been holding and swept his hand across the desk, scattering the rest. “I know they were there, Ed. I saw the other fucking gun; I saw a driver, and I’m the only one in the whole department who gives a shit.”

“Hey, you’re not the only one.” Rollins sighed. “I believe you, buddy, I do. These guys though, they’re pros. But we’re pros too. We’ll keep at it, you and me, and we’ll nail these motherless fucks. We’ll nail them right to the wall.” He put a comforting hand on Gordon’s shoulder for good measure.

Gordon nodded while he tried to pile up the mess of paper he’d made. “Thanks, Ed. I mean that. We wouldn’t even have this guy if not for you. I know that.”

When Gordon looked up at him, Rollins saw the twisted bramble of blood vessels stretched across his eyes. “Did you even go home last night, Gord?”

Gordon began putting the transcript pages back in order. “They killed my sister, Ed. Sleep can wait.”

Rollins slumped down into the seat at his station. “Go home, Gordon. You’re not going to catch anybody with your ass dragging like this. Go get some sleep, and I’ll give the transcripts some fresh eyes, yeah?”

Gordon tightened his grip on the paper. Then he dropped it, and his whole body relaxed at once. “Yeah, yeah you’re right. I’ll go do that.” He stood and put his coat on. “Thank you, Ed. You’re a good partner, and you’re a good friend.”

He held out his hand, and Rollins' stomach turned when he shook it.

"You don't owe me anything, pal, and I mean that. You go rest up, and I'll be here when you get back."

Gordon nodded and left.

Rollins crashed into the chair Gordon had been sitting in. This morning, he didn't think he could have felt any worse, but he'd just proven himself wrong. Goddamn you Lowder, he thought, tapping a finger compulsively on the thick pile of papers Gordon left on the desk. Nothing is worth this.

He produced a flask from his jacket pocket and poured a little whiskey into his coffee, then thought, Fuck it, and took two swallows straight from the flask.

Then he tucked it back in his jacket, dumped the Dale transcript in the garbage, and got to sipping his coffee.

* * *

She didn't know how many were inside. She didn't even know if Lowder was in there, for sure.

In the frigid night air, that cold steel reaching up along his spine must have been torture. The feel of blade on skin was terrifying, she knew from personal experience, but it was nowhere near as frightening as the moment the blade was lifted. At her own trial, when the sword was raised from her the nape of her neck, she was afraid to open her eyes for those terrible few moments before Valtiel had spoken her sentence, not knowing

whether the blade had been removed for good, or if it would come swinging down to sever head from shoulders in one grotesquely simple swing of his arm.

Her own prisoner, Omar Tyrell, walked stiffly beside her. She'd dropped down into an alley along the route she knew he'd take that evening on the way home from the Chinese take-out. It was so easy to grab him off the street, push him against the wall, and press her blade up against his throat. He'd dropped the bags of food, and she in that brief moment, the vacant look in his eyes told her she'd taken him by such surprise that he didn't even know to be afraid yet. She'd drawn a thin line of blood from the fleshy skin under his jaw to correct that.

Now they walked side-by-side, her sword tucked up beneath the back of his shirt. His bulky jacket hid the blade completely. Anyone looking on must have assumed they were lovers, walking romantically down the streets of Baltimore, one arm wrapped around the other. She kept the point of her blade against the nape of Tyrell's neck to remind him this couldn't have been further from the truth.

"You understand what you're doing, bitch?" Tyrell had said nothing up until that point.

"Shut up," she responded.

"What kind of shit are you trying? We got four guys in there, real killers. You understand what you're up against?"

"I know exactly what I'm up against now, thank you. Now shut up." She emphasized her command with a little pressure from the end of her sword.

Four men plus this idiot? She felt confident.

It wasn't much longer until they'd reached the vacant. She urged Tyrell up the steps and toward the door.

"Get them to open it," she said. Her heart began beating faster.

"Listen, I don't know what you think happened, but I didn't shoot that friend of yours." He turned his head to face her. "I was just driving the damn car."

Hearing him speak of Lauren fanned the flames of rage deep within her. "I'll take that into consideration," she snarled. "Now open the damn door." She prodded him forward with the cold steel against his back.

Tyrell took a deep breath and pounded on the wooden board they called a door. "Yo, it's Omar. Open up."

Her pulse began to race as she saw the wood being lifted from its frame. Her senses became sharper; her eyes dilated. Time slowed down just as it always did before blood was spilled.

A heavyset man in a football jersey stood in the doorway with a dumb look on his face. "Who the fuck is this?" he said of her to Tyrell.

Before he could answer, she drove the length of her sword into the back of Tyrell's neck and up through his mouth.

"Holy shit!" the fat man shouted, his eyes snapping wide. He reached for the gun he had hidden in his waistband, below the jersey, but Cassiel withdrew her blade and put a boot into Tyrell's back, launching him at the bouncer. The two men went down as one, Tyrell vomiting blood into the face of his friend.

Tyrell, still gurgling what sounded like "help me," scrabbled at his friend's shirt, distracting him from the gun that had fallen to his side. As he stretched his arm out for it,

Cassiel marched forward and drove her sword down through Tyrell's back and twisted hard, killing both men.

Three more, she thought, extracting the blade as she stood.

The noise she'd made with her entrance had alerted the other men in the house. The inside of the vacant was dimly lit by a scattered supply of battery operated lamps. There was a closed door off to the left, what she could guess served as the bathroom. In the next room, which was once a living room, a fire raged in an old barrel. For warmth, she assumed. Cracked walls hid the majority of that room from her, but a gutted kitchen lay to the right, and a set of stairs on the left led upward then turned a corner to the second story. She could hear panicked footsteps from the floor above. How many, she couldn't tell.

A deafening shot echoed through the vacant as a piece of the wooden doorframe exploded next to her head. She squinted her right eye shut as splinters rained against the side of her face. In that split second she saw the gun and the hand holding it peeking out from behind the living room wall. She sprinted into the relative safety of the kitchen as the second and third shots were fired.

She pressed her back to the wall, head down, but there were no more shots from the living room. When she poked her head out, however, she saw a man on the stairs dead ahead. He wore only an undershirt and a pair of boxers. He raised his own weapon and took aim at her face. She swung her head back behind the wall as the shots ripped into the floor beyond where it was just a moment ago.

Miserable coward's weapons, she thought to herself, adjusting her grip on the sword.

She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw the fat man's gun on the floor. His motionless hand had come within inches of it. Now it lay just beyond her own reach. Another shot from the stairs, closer this time, rang off the kitchen's doorframe.

Realizing she was completely pinned, she took a gamble. She lashed her sword out through the doorway, trying to catch it on the fallen gun. Her aim was wide, and she adjusted, sweeping the blade along the floor, trying to hook the gun back to her. The man on the steps fired at her exposed arm. One bullet actually rang off of the flat of her sword. Her hand flinched, but the steel remained undented. With one last strained tug, the gun came clattering toward her.

She switched her sword back to her right hand and picked the gun up with the left. Carefully, she got to her feet, back still planted to the wall, and took a deep breath.

You are a soldier, she thought to herself with closed eyes. This filth is nothing.

She fired the weapon around the corner, hitting nothing but causing the man on the stairs to take cover further up the flight. Before he could regain his footing, Cassiel flung herself from the kitchen and charged the living room, firing blindly ahead of her as she ran.

As she crossed the threshold into the living room, she realized she'd emptied the clip into the back of another of the thugs who had been retreating to the living room. Blossoms of red slowly spread across the back of his white T.

Two more, she thought as the other man in the room leveled his gun to the side of her head. He'd been hiding on the other side of the wall, to the left of the entrance.

She crouched and brought up the empty gun in her left hand. Her ears rang as he squeezed off a shot inches above her head, but then it was too late for him to recover. She brought the flat end of the gun across the man's chin, likely shattering his jaw.

He fell back against the wall, clutching at his ruined face with his free hand. To his credit, he raised his gun to fire on her even through all that pain. It was in vain, however. Before he could get off a shot, she brought her sword across her body and sliced his arm clean through at the elbow. He howled, and she drove the blade up through his rib cage swiftly, piercing his heart and ending his suffering.

She dropped the gun, cursing it for a clumsy weapon, and turned to deal with her final victim.

Without hesitation, she drove forward toward the stairs. The man in his underwear stood on the steps, raised his gun at her, then thought better of it and ran. Maybe it was the blood splattered across her face and chest that did it, but his attempt to flee was in vain. In his rush, he'd tripped over the two corpses lying in the doorway. By the time he got onto his hands and knees, Cassiel drove the point of her sword down between his shoulder blades.

She stood then, breathing raggedly, and the adrenaline in her blood began to thin out. That's when the closed door in the foyer, the bathroom door, burst open, and Alton Lowder marched out, holding a gun in both hands.

Cassiel had just enough time to turn before she took a bullet in the stomach. The impact nearly drove her off her feet. The flood of pain was unimaginable. With tears in

her eyes, she raised her sword and dove forward. She caught another bullet in her left shoulder as she barreled into Lowder, knocking him off his feet.

He held onto his gun as they hit the floor. She fell onto her side next to him, and she saw him try to raise it. With her last ounce of strength, she lifted her sword and drove it down into his forearm, severing the tendons that stretched taut to his fingers. He screamed and dropped the gun.

He scrambled to his knees and reached for it with his other hand. Cassiel rolled onto her back on top of the gun and held her sword out with both hands. She wasn't sure she had the energy to win a scuffle with him, but she couldn't let him see that – her life depended on it.

He hunched there for a moment, eyeing her, her sword, and the gun on the floor behind her. She knew he must be in agony, but he refused to clutch his wounded arm. We're playing the same bluffer's game, she thought.

"Go ahead," she said, summoning all her strength. "Try."

Hatred writhed across his face, and he let out a furious snarl before turning and escaping out the front door.

Cassiel lay there for a moment, holding her breath, sword raised. When she realized he wouldn't come back, her sword clattered to the ground, and she let the air in her lungs out in slow, ragged puffs. She felt the blackness creeping in around the edges of her consciousness, and she closed her eyes, welcoming its warmth.

No, her mind screamed at her. You failed. You can't die yet. Get UP.

She sucked in bitter, cold air that burned her throat, and she reached for her sword. Using it for support, she propped herself up, coughing. She stood, with a lot of trouble, and made for the stairwell.

I'm not going to make it far. Just need to get away. Can't be caught here.

She clunked up the steps, using her sword as a cane, and found a long hallway with bedrooms on either side. She looked up and found what she'd been looking for at the end of the hall – a pull-down latch leading to the roof.

As she struggled past one of the open bedroom doors, she heard a woman whimpering from within. A girl, she couldn't be more than a teenager, sat up on the bed, clutching the sheet to her bare chest. When she saw the blood covering Cassiel, some of it theirs, some of it hers, the poor girl began to hyperventilate.

“Go,” Cassiel whispered raggedly, but the girl just stared at her, dumb. “Go!” she screamed, and the girl did as she was told.

Cassiel reached up for the wire to pull down the trap door, and the pain in her side nearly caused her to black out again. She took a moment to steady herself, tried again, and this time she had it. She scrambled up the ladder and out into the cold night above.

She'd laid a long, sturdy piece of plywood across the gap between the vacant and the next building earlier that afternoon, planning for just this.

Well, maybe not this exactly, she thought to herself, clutching feebly at her stomach wound.

She crossed the roof and stumbled out onto the board above the alley. She made the mistake of looking down then, out there above the void.

No! she thought as the world began to spin. The black came creeping into her vision once again.

She dropped her sword then, and she heard it clang and rattle against the hard ground below several moments later.

No, she thought again, a bit more weakly.

She reached after it, dropped to her knees, and slipped off of the makeshift bridge, plunging into the abyss below.

CHAPTER 6

There was dust on the streets of the Silver City.

The ancient home of the angels still retained much of its former beauty, but it shocked and saddened Cassiel she'd seen with her own eyes how quickly the City had declined in the fiery wake of Lucifer's rebellion.

She walked the battlements of the Artisan Quarter alongside her partner, Remiel. The high wall separated the Artisan Quarter to their left from the Augur Quarter to their right. In the distance, the Father's Pinnacle jutted up from the center of the City and soared up into the sky above, extending far beyond sight. Behind that, Cassiel could make out both the skyline of the Armed Quarter, from which she and Remiel had ventured, and the smoldering scar rent through the middle of Architect Quarter.

When the fighting had broken out on the streets and the Armed swept down upon Lucifer's rebels like a flood, he realized his open coup stood no chance of victory, and he ordered every sapper he had, armed with that damned explosive mixture he'd concocted, to the Architect Quarter. The resulting devastation to the City's work force left them unable to conduct repairs and reconstruction.

Now, Lucifer's insurgents plagued what remained of the City and its loyal inhabitants, and the sands of the desert beyond the wall crept in day by day and settled, unmoved, in the street.

“Ready for another go down there?”

Remiel’s voice shook Cassiel from her thoughts. “Of course,” she said, pulling her gaze from the billowing smoke from the broken Quarter in the distance. The stairs to the Artisan Quarter wound down before them.

The rebels came from all Quarters and stations, but the largest portion, by far, hailed from the Artisan Quarter. Many of those who weren’t openly in rebellion still held sympathies for Lucifer and his upstarts, spouting their propaganda about free will and independent thought. Something about the romantic nature of the Artisans spoke to that, and it made it their Quarter a hotbed for the insurgency. It was the most dangerous patrol to draw now that the fighting had mostly died out. The Armed were now switching gears to seek and destroy mode. They’d have to turn over every rock in the Silver City to weed out the underground network of rebels, and there were still a lot of rocks left to turn. The trek down the massive staircase was a long one, but not nearly as long as it would feel trying to trudge back up. By the end of their patrols, Cassiel’s heavy sword and crossbow, along with the bulky armor she wore, weighed her down to the point of exhaustion. She was used to the lighter mail she wore on her patrols of the outer wall of the city, where she’d seen no action as of yet, beyond sparring.

She knew the situation in the City must have been grim if they were pulling wall guards in for Quarter patrols, but she never imagined things had gotten this bad.

The once bustling sidewalks and open air galleries in the Artisan Quarter stood dead in the midday heat. The heat was another thing that made Cassiel’s heavy armor nearly intolerable. Ever since the fighting began, every day was hotter than the last. Their

Father was angry, sad too, she suspected, but the rain and the cold were best left for after the war was won. Heated fury was the proper attitude until that day.

The barren street split off in two directions at the base of the staircase.

Remiel looked one way, then the other. “What do you say, partner? Split up and get out of this bloody heat twice as fast?”

It was tempting. “No,” she replied before she could consider it any further. “We should stick together in case we run into anything.”

“Like what?” he said, rubbing at the sweat in his eyes. “You think maybe we’ll find Lucifer holed up in some Artisan’s pantry?”

Cassiel ignored Remiel’s jape and set down the street on the left. After several paces, she heard the clanking of his armor fall in line beside her. She allowed herself a smile. The two of them had been partners for Cassiel’s entirety as one of the Armed. Remiel had taught her everything she knew, but clearly she had come to learn how he operated as well. That fact made her happy.

Their duty on these daily patrols was to follow up on any tips that came in (there were few so far) and search house to house for any suspicious activity or hidden dens for rebels (there were none so far.) Either there were far fewer rebels than they imagined, or they were just far better at hiding than the Armed were at seeking. Based upon the growing number of weekly bombings, Cassiel felt the latter had to be the truth of it.

The first home on their path belonged to Chamuel, a sculptor. He didn’t pose any particular threat, as far as Cassiel was concerned, but the attitude among the Armed right now was that any Artisan was a potential threat.

Chamuel came to the door bare chested, a dirty garment wrapped across his waist. Rough patches of dry clay spotted his torso.

“Yes?” was all he said in the open doorway.

Remiel spoke first. “Good day. We’re doing our daily rounds in the Quarter, weeding out any possible rebel activity in the area. Have you seen anything suspicious lately?”

“No,” the angel replied.

“Do you mind if we come in and have a look around?” Cassiel added.

“I would mind in fact. I’m working. ”

He began to close the door in their faces, but Remiel caught it with his forearm. “We insist,” he said. The hollow clack of wood on steel punctuated his assertion. Chamuel lifted both hands palm out, disgust on his face, and he turned his back on them. Remiel pushed the door open, and the two angels stepped inside.

Chamuel’s modest living space was crammed with the tools of his trade: stacks of marble blocks, packages of clay, chisels and hammers of various sizes. Any leftover space was dedicated to the fruits of his labor, ranging from the figurine sized statues which lined the shelves on his walls to the floor-to-ceiling sculptures scattered throughout the house. The statuettes varied in theme, depicting mostly sites around the city and angels of note. The larger sculptures, however, took on a more abstract nature. Most were all curves and smooth shapes, the marble and granite flowing in such a way Cassiel didn’t realize was possible. His latest creation, however, half-finished, told a much different story. A solid block of granite sat in the center of the room. An angel’s torso writhed up out of the solid stone cube beneath him, agony written across his painstakingly sculpted

face. Seemingly resigned to being searched, Chamuel ignored the two soldiers in his home and went back to angrily slapping red clay along the granite angel's back and hair. It looked like seething flame pouring out of its skin and hair.

"Cheery piece you're working on there," Remiel said, not looking at Chamuel as he paced the perimeter of the his home.

"It's a cheery time we're living in," the Artisan replied.

Cassiel stepped into the small cooking area in one corner of the room, the only part not enslaved to the other angel's art. She opened and closed the cupboard doors as quietly as she could, finding only food. She felt for hidden seams along the cabinet's insides and crouched to do the same along the floor.

"It looks like you're pretty good with stone," Remiel said, running a finger along the curved surface of one of the sculptures. "They could probably use you in the rebuilding process."

"I'm an Artisan, not an Architect. And please don't touch that."

Remiel raised his hand defensively. "I'm just saying, they have dire need of skilled hands."

Chamuel dropped his arms from his work and turned. "And have every other angel in the city look at me like you are now? Like I'm the one that did this to their families and friends? No thank you."

Cassiel eased back into the main room, hoping desperately Remiel hadn't started something he couldn't back out of. She casually rested a hand on her sword hilt.

Chamuel took note. “Find any rebels in there?” he said to her. “If not, I’d rather like if you two stopped harassing me and got out of my home. Unless you plan to arrest me for being an Artisan, as it seems as though that can be enough these days.”

Remiel batted a weary eye at Cassiel. “No,” he said. “We won’t. But someone else that comes by tomorrow or the day after that might be inclined to, if you keep up this tough guy attitude. If you’ve got nothing to hide, we’re only here to try and keep you safe from the enemy, brother.”

Chamuel snorted. “Indeed. Good day to you then, brother.” Chamuel turned and set back into the clay, clumping it across the granite angel’s face, obscuring the beautiful work that he’d done.

Back out on the street, Remiel shook his head and laughed. “These Artisan’s, I swear. They hole up in their safe little Quarter with no appreciation for the risks we take to keep them safe. I’m starting to think the whole lot of them are a bunch of sympathizers.”

“That’s a dangerous thought,” Cassiel said as they approached the next building on their route. “If we start suspecting that all of the people we’re bound to protect are actually the enemy, where does that leave us?”

“With a much clearer objective,” he said sourly as he pounded his fist against the door of the next house. Its owner, a painter named Sariel, answered.

“Hello,” she said pleasantly. “I wasn’t expecting any visitors today.” Her eyes wandered to their weapons. “Am I in some kind of trouble?”

Not wanting a repeat of their last stop, Cassiel took the lead. “Not at all, sister. We’re just on a patrol of the Quarter, and we’re checking in with many of the locals to ensure that you feel safe.”

“It’s hard to feel safe with all that’s been going on, isn’t it?” Sariel said. She tossed a glance over her shoulder. “Would you like to come in? I’ve got some ambrosia set out. I’d be happy to share it with our city’s brave defenders.”

“That would be lovely,” Cassiel said, mirroring the Artisan’s pleasantries.

Sariel stepped back and opened the door for her guests. Remiel caught Cassiel’s eye as they stepped in. He raised his eyebrows at her in either surprise or suspicion, maybe both; Cassiel couldn’t tell.

The painter’s apartment was open and warm, a drastic contrast to the sculptor’s. A humble easel and stool sat upon a tarp by a window, while portraits of all shapes and sizes hung on the walls. Cassiel recognized the domed compounds of her own Armed district in one painting, the robed scholars of the Augur district in another, and the magnificence captured in a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the Father’s Pinnacle in a centerpiece of the room, directly across from the door. It drew her in as she stepped into Sariel’s home, seeming to beckon her to step through the frame into the flawless reality within.

“You’ve got some excellent pieces in here. Are they all your work?” she commented with a bit of awe.

“My hand painted all these, yes,” Sariel responded. “They belong to any of us as much as me, however. What did the Father create me for, if not to create for you?”

Remiel made that face again. “A fine way of thinking. And has the Father also blessed you with a watchful eye? We are on the lookout for any information that might lead us to rebels in the area. If you’ve heard or seen anything suspicious, anything at all, it could help us save lives down the road.”

Sariel stood by the table in the center of the room where fresh flowers blossomed in a jar next to the pitcher of ambrosia. She began to pour them all glasses. “Suspicious? I don’t believe so. I mostly keep to myself these days. It’s dangerous out on the streets, especially in this Quarter, Father protect us.”

“That is the sad truth of it, isn’t it?” Remiel said.

The painter handed a sweating glass of ambrosia to Remiel. “Have the two of you apprehended any of these criminals yet?”

“No, not personally. The Armed have been conducting regular arrests and are making excellent progress in preventing further attacks though,” Cassiel lied as she accepted her own glass. Things were only getting worse.

“Knowing we have such brave warriors to defend us is the only thing that lets me fall asleep at night.”

Remiel smiled and took a long swallow of the ambrosia. Cassiel sipped courteously at her own as she began to browse the artwork on the walls. The sickeningly sweet liquid chilled her inside as it flowed down her throat.

Sariel picked up the final glass in her delicate Artisan’s fingers. “You look like an angel who appreciates the fine arts,” she said to Remiel. “Would you be kind enough to give me your expert’s eye on my latest work?” She beckoned him over to the wall-sized canvas depicting the Father’s Pinnacle.

“Why not?” he replied, stepping over to it. “I do love a good portrait.”

Cassiel politely ignored them but groaned on the inside. This wasn’t the first time she’d watched her partner romance a lonely angel they crossed on a patrol.

“I spent a lot of time working out the details on the Father’s Pinnacle, here,” she said, pointing to the gilding that spiraled up the tower. “Perhaps you have seen it in a different way, however, using your Armed eyes. Do you see anything... off about this portrait?” Suddenly, her eyes locked with Remiel’s and widened, pleading.

The glass he was holding shattered on the ground as his hand shot to his sword hilt, but he wasn’t fast enough. The blade erupted from the canvas and slashed down, rending the portrait in two. Its tip grazed Remiel’s cheek, producing a slim red line down the side of his face. He gasped in pain and stumbled backward as he drew his blade, wincing his eye shut as it filled with blood.

The rebel stormed through the portrait’s frame, destroying what was left of the canvas. He wore the light leather armor the insurgents preferred for its maneuverability and lightness. The sword he wielded was hardened steel, likely stolen from one of their fallen brothers in one of the earlier raids, back when the fighting had just broken out. A glass bottle dangled from his belt, one that they’d all been warned of. Angels recovered from the blows of blades and quarrels, but the liquid flame meant death.

Sariel clawed at the rebel’s back, grasping desperately at his armor in a futile attempt to restrain him. He tossed a careless backhand over his shoulder that landed across her chin, sending her sprawling onto the floor. He then set his sights on the wounded Remiel.

“Don’t move!” Cassiel shouted, steely command filling her voice. She’d unslung her heavy crossbow and had it trained on the renegade angel.

He stopped in his tracks, knowing the quarrel would punch through his light leather armor, and at this range, she couldn’t miss. Remiel touched his cheek and looked at the sticky blood that covered the hand. He licked his lips and charged the other angel, coming alive with a flurry of blows.

The rebel took his opportunity to fight back, keeping Remiel between Cassiel and himself, ensuring that she couldn’t get a clear shot. Cassiel silently cursed Remiel’s temper and strafed around the skirmish, looking for an opening to strike but finding none.

Sariel lay on the floor, cradling her chin where she’d been struck, while the two angels exchanged blows. Remiel was still on the offensive, but every swing was checked by the insurgent. Word of the training Lucifer gave to his forces had grown legendary, but Cassiel had not seen it in practice until that moment. This rebel fought like one of the Armed.

Just as Cassiel was about to sling her crossbow to join the fray with cold steel, Remiel proved too reckless with a killing swing aimed to split the rebel diagonally from shoulder to groin. The other angel sidestepped instead of blocking the blow, and Remiel stumbled forward from the momentum of his grizzly swipe. The rebel slid his sword beneath Remiel’s armpit, where he knew there would be an opening in the armor. After a yelp of pain, Remiel’s sword clattered to the ground as blood ran freely from his gauntlet.

The insurgent pressed his advantage and swooped behind Remiel, jerking him up straight and placing his blade’s edge to his throat. The look he gave Cassiel then spoke more than any words would have.

The painter's home had grown deathly quiet. The only sound were the ragged breaths Remiel drew in, trying to hide the pain. Cassiel could make out the deep fear he masked as well. "Shoot him, Cassiel," he grunted. "This is my fault."

The renegade angel drew his sword so tightly against Remiel's neck that it drew blood. "Shut up!" he screamed into his ear.

Cassiel fired.

The glass bottle at the angel's hip shattered, and the quarrel took him in the leg. The immense heat that followed sucked the breath right out of Cassiel's lungs. As the liquid reacted with the open air, it drenched the rebel angel's clothes and struck flame. His screams filled the tiny room as he stumbled backward, limbs flailing.

Remiel collapsed forward, but the fire had spread to him. His heavy armor had been splashed as well. Sariel screamed in terror as the blaze spread. She scrambled backward on her back until she was in the corner and could put no more distance between herself and the searing heat.

Cassiel acted swiftly. She dropped her crossbow and dove down next to her partner, who'd begun to cook in his own armor. She burned her hands reaching for the leather clasps that held it on, fumbling desperately for them as he writhed back and forth. She found one, then the other, and tore the flaming breastplate from his chest, tossing it across the room.

They lay on the floor then, sucking in shuttered breaths, and just like that, the apartment became horribly peaceful. The rebel's screams had died out as his charred remains smoldered across the room, leaving only Sariel's muffled sobs and their own ragged breathing.

Then Cassiel stood and helped her partner up. He stretched his exposed wings, which the Armed had learned over the years to tuck inside their armor, as the heavy plate made it impossible to fly, anyway. The skin on his chest and back had an unnatural red sheen spread across it.

He touched one of the burns on his chest and hissed. “Thanks, I think.”

Cassiel took the painter’s tarp from under the easel by the window and tossed it over the rebel’s corpse, dousing the flickering embers that still remained. She then approached the portrait from which their enemy had emerged and peered through its ruin – a tunnel led off into the darkness. She bit her lip.

Outside, a few other angels, drawn no doubt by the sounds of battle and pain, hovered a safe distance from the window, trying to peer inside.

“We need backup,” Cassiel said, staring uneasily back at the onlookers. “The whole Quarter is going to be over here soon. Are you okay to fly?”

Remiel folded and unfolded his wings. “I can be to the Citadel and back in no time. Will you be alright by yourself?”

Cassiel took a chair from the central table and planted it against the far wall, making sure both the front door and the entrance to the tunnel were in front of her. She drew her sword and sat. “Better hurry,” she said.

Remiel nodded and unstrapped the armor covering his legs. In just his tunic and linens, he rushed through the door and closed it behind him. Then, with a great swoop of his wings, he was in the air, sailing toward the Armed Quarter.

The crowd continued to gather outside. Cassiel could hear their whispers turn into mutters, and their mutters turn into murmurs. Soon they would be shouts.

“I had no choice,” Sariel whispered from the floor, holding herself in opposite corner of the room. “He was here when you knocked. They’ve been tunneling for months. That hole in my wall opened up in the middle of the night. They came through and held me down and... and threatened me... they said if I told anyone...” She broke down into sobs before she could finish. Cassiel remained silent.

By the time Remiel returned with more of their brothers, the crowd had become a mob. They shouted insults and questions to the soldiers as they landed, many voices becoming one unintelligible drone.

Five Armed guards formed a wall with their pikes and held the onlookers back as Remiel entered with their commander, Valtiel. He stood half a foot taller than the other angels and wore an ornately crafted set of white plate. Jet black hair flowed around a chiseled, hard face, continuing down over the huge shoulder plates he wore. Cassiel saw his eyes work the room as soon as he entered, taking in the burned corpse, the sniveling Sariel, the tunnel entrance, and finally, Cassiel herself.

He addressed her first. “This was your work?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, rising to attention.

“Excellent work.” He flared his nostrils and his stoic face briefly betrayed his disgust. The room smelled of cooked meat. “And what of this one?”

Sariel dared to meet the commander’s gaze for a brief moment before dropping her eyes to the floor.

“She claims the rebels forced her to keep this tunnel secret for them,” Cassiel said. Remiel wandered over to the tunnel and peered inside. “When we were inspecting the

house, she appeared to be trying to tip us off to its existence just before we were attacked, sir.”

“How noble of her,” Valtiel snorted. He called in two of the men outside. “Guard this tunnel entrance with your life. Nobody will go in or out until I return.” He then strode to Sariel, clasping an armored gauntlet around her arm, and jerked her to her feet. “This one will accompany us back to the Citadel.” He nodded down at the charred rebel. “Have that one scraped off the floor before I return.”

Cassiel knew what awaited the Artisan back at the Citadel. “Sir, I believe she may be telling the truth. This angel may have been no more than a victim of the rebel’s twisted plotting. She did attempt to restrain the enemy when he showed himself.”

“Your opinion has been noted, sister. Now come, you and your partner shall escort us home.”

“What have I done? I told you, they forced me to do it. I didn’t want to help them. I love the Father!” Sariel managed to cry out, clearly in pain from the commander’s crushing grip on her arm.

He looked at her, really looked at her for the first time since he entered, and she felt the weight of that gaze immediately. “You have given cause for the belief that you are at best a rebel sympathizer and abider, and at worst one of the scum yourself. I see little difference, in all honesty.”

“No, it’s not true!” She struggled in his grip, terrified. “What are you going to do with me?”

“Your friends have begun a practice of killing their fellow angels in cold blood. We, however, would never sink so low as to murder prisoners,” he jerked her toward the

door. “Fear not, you will not die. But you can feel pain. And you will. Only then will we have the real truth of things.”

Sariel broke at the thought of that, and the sobs began again. Valtiel dragged her through the front door of her home, her feet trailing behind.

Remiel and Cassiel exchanged glances. He shook his head, and they followed.

They took position behind Valtiel as the guardsmen pushed the crowd back with their pikes. Angry shouts erupted from the mob when they saw one of their own being dragged from her own home, and for a moment, Cassiel feared they might begin casting stones. Whether the sight of the six guards stopped them, or maybe just the presence of Valtiel himself, they managed not to cross that line.

With the cluster of Artisans safely behind them, the quartet returned to the staircase up to the battlements and journeyed on in silence. Sariel offered up the occasional whimper, but soon she too fell into a sullen quiet.

When they’d passed the Father’s Pinnacle, Cassiel looked down with a clear view of the Armed Quarter. Their home retained the strict standards of the old days in the city. Polished silver domes spotted the landscape. Smoke rose from many of them – the forges that crafted their armor and weapons. Other housed the barracks of her brothers, others still the war rooms of her superiors. The streets themselves shone silver, polished daily by the youngest angels. At the far end of the Quarter, overlooking the desert of the unknown, the Citadel towered above all the other buildings.

The Citadel had stood as a bastion in the Armed Quarter for millennia, serving as a training quarters for newly created angels. Everyone passed through it, but now, many

were returning. With the war raging on, no new training has commenced, and Valtiel commanded the Citadel be turned into a prison for captured rebels.

The Citadel proper was a smooth, windowless crescent shape at the top of a massive, slender shaft. The only way to reach the top was to enter the shaft at the ground level and fly to the top. Thus, all prisoners had their wings chained and weighted, ensuring their stay. One particularly vocal Artisan had jumped down the shaft in protest. Valtiel had what remained of him sent back up the shaft and left it there for a month to rot.

When they reached the entrance, two centurions stood guard at the gate, pikes crossed over the door. They cleared the way for Valtiel without his having to ask.

The commander turned to Remiel and Cassiel. "That tunnel may lead us straight to Lucifer himself. You've done your Father a great service this day. I expect nothing less from either of you." With that, he turned and disappeared into the Citadel, dragging Sariel at his heels.

Cassiel saw Remiel home and helped poultice his burns. They were painful, but a good night's sleep should see him back to full health, if he could get one. Cassiel wasn't so sure she would.

"The commander was right about you at least," he said as she tied off the last bandage. "You saved my life back there, I don't doubt it. You were the hero today."

"Thank you, partner," she said, resting her hands in her lap on his bedside. "But why don't I feel a hero?"

"What do you mean?"

“His screams, Remiel. They will haunt me for an eternity. I killed one of our brothers today. What kind of hero slays her own?”

“He was going to kill me, Cassiel, and then he was going to kill you. You did what had to be done. Those bastards are the ones that brought on these dark times, not us. Perhaps dark times call for a different kind of hero.”