

## CHAPTER ONE

He could feel the heat as his body plummeted; molecules of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon ignited around him as he approached the blanket of ebony clouds. His ethereal form began to change as tissue and flesh crawled across bones that had not been there moments before.

A heart that only just started beating was slowly enclosed by a hardened cage, while layers of muscle and skin sealed the precious organ in a sculpted chest. Skeletal fingers writhed in the pain of the transformation as nerves formed and were immediately exposed to the searing pain of the passing atmosphere. Cloudy eyes appeared underneath a curtain of eyelids, striking blue orbs that gained more and more clarity as time inched along.

The descent seemed to go on forever.

A mouth that had just formed lips grimaced through the torment, the roar of the wind muting any sound it could have made. The tan skin, despite the heat and debris that littered the air, seemed to glow. It rejected the burns that should have marred it. Instead, black markings began to appear on the delicate flesh, growing and twisting, forming ornate patterns and symbols.

The figure forced its eyes open, only for an instant. Just in time to bear witness as it crashed into the wall of darkness. Thunder roared as tongues of lightning kissed the newly formed body. The storm should have killed it, should have overloaded its nervous system, but it refused to give in. The rushing wind sounded like screams echoing in the darkness, begging it to join them in their anguish. A storm of ice and rain raged within the clouds, each drop like a bug biting its glowing skin but leaving no mark.

And then suddenly it was over. The naked body broke through the black clouds and could see once again. With each second, the being drew closer and closer to the ground. Its eyes watered as it strained to keep them open. With only a single breath left, it allowed itself the luxury of blinking.

The figure crashed into a forest of dead and withering trees, punching into the dirt like a bullet tearing into flesh. Earth and stones erupted into a plume of dust, forced outwards in a sphere that flattened the trees into a ring of barren wood. Amid the dust cloud, a shadow of a figure emerged. Tall, muscular, with cropped dark hair and tan skin, Uriel stepped out of the crater, rolling his stiff shoulders.

It was strange being on Earth once again. The experience was not a common one for an angel, but even less so for an archangel. He rubbed the stinging dust out of his eyes. Dirt was not something found in Heaven, and now he stood in a world that was covered with it. He felt a snug, metallic ring around his neck, perfectly smooth save for the finest of engravings. It was his halo, the symbol that he was a warrior of Heaven. It was a symbol he bore with pride.

But it was one that would have to be hidden if he wanted to survive and walk freely in this new Earth. Neither the archangel nor any of Heaven's denizens had any idea how the planet had been changed in the years after they lost the war. The black clouds of Hell obscured their vision from Heaven, a curtain that grew thicker with each victory the infernal hordes claimed. Merely breaking through the barrier had taken its toll on the angel. Uriel had only just arrived, and he

could barely steady himself.

The archangel glanced down at his physical body, no longer naked but fully clothed. His garments always manifested just as his body did, a transformation that still—even after thousands of millennia—was not fully understood by him. He found himself in sorry shape however, and already longed for the days when his physical form would boast shining plates of armor. Now he wore dark, near-tattered pants and a duster that almost went to his knees. It was light enough to fight in but would still protect his body from the elements. His boots were on the heavy side, at least for human footwear, as was the black leather vest that he wore over his chest.

*Some armor is better than none, he thought. But Heaven must be truly waning for this to be the best we have.*

At his hips were two knives with four sister blades on his belt at his back. On his left, Uriel's blade hung in its sheathe, completing the only physical weapons he brought with him. Even with his familiarity with the blades and the knowledge that they had tasted the flesh of countless demons, Uriel thought himself underequipped, as naked as when he had been falling. Humans had become voracious in their advancement of weaponry since he had last visited the planet. Compared to some of the technology and guns that they had created, Uriel's weapons seemed like relics.

He laughed at the mere thought of the weapons, that his Father would allow the humans to craft something that could kill even angels. Though it would take more than one shot to fell him, Uriel had no desire to join the nothingness that awaited his kind when they died, not when he finally had his chance to fight back against the creatures that ruled this new Earth.

He had his magic, too. He could heal and destroy, do things that humans could hardly fathom. But much of his power was drawn directly from Heaven, a connection that was, at best, flickering. The black clouds of Hell did not just shroud his vision, but anything holy. Uriel was oppressed under their smothering weight, his powers a fraction of what they should be. All of Heaven knew that the clouds enveloping the world were just one of the ways Lucifer secured his hold on the planet. Uriel still had some powerful abilities at his disposal, but he knew that he would be relying on his physical weapons more than his divine ones.

He could feel the tattoos that covered his body pulsing, trying to establish that link to his home, but to no avail. He realized then that those, too, would need to be covered. While his vestments already shrouded most of his body, his face was completely exposed. The archangel stooped down, grabbed the burnt dirt at his feet and wiped it on his face, creating a haphazard mask. He spat as some of it got in his mouth and wiped it away when it stung his eyes. It was a poor attempt at hiding the lines and patterns that crisscrossed his face, but it would have to do.

It was impossible to describe angels in their natural form. They just *were*. But when they descended to Earth they were very much physical, very much mortal. It made them vulnerable, but most compensated with martial and magical prowess. Though even that had not been able to save them from being overrun. The legions of Hell were too powerful. Heaven stood no chance in the war. Now, these long years later, this planet belonged to them.

There was no sun to guide his way or give him direction, just a reddish-grey light that permeated the world. It did not matter. Directions would be useless in a world where he knew nothing of its landscape. But Uriel could reach out all around him, using his angelic senses to detect nearby evil.

The archangel quickly discovered that, like his other abilities, his senses were dulled by the thick, black clouds hanging above. Any presence around him felt more like a fleeting shadow than a life. He could not focus on a single target, but something was nagging at his senses. Far

off in the distance he felt a great, radiating evil, stronger than the rest. Uriel figured that, if he wanted to learn about this new world, that dense evil would be as good a place as any to start.

The angel's feet crushed ancient leaves and desiccated branches as he walked through the skeleton of the forest, small cloudbursts of dirt and dust rising with each step. A brief thought crossed the angel's mind, and he wondered whether all the branches were indeed pieces of trees, not the bones of beasts, men or even his slain brothers and sisters. He forced the thought from his mind and focused on that which he knew for certain.

The forest was barren, but the shadows cast by the trees were unnaturally dark and encroaching. It presented both a blessing and a curse—the darkness allowed him to move without prying eyes observing his movement, but also prevented him from seeing anything that moved around him.

It was a far cry from what the planet was before the war. The world had once been lush and beautiful. Uriel would spend days gazing upon the beauty of his Father's creations, marveling in the vast oceans and sprawling countryside. Nothing was like that in Heaven. The denizens of Heaven were not physical beings and needed no such wonders. They only adopted a physical body when they descended to the more material realms.

As the skeletal trees began to thin and their dark shroud faded, Uriel realized he was reaching the edge of his cover. The closer he came to the threshold, the more the darkness that limited his vision weakened and his full sight returned to him. When he finally cleared the forest of skeletons, the angel emerged into a small town.

Or rather, what used to be a town. A handful of the buildings still stood, but most appeared to have been burned to the ground or smashed to pieces. A dirt road ran through the town, but both its entrance and exit seemed to have been reclaimed by the forest. Combined with its unnatural darkness, Uriel wondered how dead the forest really was—or if it too were some ravenous, dark organism. Any human taking refuge in the town would never be able to intentionally find their way out of the dark woodland, their starved and lost bodies inevitably becoming nutrients for the brush. The archangel was thankful that he had some sort of destination, that he could feel the evil in the distance.

He could not sense anything in the town, however, nor in the surrounding forest. He did not know how reliable his perception was yet, but he imagined that such ruins would not be home to anything more than rats. The archangel, as silent as the empty buildings he approached, walked into the town along its single dirt road.

*Had there been more?* the angel thought. *Has the darkness consumed all but these few buildings?*

It was possible, as Uriel could see only a half-dozen houses or their remnants, some sort of shop, and a broken building at the end of the road. No community could survive with so little, not with the hordes of Hell festering across the planet.

The archangel walked up to the first house he came to and peered inside. The occupants had left in a hurry. Uriel could still see dinnerware on the table, stained with the shadow of an old, rotted meal that had long since been abandoned. A pair of wineglasses sat upon the table, one toppled over at the foot of the other. The floor beside the table was stained and covered in mold growing from the contents of a bottle of wine that had rolled off and shattered years ago.

Through another window he saw toys scattered on the floor next to a couch and pictures of young children with their parents adorning the wall, all of them covered in a thick layer of dust. No violence had tainted this house, but Uriel could not help but wonder whether the occupants had made it far.

The next house painted a very different scene. The windows were covered with planks of wood, nailed from the inside. The door had been torn away from its frame, creating a jagged, splintered entrance. The angel stepped inside the building and was immediately shaken with sorrow.

Pictures and tables had been smashed and overturned in every room. A cabinet, toppled over, lay atop a crushed human skeleton, bony arms protruding from each side. Its skull, however, was nowhere to be found. In the kitchen Uriel discovered a skeletal arm, desiccated fingers still loosely grasping a meat cleaver. The archangel grimaced as he found the matching arm on the other side of the room, while the rib cage and a leg were perched atop the kitchen counter. The remaining leg, like the other body's head, was absent.

The archangel ascended the stairs to the second floor. He knew he was not going to find anyone up there but felt an urge to look nonetheless. The first bedroom did not show many signs of a struggle, save for the closet door lying in splinters, torn from its hinges.

The next room could not have been more different. Uriel guessed that it had once been painted a light blue, but much of the walls were covered in old, dried blood, giving them a cracked, reddish-brown coat. Claw marks were the only other decorations on the wall, but something else drew the angel's eye. On the small bed in the far corner of the room sat a pile of bones.

Treading carefully over the dried patches of blood and rotted flesh, Uriel approached the grisly mound and looked at the yellowed remains. He saw a combination of all sizes and body parts. A handful of skulls were mixed with femurs, ribs and hip bones. The angel nearly winced at the sight of the smallest of bones, limbs that could not have belonged to children more than a few years old. It was all he needed to see before he turned and left the macabre scene.

The remaining two houses looked much like the first, but with more signs of panic. All of the buildings had been coated in a thick layer of dust, and the angel knew that no one had lived in any of them for years. Every now and then the wind would rush through the dilapidated structures, creating the sound of a distant scream. Some noises were easily excused, the wooden panels of the houses straining as the air rushed through their seams. Others sounded too visceral, too panicked, for the archangel to find a logical explanation.

A small store sat across from the ruins of two houses. Uriel felt no need to examine the destroyed homes. Instead, he entered through the front door of the shop. A small bell announced him as he walked through. The inside of the building was also undisturbed, the aisles of shelves still stocked with cans of food. Anything not in cans had been eaten by vermin and scavengers years ago, their only memories manifested as black stains on shelves and stands. The store confirmed the archangel's suspicion that this town had not been looted. Whatever had come through here had the sole intention of spilling blood. Some supplies were missing, but the widespread looting that Uriel had witnessed during the first months of the war, before the planet was smothered in darkness, was not evident.

A ladder in the back room led to the roof of the store. After taking it two rungs at a time, Uriel opened a hatch to the outside. It was a concrete surface with a low wall enclosing the edge. Two vents protruded from the shop below, and something black nestled behind them drew Uriel's eye. He walked over and recognized the stock of a gun.

The archangel's heart skipped at the prospect of one of the weapons. His enthusiasm faded as quickly as it appeared, however, when the weapon came farther into view. It was the stock of a gun, the trigger and loading mechanism as well. But the other half of the gun was a metre away. The weapon, some sort of rifle, had been snapped in half by an inhuman force. Bullet

casings littered the ground around it, both large and small. At one time, there had been a second, smaller gun, but it was impossible to know how long ago it had been taken.

Sitting against the vent, hidden from the angel previously, was the body of a human, a man from the looks of the clothing that remained. Pieces of fabric and remnants of flesh still loosely clung to the bones, but he had been dead for a while. His rib cage had been smashed in, now only a hollow chasm in his chest. Demons, always finding ways of torturing humans, were fond of ripping out the hearts of their victims and consuming them in front of their prey. Claw marks on the low surrounding wall painted the picture enough for Uriel. He could almost see the terrible creatures climbing onto the roof, closing in on the panicked survivor.

One building was left for the angel to examine, so he simply stepped onto the small lip that enclosed the roof and dropped to the ground below. After landing on his feet, Uriel made his way to the final building. Its ruinous state made it difficult to recognize from a distance, but soon Uriel realized the structure for what it used to be.

The wood was charred and barely standing. The tall roof had collapsed in on itself, crushing the wooden pews inside. Shattered pieces of stained glass covered the ground, most of it burnt and blackened. Uriel walked through what was left of the scorched church, stepping over and ducking under the fallen beams. Many of the ashes had been blown away, but piles of debris and burnt bones remained in the corners and crevices of the broken holy site.

Only the far wall had been left standing, but the archangel's heart sank when he saw it. At the base of the wall were thousands of human bones from dozens of bodies, piling upwards towards the centre of the wall. At its apex was an unholy mockery—human bones tied together in the shape of an inverted cross. The bones appeared to have been smeared with blood at one point, but much of the dark substance, browned with age, had been worn away by time and the elements. All around the gruesome icon were derogatory slurs written in the same dried, chipped blood that the cross was coated in.

“Disgusting,” the angel whispered with malice. He could not leave such a tragedy standing.

Both angels and demons knew that an inverted cross did not carry any true meaning. It was a symbol that struck fear in all humans, regardless of their faith or their saints. It was a symbol of evil, one that was adopted, not created, by Hell. Nonetheless, it was an affront to Uriel's mission. It was an insult to the light he would bring to the world.

Being careful not to step on the fragile bones, Uriel moved as close as he could and gently removed the tragic icon from the wall. It was a slow process, but the angel did not want any of the bones to break. Though it might have been futile, Uriel knew that the dead needed to be respected, even if they had been in such a state for years. He lowered the makeshift crucifix to the ground and drew one of his daggers. The old ropes, weathered and aged, came away easily and the bones tumbled away from each other. Some of the ancient skeletal pieces crumbled when they hit the ground, but most stayed intact. Uriel moved the unbound bones back into the pile with the others and dropped to his knees on the charred wood in front of the mound.

The archangel pressed his hands together in front of his chest and began his whispered prayers. He spoke in Angelic, the tongue of angels, most of which was not even translatable to a human language. In the times before the apocalypse, such a prayer would carry all the way to Heaven and safely ferry the souls of the dead with them. The words of angels had a power of their own but were not nearly powerful enough to break through the black clouds that smothered the planet. It meant no souls had been taken to Heaven since they had lost the war.

The angel's eyes flashed open midprayer. How could he be so foolish? On this new Earth, under the black clouds, a prayer would be sensed by any of Hell's creatures that were nearby. Its

power was weak, but it would not go unnoticed. As if in response, he heard a piercing howl in the distance.

Hellhounds.

Alone the creature posed no threat to an angel. Even a pack would be hard-pressed to take down a lone warrior of Heaven. It was not the pack that he was worried about, however. It was the attention the beasts would draw. If a pack of hellhounds were to find him, other creatures would soon join in the hunt.

“Watch over us,” the angel finished in a human tongue. He rose to his feet and sprinted back into the forest, towards the great evil he felt. The infernal wolves were fast. He would just have to be faster.

## CHAPTER TWO

It had been hours since the archangel left the derelict town, but howls and snarls still bit at his heels. He had ventured once more into the smothering darkness of the forest and had taken off in the direction of the great evil he was sensing. The closer he came to the source, the more convinced Uriel became that this was not some single great entity. To be drawing him from this far away, the feeling was more like the dark resonance of tens of thousands of evil creatures.

Despite being able to sense the dense evil in the distance, the archangel struggled to detect individual entities around him. He heard the hellhounds chasing him through the forest, but he could not sense them. No matter how much he focused, no matter how much he extended his senses, it was as if he were blind.

Uriel's weakness under the black clouds worried him. He stopped in his tracks, listening for the encroaching pack. He thought he heard snapping branches and rustling fur in the darkness around him, but he could not be sure. The archangel readied himself for a fight, but none came. Whether the hounds were biding their time or if Uriel was just being paranoid, the angel did not wait to find out.

Without giving it another thought, Uriel sprinted off again. This time he pumped his legs even faster than before, leaping over thick, withered roots and bounding over creek beds that had long ago run dry. Dead branches scratched at his exposed face and grabbed at his long jacket, like skeletal fingers trying to hinder the angel's progress.

Uriel's physical body did not fatigue as quickly as any earthly being. Even infernal creatures could not match the endurance of an angel, save for maybe the most powerful of demons. Another hour passed before Uriel came to the edge of the dark arbors once more. The darkness faded as the reddish glow of the world filled his vision. Though it was nothing like the light of the sun, this low dim barely limited the angel's sight.

The ground was flat as far as the eye could see. The dying frames of trees became sparse and the dry, cracked ground peeked through the thinning blanket of twigs and debris. How the trees survived at all, even in their naked state, was a wonder to the angel. Much of the landscape appeared to be uniform in this new Earth. The land was dry and shattered, and the flora all appeared to be clinging to life. Few examples of natural wildlife were left. Anytime Uriel thought he saw a bird or small animal, he was disgusted when he noticed extra eyes, fierce fangs or any other multitude of hellish features. Even the lowly squirrel was replaced by some form of devilish rodent, its feet boasting wicked claws and spines lining its back. Nothing of this planet even resembled its former self.

Snarls came from behind him, but the hellhounds never revealed themselves from within the darkness. The beasts preferred to herd their prey and ambush it as a pack. Uriel stood confidently, defying them. It bought the archangel some time to think about his next step, but only a moment.

The angel realized that he had also been relying on the darkness of the dead forest, and he was completely exposed without it. Any wandering demon, infernal creature or flying monster would spot him in a heartbeat. The archangel rushed under a nearby copse of trees. The branches were bare, but so entangled in one another that they provided a sufficient canopy from above, and the trunks were able to adequately hide his muscled form.

Normally, the archangel would take this small rest to list off a short prayer, a small message back up to Heaven. But considering the effects of his last effort, Uriel opted against it. Instead, he closed his eyes and focused as hard as he could, trying to pinpoint the location of the evil presences around him. Hundreds of years ago, the angel would be able to at least discern the general location of an entity, though the exact number and size of the beasts would be unknown to him. With his connection to Heaven limited, the once-easy feat was now hampered.

Still, the concentration of evil, though a long way off, was vibrant in his mind. Never before had Uriel encountered so many dark beings in one place. The archangel concentrated again, trying to gauge the distance between himself and the cluster of evil. His mission was to renew the fight on Earth, to rally whatever humans or angels might still be alive. It was impossible for him and the rest of Heaven's angels to formulate a cohesive plan on the other side of those black clouds, but if Uriel could find some allies, perhaps they could break through the ebony ceiling. If any angel could do it, it was Uriel. Now that he was under the weight of the black clouds, though, such a feat seemed impossible. Still, if they could open a passage to Heaven, then they might get a second chance at redeeming themselves.

He was suddenly interrupted by another pang in his mind, one that he had not felt for many years. The feeling was not a warning, not an indicator of something evil. It was a feeling of something good, something...innocent.

A child.

Uriel recognized the warmth of innocence. But he found it hard to believe that a human child could survive amid all this carnage. Even if it was protected by others, raising a child in this world would be costly. Suddenly, Uriel was less concerned about the evil in the distance and more concerned with this single spark of innocence.

He would have to find the child quickly; though most hellish creatures did not have the same perception that angels did, few places existed where a child or group could effectively hide in the desolate fields and dying forests that Uriel had seen.

The child's presence was in the same direction as the great evil that Uriel felt, which could have masked the soul's pure nature. Uriel glanced around, making sure no eyes were on him, and began dashing from cover to cover. The pace was agonizingly slow.

His movements became hastier when he entered another graveyard of trees. He could feel the emanations of innocence without effort now, its source just beyond the ghastly wooden corpses. Through the trees he could see the outline of what appeared to be a small cottage, two stories tall but in dire need of repair. Pieces of siding hung off the walls and the roof sagged along the side closest to Uriel. It looked as if it could collapse at any moment, yet it was more of a haven than Uriel had seen since leaving the abandoned town.

Still, the sight gave Uriel pause. How could a group of humans and a child survive out here? Surely demons would have checked the solitary building. And once the demons caught the scent of a child, they would be relentless in their pursuit of it. It did not matter to the archangel though, not now. If humans were in the house, they would undoubtedly be happy to see an angel. If Uriel was wrong...

He couldn't be. The archangel refused to believe anything else.

With a quick glance around and to the sky, Uriel dashed for the house. With every step he took, something else bit at his senses. Something about this house was wrong, something that the archangel couldn't see. It felt solid enough as he flattened himself against its side, taking what little cover he could. The walls seemed to hum with some sort of power, but Uriel could not tell if it was malign or not.



The archangel ignored the warning bells in his mind. A child was inside! He could take care of whatever dangers might present themselves.

Uriel glanced at one of the windows but found it boarded up from the inside. The same was said for its twin farther down the wall, but a quick scan revealed the windows on the second floor to be free of any barricades. The archangel considered climbing up and through one of the windows, but the state of the wall in front of him made him doubt he could do so quietly. Silently, he continued around the house, looking for other ways inside.

He spotted a door around the back of the cottage and crept over to it, hiding as much of his lean, muscled frame as he could. The dirt and sharp, brown grass around the doorway showed signs of travel, most of it going down towards a dried ditch or creek that disappeared in the flat landscape.

With another quick glance around, the angel slowly turned the doorknob, alarmed to find it unlocked but relieved to maintain some measure of stealth. The angel slipped through the door, closing it quietly behind him. As he stepped into the house, Uriel realized that it was not only a physical threshold he was crossing but some other kind as well, something not of this world.

The archangel drew one of his daggers, its blade pointed down as he crept through what seemed to be the kitchen of the decrepit house. The building was in dire need of repair and, from what Uriel understood about humans, was barely hospitable. Decrepit wallpaper hung loosely on the walls, and it appeared that the walls had been vandalized before or during the war.

A quick inspection revealed disturbances in the dust and dirt that clung to the floor and other surfaces in the room. The marks on the floor—mud tracked in from the outside—showed two sets of footprints. The smaller footprints clearly belonged to a child, but they were mixed among larger boots as well. Was someone protecting the child? Or was something keeping it for a more sinister reason?

Uriel remained tense. He could not sense another human within the house. Even with some sin, almost every human had an innocence within their soul that the angel should be able to sense, especially within such close proximity. If a human was in the house, or any other creature for that matter, it was intentionally hiding its presence from angels.

Uriel used the fingertips of his free hand to open a large pantry, making sure no unwanted guests were within. All he found were mostly bare shelves, stocked with just a handful of cans. Some of them were already opened and empty. The archangel had turned to leave the kitchen when he heard a creak from above him. Uriel sprang into action, drawing a second dagger and rushing through the rooms on the first floor of the house until he found the stairs. Leaping up two and three at a time, the angel quickly ascended to the top floor.

He slowed again, peeking into each room as he passed. The sound he heard came from the room farthest down the hallway. As he crept closer, he felt something new, something that the archangel vaguely recognized. It seemed like a contained evil, a feeling that might emanate from a lowly demon, but something was smothering it. And it was next to the child. He could clearly sense that now. Whatever it was, every bit of Uriel's instinct considered it a threat to both him and the child.

Finally, the archangel reached the last door in the hallway. His hand reached out, only to find that this door was locked. He cringed at the noise the doorknob made, ruining whatever element of surprise he may have had. It did not matter now. He had to act. Uriel positioned himself in front of the door, tightened his grip on his blades and kicked the wooden barrier. The rotted frame easily gave way under his foot and the door swung open. He heard a sharp twang from the room, just enough warning for him to jerk out of the doorway in time to see an arrow

fly past him, embedding itself in the wall behind where he had been standing. The arrow just grazed him, cutting through the sleeve of his loose jacket without touching his skin.

The angel scolded himself for his haste. He was one of Heaven's most skilled warriors but had barely avoided the simplest of ambushes. No doubt his adversary had another arrow aimed at the door, which made it difficult for Uriel to storm in. And whatever *it* was, it was still right next to the child, making any assault dangerous. It also stopped him from flooding the room with divine fire.

"Please, I mean you no harm," Uriel said loud enough for whoever was in the room to hear. "I merely want to ensure the child's safety."

"The kid's fine. Now leave us alone!" came the reply, a female voice.

The assurance was not satisfactory for the angel. Some panic was in that voice, and panic could make her dangerous.

"Please, just allow me a moment. I promise my intentions are only good," the angel insisted.

"Get the fuck out of here, or the next arrow goes in your throat."

Uriel could tell that he was not going to make any progress here. He could do nothing for fear of harming the child, but he was the Fire of God. And with that fire came light, a divine, heavenly source of brilliance. The angel was still wary of using any magic, but he needed to make sure the child was all right. Any consequences could be dealt with later.

Back against the wall, he sheathed one of his blades and moved his hand into the doorway, palm facing into the room. With a thought, white light erupted from the angel's hand, filling the room with a blinding flash. Uriel waited a brief second, long enough for the predictable arrow to fly through the door, before he entered the room and moved around its edge. The archangel recognized various human furniture: a bookshelf, a bed, a dresser. From the faded paint and colors throughout the room, he reasoned that it had belonged to a young girl. It was by no means a large room, but Uriel still wanted to distance himself from the child and the female presence. Before whoever the woman was could recover, the angel toppled the bookshelf onto its side to use as cover.

"Damn angels!" cried the female voice.

Uriel's interest was piqued. Clearly this was not the first time she had met a warrior of Heaven.

"Yes, I am an angel," Uriel said, trying to prove his intentions. "I am a friend. Please, let me make sure everything is okay." The suppressed evil Uriel had sensed before seemed to grow stronger, but still something restrained it. Uriel could feel divine energy gathering in his hands, ready to fight for this child's life if he needed to.

"Friend? You think we have friends?" the voice scoffed. "Angels, demons, humans. You're all the same."

"Go away!" came a second female voice, this one much younger. The voice of a child.

"Please, I come in the service of our Father." Uriel was relieved to hear the child, even if it protested his presence.

"God isn't our father," the older voice stated, hesitating before continuing. "He couldn't give less of a shit about us."

After a moment's thought, Uriel tossed the dagger he held onto the floor, away from him, a gesture of surrender. "Please, I simply wish to speak." The angel began to stand, hoping whoever this was would not shoot another arrow at him. It would not kill him, but the angel had felt the sting of arrows before, and it was not an experience he wished to repeat.

Tentatively, the female voice replied. "Fine. But come any closer and you're dead."

Uriel did not know whether the voice spoke the truth, but no more arrows came his way.

The archangel turned and viewed the pair in full for the first time. The child was young, but Uriel was not a good judge of human age. She had long blonde hair that might have been curly if it had not been dirty and matted. Striking blue eyes shone from a pale complexion. She was skinny, but not sickly so. In a world so inhospitable, the child seemed to be surviving. The angel smiled.

Uriel's eyes then shifted to the other figure. She was taller, with deep, black hair but the same pale complexion. The angel guessed that she was maybe two decades old, but her hardened expression and demeanor belied an experience beyond her years. Her face was sharp, her expression hardened. The way the woman stood, protectively in front of the child, told the angel that she was the reason this girl had survived for so long. But then her eyes met his, and Uriel saw their striking red color. Rage swelled within the angel as he recognized the creature for what it truly was.

"Demon spawn!" he roared as he drew a dagger once more, his own eyes turning an unnatural white.

The creature, a cambion Uriel now knew, hissed at the angel and drew a knife of her own. The knife belonged in a kitchen but looked sharp nonetheless.

"Stop!" the blonde child screamed.

Uriel's rage subsided when he realized that she clung tightly to the leg of the cambion. "Give me the child," Uriel commanded, "and I may spare your life."

"You touch her, you die," the beast said coldly. The creature was half-demon, half-human, the product of an unholy union. Despite its human appearance, the thing fueled an innate anger within Uriel.

"Bringing the girl back to your wretched father?"

"You don't know a thing about our father!"

The cambion's words confused the archangel, and not for the first time. "I'm not like them. I'm not one of those fucking animals."

A tear trailed from the corner of her eye, and her arm tightened around the young girl. Not the tightening grasp of a predator securing its prey, but a protective hold. She held the knife out defensively, protecting both her and the human child. Uriel could see the weapon trembling in her hand. The cambion truly cared about the girl.

Uriel did not trust the monster, could barely stand to look at it, but he sheathed his blade. If for nothing more than the sake of the child, the archangel held out his empty palms.

"All right, demon, you have your chance."

The cambion visibly relaxed. Her shoulders dropped, but her knife remained in her hand.

"Tell me why you protect this child, and why she has survived when so many others have died."

"Well, the second part's easy," the woman explained. "As you so politely pointed out, I am not entirely...human. The demon in me, the monster, is vile. But it's gotten us this far. This darkness is just like any other demon. It's strong. I may not be as powerful as you, or even like actual demons, but I can survive. We have been for seven years."

The cambion motioned to the window, and Uriel's eyes followed, just for a second. He only now realized that a blood sigil was on it. In fact, Uriel remembered that it was not the first one he had seen in the house. They had been on the walls and windows downstairs, but he had mistaken them for vandalism in his haste. He was so set on saving the child that he had not even thought to look for any sort of rune.

“These hide us from the demons and those other things. They completely hide the house. Apparently, it doesn’t work on angels, though.”

“Why hide from them? You are like them. Hell would willingly call itself your home.”

“I’m nothing like them!” the cambion yelled. “You don’t think I’ve tried? You think I haven’t tried to find something—*anything*—safer than this? They beat me, did awful, terrible things to me. I wanted them to kill me, but that wouldn’t have been as fun for them.” The cambion wrapped her arms around the little girl, who looked as if she was going to cry. “We’ve been through more than any sisters should. All because of who—of what—our father is.”

“What do you mean *our*?” Uriel asked, looking at the child. The creature had made the claim more than once, but there was no way a demon sired such innocence.

The cambion sat on the bed, guiding the small girl with her. “Sit, angel,” the creature said, motioning to the overturned bookshelf. “Let me tell you exactly what we are. Maybe I can convince you to spare us.”

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“Years ago, before this all began, before either of us were born, there was a woman. She was perfect, the envy of all who ever laid eyes upon her. She was blessed with beauty—golden curls that danced as she walked, piercing blue eyes that were so gorgeous you could only look at them for a few seconds. Anymore and you would find yourself feeling unworthy of the sight. She was a tiny creature, delicate and soft.

“Despite how she radiated beauty, she refused the approaches of each and every man, waiting for the one she knew must be coming. You see, she was an extremely devout woman. She prayed every night to a God who would soon turn His back on the world, praying that one day she would find the soul that was praying to find hers just as hard. And so great was her beauty that all men, even those she turned away, still loved her, for her kindness and compassion extended to everyone. If anyone were deserving of having their prayers answered, it was her.

“But one evening, when she finished praying, something else, something terrible answered. It was that night that the war between Heaven and Hell began. She heard screams and cries of pain from outside her window as death spilled onto the streets. She dared to steal a glance and saw the carnage of angels and demons, humans and monstrosities, all tearing each other to pieces. The roads ran red with the blood of the people she loved, wet like the tears that fell from her eyes as they witnessed the end of the world.

“She ran, terrified, trying to find some place that was safe from the violence. Still, every night she prayed. Every night, God continued to ignore her prayers as the legions of Heaven were obliterated. Not all hope was lost, though. She managed to find some familiar faces. People who remembered her kindness and generosity, people who took her in. For years they survived, their numbers slowly dwindling until there were only a handful of them left. Nowhere was safe. Each night was spent in fear, every day running.

“Late one night, while she slept, a legion of demons descended upon the small group. They slaughtered without mercy, reveling in the orgy of blood and pain. But they did not kill her. How could they? With her beauty, even after the carnage of the apocalypse, they could not bring themselves to waste such a prize. Instead, they used her as an example, to mock the God that had given her these looks. They cut her and burned her. They tore at her flesh and made her scream until her throat was raw. But it still wasn’t enough. The leader of the demons leaned down to her swollen, unrecognizable face and heard her murmuring, praying to God in hopes that, somehow,

He would protect her. The demon laughed in her face, then whispered in her ear, 'I have a message for your almighty God.' He laughed as he raped her, laughed at her broken body, laughed upwards at God, who created such a beautiful woman that was now nothing more than a demon's plaything.

"They did not kill the woman. They left her there, broken and crippled. For days she lay in the pool of blood and bodies left in the horde's wake. But the whole time she felt it, a darkness growing inside her, and she knew that she carried the demon's seed. So, there she stayed, waiting to die, not capable of moving or even opening her eyes. Then, just as she was about to give in, to let death come for her like it had for everyone she had ever known, she felt something.

"She couldn't explain it, but it was warm, and it was good. She felt it draw closer and closer, and the thing in her womb stirred at its presence. She managed to whimper a noise, sounding almost like the 'hello' she was hoping for. Suddenly, she felt warming hands on her bruised and bloodied flesh. She tried to open her eyes, but they were swollen shut. The grim thought of whether she even had eyes anymore dawned on her. 'Do not worry,' said a gentle voice, 'I am an angel of the Lord.'

"The woman would have smiled, but each breath seemed like a conscious effort. 'Your suffering is over now,' the voice continued, 'I can fix you if you so desire. But know that the demon who defiled you left his seed. It has conceived twins, two half-human, half-demon children inside of your body. If I heal you, the creatures will likely kill you as you give birth. Which, judging from their maturity, is imminent.'

"The voice hesitated before giving an alternative option. 'However, you have another choice. I can attempt to purify the children, rid them of their demonic essence. They will still be born in a matter of hours, and you will probably die from the strain of birth, but they will be your children, and I promise they will be left in the care of one of my angels.' The woman felt the embryos roll and kick inside her as the angel tried to comfort her, his warm hands gently brushing her disfigured cheek. 'We are isolated from Heaven, though. I'm sorry but I simply do not have the power to heal you and purify them. The choice is yours.'

"The woman had already made her decision. She was tired of the agony that she had endured here on Earth. She knew that she could take no more. The woman moved her broken arm so her hand rested on her stomach. The sheer size of it would have shocked her if she was not about to offer up her life. With all the force she could muster, she whispered out a dry 'Save them' to the angel.

"The angel lowered her back to the ground, and she could feel as he moved his warm, comforting hands towards her abdomen. A soft trickle of heat began coursing through her veins. Through her sealed eyelids she thought she saw a dim glow. It endured for a few brief seconds and then it was done. She tried speaking again, but it was tough. 'Did...work?' she managed to ask. The angel's voice seemed more hesitant this time. 'Yes. It seems like it has. Now we wait.'

"They didn't have to wait long. The birth began within a few hours. She knew that there were many angels now, all listening to the one who had spoken to her. They all surrounded her, comforting her with warm touches and all but numbing her through the pain of the birth. She could feel her body growing weaker as she brought those two children into the world. The first birth happened relatively easily, though she hardly felt anything with the angels' warming hands.

"The second child, however, was different. As she felt it come out of her, there was a sudden sense of alarm. She heard one of the angels shout 'Monster!' as he withdrew his hand from her. The now familiar sound of a sword being drawn rang in her ears. The other angels, just as panicked, seemed to jump away, not necessarily from the woman, but from something else. And,

as the warming touch of the angels disappeared, the woman felt a flash of tremendous pain as every cut, bruise and tear ignited in agony. It was only for a brief second, however, and it was the last thing she ever felt.”

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“And that is how I killed my mother, simply by being born,” finished the cambion.

The story more than intrigued Uriel, both for the slight amount of compassion it stirred inside of him for this creature, and for the angel that had attempted to purify both children. It was obviously successful; Uriel could feel the innocence radiating from the girl sitting next to the half-demon, but it was a feat that was nearly impossible.

Usually when cambions were conceived, the children were birthed in secret, and the gestation period was so short that angels, even if they knew about it, would have little time to react. He had only witnessed a single purification of a cambion embryo before and had heard of only a few others. Each one had been performed by the same angel, an archangel no less—one of his brothers, an angel that was created with the very essence of their Father. Only a few of the archangels were left, Uriel knew.

“This angel that assisted your mother...did he have a name?”

“Well, I’m sure he did,” the woman answered sarcastically, “but I never learned it, nor did my mother.”

“And how do you know that? How do you know anything about your mother if your birth killed her?” Uriel immediately looked to the child. He should have picked his words more carefully, for her sake. The young girl seemed unphased at the mention of her mother’s death.

“When I was growing inside her, the demonic part of me peered into her soul,” the cambion replied. “I learned her every memory, fault, desire and regret. I knew her as if I was her, and those memories never faded. My sister does not remember, since the demon in her was destroyed and her human brain was too immature.”

Uriel examined the two girls, the cambion maybe better described as a woman now. They very well could have been twins, but they looked separated by over a decade. Little was known about cambions, but Uriel knew that they matured at a much faster rate than humans. He saw that they truly cared for one another. The only fear that emanated from the human girl was caused by his own presence.

He noticed how dirty and hurt both of them were, with bruises and small cuts on their faces and arms. This house, this world, was no place for a child. Uriel sighed, his lips curling into a smile.

“Both of you look like you’ve been through far too much. Perhaps I can offer some aid?” The angel spread his empty hands in front of him. He still did not trust the cambion, but she did not seem to be a threat, and Uriel knew he could at least try to earn their trust. He knew nothing of this infernal world and, as much as he hated to admit it, needed assistance. “Please, let me do what I can to heal you—both of you. As a sign of good faith.”

The cambion’s face shifted as she debated whether to trust the angel. “And then you’ll get the hell out of here?” She looked him dead in his eyes as she said it.

“And then we will talk some more. I promise no harm will come to you or your sister.” The last word was forced out of the angel’s mouth. “I am an angel of the Lord. I would not lie when it comes to this child.”

The woman thought over his words. It was difficult for the archangel to keep his hatred in

check. He held no love for this creature or her ilk, but the girl was a human, so he would not harm her.

“Okay,” the cambion finally agreed. “You’re in luck. The sigils on the walls will prevent anyone outside of here from noticing you.”

Uriel felt a small sense of relief hearing that and had the slightest temptation then to just obliterate the cambion where she was. But the more he thought about it, the more the archangel realized that he could use her help. The smiting could wait—there would be no shortage of monstrous creatures to destroy.

The angel slowly rose and advanced towards where the pair was sitting, his palms in front of him and facing up. He was not gifted with healing, far from it, but little cuts and bruises, fractured bones and simple illnesses were all within his abilities to mend. When he was within arms’ reach of them, his hands glowed a soft yellow.

“Please, place your hands in mine,” the angel said, offering his open palms.

The cambion and the child complied, holding each other’s hands and placing their free ones in his own. Uriel watched as the sisters began to glow, starting with their hands, then up their arms. The soft yellow light soon flooded over their entirety. After a few brief seconds, the glow faded. Uriel witnessed as the cuts, bruises and dirt that marred their skin vanished. The two looked refreshed and rejuvenated. The archangel, his innate hatred for the cambion somewhat lessened after her tale, was still curious.

“How did you survive after your birth?” he asked the half-demon. “It is doubtful the angels would have allowed you to live.”

“Thank whichever one of you tried to purify me,” the cambion replied. “Somehow, when he was working his magic, the souls of my sister and I became entangled, as if the demon did not want to let go of either of our souls. The angel realized this and told the others that if one of us dies, the other would, too. Whether or not he was telling the truth, I have no idea. But it saved my ass, so I’ll go with it.”

Uriel had never heard of such a thing before, but he was certain that the angel who attempted the purification was Raphael, one of his brothers, and he trusted his word. “But you were simply infants. How did you survive?” the archangel inquired further.

“The angel that saved us was the leader of the group. He ordered one of the other angels, Hadriel, to look after us. For five years he took care of us. He killed any who came near us and raised us like...like a father, I guess.” There was pain in the cambion’s voice.

Uriel knew Hadriel—or rather, knew of him. He was one of Raphael’s followers, an angel of great power and knowledge. Knowing that Hadriel was present at the purification attempt gave Uriel more hope that Raphael was still alive. But that was seven years ago. A lot of angels lost their lives in that time.

“And where is Hadriel?” Uriel asked, hoping he could get more assistance than this half-demon.

“He died, protecting us. A witch and her familiar found this house. Neither Hadriel’s power or mine hid us from her. She broke in and used her magic to kill him. She tried to do the same to me, but their magic doesn’t have the same effect against a half-demon. My knife worked fine against her, though. I butchered her and her pet and tossed what was left of them in the creek behind the house. I hope something ate the bitch.”

Uriel’s heart sank at Hadriel’s fate, though he was not surprised. The number of angels left on Earth would pale in comparison to the legions that descended during the onset of the war. The archangel noticed the young girl playing with something in her hair.

Uriel realized that both she and the cambion had a feather, the color of fallen snow, tied into their golden and raven locks. It was an angelic custom, to keep a feather of a fallen brother or sister in remembrance. It made Uriel think, just for a moment, that maybe he had jumped to conclusions too quickly.

He certainly could not kill her, not if it also killed the child, but maybe they could help him. If Raphael were still alive, Uriel wanted to find any other angels that he could rally to his rebellion.

"Maybe I judged you too hastily, cambion," Uriel said, a hint of shame in his voice. "I am Uriel, an Angel of His Presence and an archangel of Heaven. May I ask what your names are?"

The cambion's eyes widened at the introduction. She did her best to maintain her composure upon discovering Uriel's true nature. "An archangel, huh? Well, I'm Shandra, and this is—"

"Elena!" the little girl chimed in, speaking for the first time since Shandra had told her story.

Uriel knew that he had terrified her, but he was glad to see that both of them were beginning to relax around him. Maybe not the cambion, Shandra, who seemed even more shaken after learning exactly what Uriel was.

"Hello, Elena, it's very nice to meet you." Uriel was better at handling a blade than speaking with human children. They were almost too innocent for him to fathom. He turned to Shandra. "I have been sent from Heaven. I am to renew the fight against the plague of darkness that has consumed this world."

The cambion laughed a sharp, sarcastic noise. "A bit late for that, don't you think? The world has gone to shit, and you think that one angel will change anything? Your whole army failed. How will one choirboy succeed?"

Uriel was not pleased with her tone or sarcasm, but he chose to ignore it. "It was our Father's plan. I shall not question it. If it is my duty to turn the tides of battle, then I shall not falter." Uriel was a skilled fighter, as much as any of his brothers, but open warfare was always his preference. The archangel was good at destroying things, plain and simple. "But I will need help."

Shandra paused, studying the angel. "With what? What could I possibly do for 'an angel of the Lord'?" the cambion sneered.

"I do not know this land, nor the denizens that walk it. Lucifer's power is so great that he has blocked our view from Heaven. I need someone who knows the area and the powers that rule here. Surely Lucifer cannot control it all himself."

"Everyone knows that the demon lords rule like warlords around here, constantly fighting each other. Botis owns this area. That snake is pathetic, though. How he clings to his power is beyond me. His demons swarm his territory like bugs. I don't know how many he actually has."

Uriel nodded. Suddenly the dense evil in the distance made sense to the archangel.

The archangel recognized the name Botis; Uriel knew almost the entirety of the hierarchy of Hell. It was frequently his job to council Gabriel and Michael when they would combat their forces. He agreed with Shandra. Botis was an earl of Hell, but by himself was not powerful. He was a fighter of some skill, but any angel worth their wings would be more than a match for him. He was a leader for his knowledge and intellect, and Lucifer supplied him with sixty legions of demons.

Before the war started, he would have had hundreds of thousands of the creatures at his personal disposal. With the black clouds that hovered above them, not even the host of Heaven knew how many demons were still under his control. And whatever number was left did not include the various creatures and tainted humans that would also follow Botis. Uriel felt a pang



of sorrow knowing that there may even be Fallen angels among the earl's ranks.

If Botis was alive, he would have an army. He would have a kingdom that he ruled over. That meant he would have a palace where they would reside. That had to be the darkness he felt at the edge of his mind. The archangel finally realized how intimidating his task was.

"Get me to Botis's stronghold. That is all I ask of you," Uriel said to Shandra. Her knowledge of the land would be invaluable to him. "After that, I will leave you and your sister alone."

The half-demon weighed the angel's words. Uriel was worried she might say no. "Okay, choirboy, I'll tell you what: I'll lead you there, and even help you get to Botis himself. But the witch that killed Hadriel was one of Botis's, so I get to slit that bastard's throat myself."

## CHAPTER THREE

Uriel gave the two sisters the night to sleep. Even if Shandra was a cambion, she still needed some rest. The archangel had no doubt that his sudden appearance took its toll on her, and what he was asking her to do for him was no small endeavor. She would have to leave her sister behind and journey with an angel she had just met, one she was not sure she could trust. The feeling was mutual, but Uriel had few options available.

The sisters spent the night in the same room where Shandra had conveyed her story earlier. Uriel took the time to fix the room as best he could—righting the bookshelf, readjusting one of the legs of the decrepit, warped bed frame—and then left the sisters alone.

They did not leave the room, save for once when the half-demon had come down, alone, to retrieve a can of food for the pair. She refused to make eye contact with the archangel, only sneaking a glance when she thought he was not looking. Uriel, still wary of the woman who was sired by a demon, remained vigilant. He tried to pass off a relaxed, at-ease look by pretending to examine the runes on the wall. By the way the cambion looked at him, he did not think he was accomplishing the look he wanted.

There was no sun to set, but it seemed night in this new world was marked by the very air around them growing darker as the pale red glow of the day gave way to the shadows of night. Uriel stood in the dust-covered kitchen, back door ajar as he scanned the new world. If Shandra was correct, the runes plastering the walls of the house would shield him from view, even if he stood in the doorway.

While the day seemed to be crawling with all sorts of strange and hellish creatures, the world buzzed with activity when the red glow of the day faded. Bestial shrieks and the flapping of thick, leathery wings could be heard from his kitchen outpost, though even his enhanced sight could not find the creatures that loomed in the darkness.

His blind sentry all but useless, Uriel quietly closed the back door. He turned his attention in earnest to the markings that covered the walls. Hadriel had clearly been a master of the mystical symbols, a specialty that was not in Uriel's repertoire. He examined them as best he could, noting that some of the runes were Angelic, symbols that he had seen before in Heaven and during previous wars with Hell. It might have been in his mind, but the symbols seemed to radiate a warmth. They reminded the archangel of how it felt to be in Heaven, how much better that ethereal plane was compared to this new Earth.

There were other runes, however, that did the exact opposite. The sharp, jagged lines of Infernal script were a sharp contrast to the flowing curvature of its Angelic counterpart. Where the heavenly runes emanated warmth, the hellish ones felt cold, as if they were pulling the energy from the air around them.

Hadriel had clearly been skilled in runecraft, but Uriel would have been surprised if the angel had been well versed in the Infernal script. There was a half-demon just above him, the archangel reminded himself. Perhaps Shandra had some insight into Infernal runes. Whether she innately did or not, it was clear that Hadriel had passed his craft on to Shandra. There were clear differences in style and finesse, but Shandra had to have a strong grasp on the art if they had survived this long.

One rune in particular drew the angel's interest. It was one he had seen many times before,

especially on angels who specialized in stealth and secrecy. The symbol was simple, even by Uriel's standards, but it was the rune that allowed minor spells and abilities to be used without detection. As an archangel, Uriel carried an aura of power that was almost tangible, like the heat of his inner fire. Not only could this rune shroud that aura, but it would allow him to cast some of his lesser powers. It was not much, but it was a start.

There was more to runecraft than just the drawing of the symbol, however. Uriel's body was covered in tattoos of various runes and markings, each one pulsing rhythmically as it tried to establish a link with Heaven. Like an angel's own power, the tattoos drew much of their strength from Heaven. Now, with the blanket of Lucifer's power overhead, they were limited in what they could do. But the archangel needed access to some of his abilities, so he had to try.

Uriel brandished one of his daggers, its silver steel somehow managing to glint off the tiniest light in this new, dark world. It was designed for the archangel to wield with deadly efficiency or throw with lethal precision. Its point, like its sister blades along his waist, was more a voracious steel fang than a blade.

Uriel pulled his tan, muscled arm from within his jacket, exposing his light brown skin and the swirling tattoos that covered it. The dagger bit into his skin easily, the wound glowing a soft blue as the archangel channeled some of his power into the blade. His magic imbued itself into the lines he drew, immediately scarring the wound as Uriel mimicked the symbol in front of him. No blood seeped from the carving, though there was some discomfort.

When it was done, Uriel examined his handy work. It was crude, for sure, but it would do. This rune was the only marking on his body that he drew himself. The tattoos were usually done by the steady hands of those angels whose talent allowed them to work the ink like experts. It was also the only symbol that was a scar, rather than the deep ink that danced on his skin. He did not feel any different, but was confident in his work nonetheless.

After looking over the house once more, hoping for any other runes he might recognize but finding none, Uriel lay down on a couch that erupted with dust under his weight.

*Dust*, the archangel thought bitterly. *Does it have to be everywhere in this world?* He wiped the small particles out of his eyes and sneezed when it got in his nose.

The rest of the night passed slowly. Uriel refused to let any kind of thoughts enter his mind, refused to speculate on what his journey ahead of him held. He did not want to think about how much the world had changed, or how daunting his mission seemed to be.

Instead, he closed his eyes and prayed. With his makeshift rune cloaking his voice and its power, the words were calming. Each syllable relaxed his muscles and eased his mind. At one point a vision came to him, though not one he was expecting. If anything, he thought his reverie would bring images of Heaven, memories of times before the apocalypse. But he could not have been more wrong.

Instead his mind was assailed by shifting mountains, fracturing earth and plumes of fire. The sky itself seemed to be ablaze as molten rock erupted from geysers in the ground. The sky was not the black of this new Earth, nor was it the blue of the old one. It was as if there was no sky at all, and Uriel could see, between the erupting lava and billows of black smoke, entire galaxies floating above him.

Then, suddenly, he could feel it—all of it. His nerves screamed in agony as his skin felt like it was ablaze. The archangel's flesh blistered and ruptured, his blood and other liquids steaming and evaporating as they leapt from the wounds in his body. The lava that danced all around him began to plaster his skin, making him scream as it melted his muscles. Then the molten rock cooled, hardening into black and grey stone that encased his body.

The archangel could not find the strength to move, but at least the stone shell protected him from the heat all around him. That is, until his body began to warm from the inside, as if the magma were there as well. He could feel it rising within him, seeping out the thin crack that was his mouth and drooling onto his stone chest.

The archangel almost shouted in pain as he opened his eyes and sat up, back in the relative safety of this hellish world. He looked around and was relieved to see that he was still in the house shared by the sisters, still on the dusty couch that seemed to release another cloud of dust at his sudden movement. In his right hand, Uriel gripped his sword, still sheathed, by its golden grip. The weapon felt hot to the touch, almost unbearably so. He dropped the covered blade to the wooden floor and stared at his palm. What had just happened?

Uriel spent the rest of the night going over the images again and again in his mind, but no insights revealed themselves. It was only when he heard the house groan in response to footsteps above him that he was shaken from his thoughts. A few moments later, and after more than once hearing a childish giggle echo from above, Uriel saw the two sisters descend the protesting stairs. Pale red light was beginning to seep in through the boarded windows, making the pair barely more than a silhouette as they made their way towards him.

“Something is different about you,” Shandra commented, looking the archangel up and down. “And I doubt it’s your glowing personality.”

Uriel grinned at the friendly slight. Though he was still uneasy with the idea of trusting a cambion, the woman seemed to have no qualms with being casual with him. Uriel was somewhat surprised to see that Shandra was already dressed for the road. She wore a black, fitted leather vest. Her pants were also black, though he could not make out their material. Judging by the scuffs and marks on it, they had to be made of something similarly durable. A quiver of arrows rested at a slight angle on her back, and it looked like it was held there by a belt that the half-demon had attached to it. Her bow was in one hand, while her other tousled her sister’s hair, and a kitchen knife rested in a homemade sheathe on her hip.

The archangel flashed his forearm at her, revealing the rune that now scarred his body. “This kind of spellwork is not my specialty, but I thought this would be helpful.”

“Clearly,” the half-demon remarked. Uriel could not tell if it was sarcastic or cruel. She walked towards him and grabbed his forearm, examining the angel’s work. “May I?” she asked, opening her hand.

Uriel drew one of the daggers from behind his back and offered it to her. She balanced it in her hand, weighing the deadly piece of metal. Again, Uriel could not read her intentions. He saw the white feather tied into her hair and reassured himself that he was giving her a chance at revenge, a chance to make her sister’s world safer. Regardless, the angel’s muscles tightened, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

“This might hurt,” the half-demon added. She did not sound apologetic.

The tip of the blade dug into Uriel’s arm for the second time in only a handful of hours. Unlike when he cut the rune, the tip of the blade glowed a dark black, the fringes of its energy tinged with a red hue. There was blood this time, the result of a blade infused with Infernal magic. When Shandra had finished, jagged lines now intersected with Uriel’s curving scars. The half-demon wiped away the blood on his arm, revealing her work. The cuts were considerably more precise than Uriel’s, from a hand clearly trained in runecraft. The half-demon handed Uriel his dagger back.

“Angelic runes get most of their juice from up above, right?” Shandra turned and ushered her sister into the kitchen, talking to Uriel even as her back was to him. “This’ll give it a little

more punch. Join us on the dark side, Luke.” She looked back at him expectantly. The angel did not know what he was supposed to say or do in response, evoking a disappointed sigh from the cambion after a few seconds.

Uriel joined the sisters in the kitchen, still at a loss for words but happy to see them going through the workings of what might otherwise be everyday life. Shandra pulled an unlabeled bag out of the pantry and moved towards the small sink. It looked as if it had been blackened, though Uriel could not tell by what. The burns were a stark contrast to the shining steel that formed it. The half-demon grabbed a kettle and a metal grate from one of the cupboards, then set them next to the sink. Out of another cupboard she pulled some yellowed paper and a few bits of broken branches. She set the paper and branches in the sink in a neat bundle. The iron grate sat across the sink with the kettle on top, creating what the archangel assumed was a makeshift stove. Yet another cupboard revealed four large jugs of water, one of which Shandra used to fill the kettle.

“Damn it,” she muttered to herself. “Where did I put the matches?” She frantically pulled open drawers and nearly ripped cupboard doors off their hinges. Uriel could see her face reddening with every failed search.

“Please,” he said softly, approaching the sink, “allow me.” The archangel pointed a finger at the pile of kindling. A small jet of white flame jumped from his fingertip to the wood and paper, igniting the bundle in a small, brilliant blaze.

“Thanks,” Shandra muttered, fishing out two bowls. She paused and looked at Uriel. “Would you like some? It’s just oats, nothing special. Well, sort of. Somewhere, some people have been managing to grow crops. It’s a bitch to get them all the way here, but people will pay out of their asses for this stuff. It’s too dry here, too barren. Hell, finding water is tough enough.”

Uriel regarded the cambion, for a moment forgetting that she was not human. What she had sacrificed, how she struggled to provide for her sister, was inspiring. Even the simple act of collecting firewood or finding water put her in harm’s way. If a demon found her...well, Shandra knew firsthand what would happen.

“No, thank you,” the angel said, smiling. “My physical form does not need much sustenance, only after I have used a great deal of power or have suffered a great injury. Even then, a good night’s rest will usually suffice.” Uriel had been tired by his descent to Earth from Heaven, a trip that no other angel could perform. The night had brought back most of his energy, though he tried not to think about the terrible vision he had endured.

“Suit yourself,” Shandra said, turning back to preparing the oatmeal. Her voice belied a small amount of gratitude. No doubt she was hard-pressed for food and water at the best of times.

Uriel stood silent for a few moments, watching the sisters prepare and consume their food, laughing as Shandra made a joke that nearly brought her sister to tears. It was hard to believe, looking at the pair, that the world had been through as much suffering as it had. The dull red that permeated the house was the only real reminder that beyond these walls was a world ruled by demons.

“Shandra,” the archangel said, taking advantage of a lull in the sisters’ breakfast, “are you sure that it is all right leaving your sister here alone? I do not wish you to second-guess your decision to join me, but this world is surely too dangerous for her to be left by herself.”

Both sisters stopped eating and looked at each other. Shandra cocked an eyebrow, which only served to make Elena giggle.

“What do you say, kid?” Shandra ruffled up Elena’s curly blonde locks as she asked. “Think you’ll make it without me?”

“Do you think you’ll make it without *me*? I am the oldest, after all,” Elena shot right back, grinning from ear to ear. Both sisters started giggling again. Uriel couldn’t help but smile.

“This isn’t our first rodeo, choirboy.” Shandra’s red eyes met Uriel’s. Determination was burning in them. “Elena has to go days, sometimes even weeks while I head into the city to restock our supplies. The house is warded against all manner of creatures. Apparently not against angels, though the odds of two angels in one week doesn’t seem likely to me. Of course I’ll worry about her, and I’m sure she’ll be worried about me, won’t you, squirt? But this is how we’ve always lived, at least since Hadriel was killed.”

Elena’s eyes lowered at the mention of the angel. Uriel nodded in agreement. He might not like the idea of the child staying by herself, but he could not argue with Shandra’s words. He had been here only a day, but these two had lived their entire lives in this world. It was not just determination burning in the half-demon’s eyes. Hatred was there, sparked by the opportunity for revenge. It reflected off the white feather in her hair. Uriel was not just asking the cambion for help. He was giving her a chance to avenge the only father she had ever known.

“Fair enough.” The angel nodded. “I concede my point.”

“Damn right you do.” Shandra smiled at him. “Now let me make sure I’m not forgetting anything, then we can go.”

The half-demon walked out of the kitchen and climbed the stairs, leaving Uriel and Elena alone. The angel wished he could think of some comforting words for the child, but such a thing had never come easily to him. When his eyes returned to where Elena had been sitting, however, the child was no longer there. Instead, she was standing in front of the archangel, eyes locked with his. They were red and puffy, as if she were fighting to hold back tears. No matter what bravado they had shown him, it must have been terrifying for the younger sister to see Shandra go. Especially with a stranger, an archangel, who had shown up out of nowhere just the evening before.

“You’re going to keep my sister safe, right?”

Uriel did his best to smile at the young girl. By birth, Shandra was a creature of Hell, but he would do all he could to keep her safe. She had agreed to help him. That was no small matter. And, if Shandra’s story was true, then the death of either sister would result in the death of them both. Uriel did not want the blood of either on his hands.

“Of course, little one.” He reached out and placed one of his hands on her shoulder, the only act of comfort he could think of. “I promise.”

The archangel brought his other hand, palm up, between him and the young girl. The darkness around it seemed to recede as a sphere of light formed in his hand. It glowed softly and was cool to the touch. Elena marveled at it, her wet eyes sparkling in its luminescence.

“I am the Fire of God, a gift bestowed on me by our Father. Now, I give this small gift to you, Elena. As long as this light shines, you will know that we are safe, and I promise we will return to you. Hold it close and our light will always be with you.”

Elena reached out tentatively, as if the globe of light would burn her. She picked it out of his hand and held it to her chest, whispering a barely audible, “Thank you.”

A slight shuffle alerted Uriel to the half-demon’s return, though it looked as if she had been standing there through the entire exchange. She had a pair of fingerless gloves on, as well as a small bag that hung off her hip. Her smile was the most genuine Uriel had seen since he had met her. Elena ran over to her sister and squeaked in excitement as she was picked up in a hug.

“We’ll be back before you know it, okay?” The cambion gripped her sister tightly. Elena nuzzled her head farther into the crook of Shandra’s neck.

“I love you.” Elena’s voice was muffled.

“I love you too,” Shandra said in turn. She lowered her sister back to the ground and kissed the top of her forehead. “I’ll see you soon.”

She turned to Uriel.

“Let’s go then. We are burning daylight.”

The archangel almost laughed.

“Before we go,” the archangel said, offering out his palm again, this time to Shandra. It did not hold a ball of magic light, but one of Uriel’s daggers encased in its sheathe. He had removed it during the night with the idea of giving it to his new companion. Its steel was that of Heaven, much stronger than the kind made on Earth, and its edge was infinitely sharper than Shandra’s current knife. Between his divine powers and his other martial weapons, one dagger would not be missed. “Please, I insist.”

Shandra looked surprised as she took the knife. “Thanks,” she reluctantly admitted to the angel. She then turned to her sister, away from Uriel, as she undid her belt to replace her old knife with the new one. When she was finished, she handed her sister the kitchen blade. “Just in case, okay? But, if anyone comes in, I want you to hide where I showed you.” Elena nodded. “And there is enough food and stuff here for over two weeks, so don’t even think about leaving the house.”

Elena stood there, knife in one hand and globe of light in the other, two gifts that promised her protection. A tear trickled down her face. Shandra gave her one last reassuring look, whispered something the angel could not quite make out, and turned towards the back door that led from the kitchen to the dangerous world beyond. Uriel adjusted his jacket, gave one last assuring smile to Elena, and followed the half-demon out of the house.

It was difficult watching the two sisters say good-bye, but it gave Uriel hope that not all was lost in this hellish world. That same world drained most positive emotions, though, when he stepped back into it and was immediately reminded of how daunting his mission was. But he had an ally, he had a goal and he had hope.

“We’ll travel most of the way next to the creek,” Shandra said, moving quickly towards the dried bed. “It goes most of the way to Zezurat, Botis’s city, and can give us a decent place to hide if we need to. When we get there—you aren’t going to like this—we will use the sewers to get in. There is a pipe big enough to walk through. It’s just in a...difficult location.”

Uriel nodded his consent. Being a cambion, Shandra would have been ridiculed by humans and abused by demons. She probably entered Zezurat exclusively through means such as the sewers. It also meant she most likely avoided the main roads and knew where demons were likely to congregate. Suddenly the archangel was grateful for such an unlikely companion.

Still, he did not enjoy the idea of wading through the waste of other creatures. Even to an angel, that was disgusting.

## CHAPTER FOUR

There they stood, two dozen beasts dragged straight from the pits of Hell. Drool ran from their maws with the promise of fresh prey. Their pale eyes took on a new glow at the prospect of feeling blood trickle through their teeth and plaster their grey fur. It was hard to tell any of them apart, their elongated limbs and fingers matching the ones standing beside them, their canine snouts identical, save for a few scars or broken bones that the demons had gathered since the apocalypse had begun those many years ago. These, the lowborn demons, wanted nothing more than to hunt, defile and kill.

And they were all under his command.

The man in black stood facing the horde of demons. Perhaps he had brought too many along with them. The beasts were most effective in numbers, but he may have discontent among his ranks if there was not enough prey to go around. The man had been ordered to cleanse this human settlement, a group of filth who had openly revolted against his master. The fools. What did they think a handful of humans could do against his master's legions? What hope did they have? Regardless, the humans would be put in their place. They would be a warning for any who dared to harbor the same rebellious thoughts.

"Turn around, my love." The voice was beautiful and cruel all at once. "Look at what awaits us."

The woman stood by his side, her grey, glazed eyes belying little more life than the ones possessed by the demons. She wore a black lace dress that extended from a collar around her throat down to her ankles. It highlighted her features perfectly, but it did nothing for the man. The witch was just a constant memory of a better time, a sick perversion of his life before this one.

The man turned away from his horde of demons and regarded the handful of structures that dotted the horizon. The townspeople had already noticed their approach, most likely knew of them for over a day now if their sentries were half-decent. The ones that his demons couldn't find, that is. Their persistence had cost him the lives of six demons just getting here, but casualties did not bother him. Every lowborn demon could be replaced. Every dog was expendable for his crusade.

He saw a line of humans—men and women—standing between the two foremost buildings. One was a two-story house and the other some long, rectangular structure that looked as if it were barely standing. It was too far to see them clearly, but the humans were undoubtedly brandishing rusted machetes and hatchets, or some sort of homemade weaponry. The sentries they had encountered thus far were poorly equipped, but still managed to be effective with what they had.

The man raised a gloved hand to his face, a feature that was hidden inside a black hood. He sighed and nodded, weary of this busy work that his master sent him on. Humans may be prey for demons, but they were not the ones he was hunting.

"Go." His voice was quiet, but still the words were carried to the ears of each and every demon. "Have your fun."

The creatures howled and roared as they took off past him, like a current of blurred, bloodthirsty water rushing by. The demons started on two legs as they picked up speed. Clangs



sounded as they dropped their weapons to the ground and ran on all fours. They much preferred to hunt with their claws and their fangs.

The humans were still a long way off, a journey that would have taken the group twenty minutes or longer to walk. But when a horde of demons could see their prey, they became something else entirely. Their gaunt bodies looked like nothing more than stretched skin plastered onto elongated bones. While their teeth and claws were as sharp as blades, their tall, skinny bodies looked almost sickly.

But at the prospect of spilling blood, the demons revealed their true strength. They moved so quickly that even his trained eyes could barely distinguish where they were. Their strength was that of five men, if not more. Their brutality was unmatched.

When the beasts had covered half the distance to the town, a loud bang ripped through the air. One of the demons toppled over in its run, taking a moment to right itself even as dark blood poured from its gut. Only the best marksman could land a kill shot on a moving demon. But this one had been slowed—the man was not surprised to hear another gunshot precede half the beast's head exploding.

More gunshots followed, some of them missing but most of them finding marks. Only one bullet managed to take a demon down with its first hit, a shot that tore through the shriveled breast of a female demon and obliterated its black heart. By the methodical shooting, the man in black knew that this was an experienced marksman. Given the chance, they would have taken out half his demons before they would even reach the line of humans. But there was only one shooter, probably only one gun in the entire town, and he had spotted where the shots were coming from.

"Isabelle, please take care of our sharpshooter." He pointed towards the two-story house that flanked the defensive line.

The witch smiled at him and gave a mocking curtsy. There was a flash of movement as her familiar, a disgusting perversion of a man and a beast, scurried after her. The pair had barely walked a quarter of the distance to the town, but it was close enough for the woman.

The air swirled around Isabelle's raised fist, which now crackled with black energy. Dark lightning leapt from her closed hand and connected with the ground as if trying to escape her terrible grasp. The witch uttered an Infernal word and opened her hand towards the sniper's nest. A jagged path of darkness formed between her and the house as black lightning tore towards the shooter's hiding place. Isabelle grinned at the sure kill.

But the lightning never made it to the house. Just a few metres before its walls, the spell was stopped as it collided with an unseen barrier, one that glowed yellow and cracked after the lightning smashed into it. The shield, the man briefly saw, was a domed wall that stood between the humans and the demons, effectively keeping anything—even spells—out. Now it was the man's turn to smile, unseen from the dark shadow of his hood. He recognized this type of magic, and he doubted any human had conjured it. His blood pumped faster at the prospect of fighting an angel.

"This just got a little more interesting," Isabelle snickered, eying the man in black.

The wave of demons had reached the barrier by now, but they slammed against it like a wave against a cliff. Some of them scrambled over top of each other, clawing at the magical wall. A few of them, the handful that bore some intelligence, barked a few words of Infernal, slamming the shield with invisible waves of force and balls of hungry fire. All the while, the shooter continued their methodical barrage of lead and the humans just beyond the shield stirred in anticipation. They held their meager weapons in front of them as if they did not trust the

magical barrier.

“Destroy that barrier before I reach it. Get rid of the shooter and let our demons have their hunt.” The man drew his twin swords from his hips, black sabres that seemed to mock the dim light around him. “The angel is mine.”

The man in black took off in a run, his cloak trailing behind him only to reveal more dark vestments, thick leather that shrouded his body. Terrible, jagged designs were stitched and etched into the leather, displaying a mosaic of horror across his body. The witch began to cast again, alternating hands as she channeled and released more lightning. Each bolt slammed into the glowing barrier, each one creating larger cracks in its surface. In between spells, the witch could see some of the cracks mending themselves. The angel was trying to repair its shield, but it was not moving fast enough.

This was no longer its world. This world belonged to darkness.

The witch channeled energy into both of her hands and brought them up before her. She released both at once, the spells resonating with one another to create a single devastating blast of energy. The barrier was unable to hold the magic back and shattered under the spell’s assault, like a pane of glass breaking into a million specks of glittering dust.

The demons, only half the amount that had initially charged the town, flooded forth now that their dam was broken. The shooting increased in frequency, but more and more shots missed their marks. With nothing but crude weapons and a faltering confidence against them, the demons swarmed over the humans. There were not even enough men, women or children in the line to meet the beasts two to one. The rusted blades and tools tore at hollow, grey flesh and spilled black blood, but it was barely enough to slow the horde down. The demons set their deadly fangs and claws to work. With their mouths, they tore out the throats of some and crushed through the bones of others. With their hands, they disemboweled their prey and tore deep into flesh and muscle. A woman cried as she watched what could have been her son, barely an adult, be torn in half by two demons, only to have a third silence her as it removed her head from her shoulders.

Isabelle, far from the battle, turned her attention to the sniper. Still it fired at the demons and managed to do more damage to their ranks. It was no wonder the demon lords destroyed most of the firearms they came across; the devastation they could cause was painted right before her eyes. Though all but a few of the humans lay dead or dying, only four or five demons remained. The lives of some demons may have been inconsequential, but she was tasked with keeping her partner safe so he could return to their master. Since he had almost made it to where the demons had amassed a small pond of blood and bodies, Isabelle had to make short work of this marksman.

She focused her thoughts on the building and drew intricate symbols in the air, muttering a few words of Infernal as she went. Isabelle could feel the dark energy building inside her, begging to be released. When the witch clapped her hands together in front of her, allowing the vile magic to do her bidding, the release was almost sensual. A breath passed before the ground trembled, an omen of what she had done.

Suddenly, an array of massive crystals, amethysts with deep red veins running through them, shot out of the ground and pierced through the building. The columns then sprouted offshoots of smaller, more jagged crystals, which, in turn, sprouted some of their own. The process continued again and again, filling every inch of space within the house with jagged, tearing crystals. The only sign that the witch was successful was an arm, bloodied from where it was torn from its body, hanging from one of the gems.

The man in black ignored the destroyed house and the line of bodies as he continued into the town. What few demons were left had discarded their victims and were ahead of him, four beasts circling a lone figure that stood in the middle of the cracked road. The figure, a woman, slowly followed their movements, doing her best to keep her eyes on each creature. Her left arm boasted a small steel buckler that crawled with fluid, swooping engravings and runes. In her right hand she held a spear, its wooden shaft reinforced with bands of steel, the same metal that formed the small spike on the butt of the weapon and the broad, deadly spearhead on its top. Her pale skin glistened in the dim red light of midday, but it, too, was covered in ornate markings. Another piece of steel glinted in the pale light—a slim halo that encircled her neck, nearly hidden by her long, matted blonde hair.

One of the demons, a male whose grey fur was now wet with blood, snarled as it ran at the angel, dashing on two legs and aiming for her heart with its claws. Demons craved the taste of an angel's heart. But the angel had a different plan. She punched out with her left, catching the rim of the steel buckler in the demon's throat. The creature stumbled backwards and clawed at its crushed windpipe, desperately trying to draw breath.

Without hesitating, the angel pivoted and swung her spear in a wide arc, letting it slide to its full reach and grasping it just before the deadly spike at its base. The steel blade that crowned the weapon was so sharp that the next demon barely noticed as its throat was cut open, still grinning in excitement even as its lifeblood sprayed out in front of it.

The angel swung the spear up and over, so it rested on her shoulders behind her head, with the blade pointing the same direction as her buckler. The third demon did not register the movement in time to avoid the quick thrust of the weapon, thinking that it only had the angel's shield to contend with. The steel of the spearhead proved it wrong, however, as it slipped through its neck and severed the demon's spine.

The last demon, realizing that the angel's flank was exposed, charged with reckless abandon, its maw frothing. A flick of the angel's wrist retracted the spear from the dead demon's spine and sent it sliding along the warrior's shoulder again. The spike on the butt of the spear bit into the last living demon's chest, but not enough to deliver a lethal blow.

Still, the warrior angel drove farther out with the butt of her weapon and used her leg to hook around the demon's ankle, tripping the beast and sending it to the ground. Without giving it a moment's reprieve, the angel dropped on top of the beast's chest and punched at its face, connecting her steel buckler with its skull again and again, until nothing was left but a red paste where its head should have been.

By the time the man in black got anywhere close to the angel, it had already dispatched the four hellish creatures. If the man did not hold such seething hatred for the warrior and her ilk, he would have been impressed. Instead, he readied his twin ebony blades and allowed the angel to stand. The divine warrior assumed a defensive stance, placing her buckler between the two of them and holding her spear high. As she studied her opponent, the angel's stance softened, just a fraction.

"You...you are human," she mourned, looking around at the demons she had slain, the beasts that had followed this man's command. "Why? Why do you side with the monsters? Why do you kill your own kind?"

"I do not answer to you." The man's voice was cold, devoid of any emotion that was not hatred.

He sized up his opponent, noting the grace with which she had eliminated the demons. That buckler was as much a weapon as it was a shield, and that spear was more versatile than he had

given her credit for.

The angel's eyes were sad when they met his again. It wasn't just sorrow for the murdered townspeople, but pity for this man before her.

"Not in this life, perhaps." The angel assumed her defensive posture again.

The man held both blades at his sides loosely. The angel may have been innately stronger than him, but his master had given him all the tools he needed to combat the soldiers of Heaven. Still, his biggest advantage was the fact that he was human; no angel *wanted* to fight a human, much less kill one. It went against their wiring, caused every one of their instincts to scream. They were protectors of humanity, or so many of them believed. But he knew the truth.

The man launched himself forward, recklessly assailing the angel with a flurry of blows. There was no rhythm to his movements, nothing that indicated any sort of form or style. He brought his ebony sabres in from either side, from above and below. He stabbed and slashed, leapt and pivoted as he tried to find an opening, any opening. The angel met every attack with a move of her own, dodging or blocking with her buckler. The pitch black of his blades was a stark contrast to the gleaming silver of her shield, as if the two opposing colors refused to mix. His blades were knocked away, no matter which angle he came from.

After yet another successful deflection, the angel locked her legs and parried the attack, driving the blade of her spear towards the man's shoulder. That was her first mistake. The angel was holding back, was not trying to kill her human opponent. He made sure to make her pay for her error, rolling away from the attack while bringing one of his blades down on her exposed arm. The blade bit deep, scratching against the bones in her forearm.

The angel screamed as blood poured from the wound. Her opponent retreated, taking a moment to catch his breath after his assault. He watched as the angel's buckler moved to the gash, hovering over it as her hand glowed yellow underneath. When she revealed her forearm again, the angel did not even have a scar where the sword had torn at her.

Without warning, the angel sprinted at him, covering half the distance between the two in a flash before leaping into the air. She used her momentum to drive her spear forward, aiming straight for the man's heart. He knew he couldn't block her attack, not with such force behind it, so he tried to deflect it and score another counter.

The angel seemed more prepared this time, immediately spinning full-circle when her attack did not connect and swinging her buckler in a wide arc. She smashed the shield into his counterattack, knocking the sabre clear from the man's hand. The blade landed with a soft thud, its blade embedded in the dry, arid soil.

Without wasting a breath, the angel planted her heel and spun back around, sweeping her spear at her adversary's feet. It was not a killing blow, but it would surely be followed by one if she managed to trip the human. But the man reacted in a way she would have never expected.

He drove his last remaining blade halfway into the ground, edge facing the sweeping spear. It was enough to stop the angel's assault, and it took her a second to understand what was happening, but it was a second she could not afford. The man reached out with both free hands and grabbed her buckler, using his surprise and its leverage to pull the angel to the ground. She landed on top of her spear, her exposed throat, just below her halo, a hair's breadth away from the hungry black blade. Her shield arm still in his hands, he forced it behind her body and stomped a boot down on the angel's shoulder. She was too stunned to cry out in pain, but the sickening crunch of bones was enough to tell him what happened.

Before the angel could do anything, the man in black brought his other foot to bear, kicking the angel's head towards his blade. It was nearly enough force to decapitate her; only a few cords

of muscle were spared from the blade's vicious edge.

By the time Isabelle sauntered into the town, the man had finished removing the angel's head and had it skewered on her own spear. The spear stood in the middle of the town, a warning to any who might pass through that dissent would not be tolerated. And harboring an angel would condemn anyone to a fate worse than death.

"What took you so long?" The man's voice was coarse and filled with rage. For the angel. For this world. For everything that had happened to him.

"I thought I would let you enjoy yourself," the witch said, giggling. It was an ugly sound. She placed a hand teasingly on his arm. "Besides, I saw the whole thing. It was incredible."

The man brushed her hand off him. She sighed and pouted.

"Besides," the disappointed Isabelle continued, "I got a message from our master. We have new prey."

The man wiped the blood and dirt off his blade using the angel's frayed, stained clothes. They reeked of stale water and decay, though what didn't this far out from a city these days?

"I grow weary of slaughtering entire towns. He can send one of his hordes and a general if he wants."

"It is not a human we are after." The witch smiled with teeth that were impossibly white. "I have been told that an angel managed to break through the clouds yesterday."

She could not see the fire flicker back to life in his eyes from underneath his hood, but she knew that it was there. Still, he shook his head.

"Impossible." He sheathed his blades. "Nothing can break through the clouds or they would have years ago. Unless..."

"Unless it was an archangel," she finished for him.

The man's body went numb, save for small pinpricks that crept over his flesh. An archangel. He had yet to claim the head of one of those.

"There are only three of them left now, but the other two have been smart enough to hide."

"You do not need to remind me," the man snapped. He could feel his bloodlust rising. "Where did the creature break through?"

The witch traced the many patterns etched into his leather armor.

"Near Zezurat, the city of Botis. It is only a few days from where you stand."

The man spat on the ground. Botis was a snake, one of the few high demons that was smart enough to be cunning, but too weak to do anything himself. They had dealt with Botis once before, and it had taken conscious effort not to run the demon through with his blades.

"Zezurat it is. We will go immediately."

Before he could take a step, the witch snapped her fingers. Every muscle in the man's body froze, his entire frame completely paralyzed. He was helpless to resist as Isabelle beckoned him over to a nearby building, a single-story house that still held pictures of children and their toys. Against his will, the man stepped inside.

"We can leave in the morning. You are mine tonight," she cackled as she led him upstairs.

The man in black let the witch have his body, but his mind went elsewhere. It went to a time when angels were good, when this thing on top of him was his wife, not some abomination. It went to a time when he was a father.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The red glow of the smothered sun disappeared and with it, Uriel noticed, Shandra's energy. He did not doubt the day had been taxing on her. They had run into a troupe of demons that were still high on the blood of their prey. Shandra had tried to fool them at first, explaining that they were on a mission for Botis.

It almost worked, but the combination of her eyes and the tattoos that covered Uriel's face were enough to give away what the pair really were. Seeing the two together—a cambion and an angel—confused the demons just long enough for Shandra and Uriel to gain the upper hand. It was relatively easy for the pair to dispatch the small group of beasts, especially when Uriel's first two daggers each found their marks, killing two of the creatures before the fight had even begun in earnest.

But what had fascinated the angel the most was how the half-demon fought. The archangel had been too quick to judge his new companion. What he initially believed to be mundane arrows were actually enchanted weapons, created either by the cambion or her divine mentor. Regardless of who spelled them, the arrows were more than just steel tips on wooden shafts. The arrows bit into the grey, stretched flesh of the demons and consumed them, turning their entire body to ash.

The last few demons who already witnessed the devastation of the cambion's spellworked attacks tried to wrench the arrows from their bodies if they were hit. But even then, it was too late. The ravenous magic seemed to work with the first taste of demonic flesh.

"You performed admirably today," the archangel said as they sat down in their makeshift camp. It was not much, just the crumbling foundations of an old barn. Still, the stones were sturdy and would provide ample cover during the night. During the day, a harsh wind had shrieked across the barren land, and though it had subsided somewhat, the ruins offered a much-needed reprieve. "Those arrows you have are extremely potent. I assume it is some sort of spellwork?"

"Cool, aren't they?" The cambion turned to grin at him. She pulled a thin blanket out of her bag and set it on the ground. "They were a gift from Hadriel. I have memories of my mother getting gifts of clothes and books, but I got a handful of fancy arrows. I've tried copying the runes on them, but it doesn't have the same effect. So, I have to be careful with them, you know?"

Uriel nodded, but their conversation was interrupted by what sounded like a scream. It was far off, though, carried by the strong winds. The angel could not decide whether it was the sound of some beast catching its prey or a cry of terror from the prey itself. Shandra barely seemed to notice the noise, as if it were as common as the demons they had come across.

"They only work on demons though," Shandra continued, sitting on her blanket and rummaging through the small bag in her lap. "It's like they can sense them. They are hungry for the damned things. I can't be sure, but I feel like if I stuck myself with one, it would kill me, too."

The half-demon looked up from her searching and eyed the quiver of arrows uneasily. Though Uriel was looking at them as well, he did not miss the small movement as the cambion shifted away from the weapons.

There was a long break of silence after that. Shandra finally pulled some questionable-looking bread and salted meat out of her bag and gestured them towards Uriel in an offer to join her. The archangel smiled and shook his head. He would need to eat eventually, but his physical body could withstand a lot more stress than Shandra's. He would wait until they got to Zezurat, where he hoped supplies would be more plentiful. Even for an archangel and a half-demon.

"Can I ask you something?" The cambion's quiet voice suddenly broke their silence. Even with the wind rushing outside their small refuge, it was easy to hear the cambion. But this tone was different. It was not the same sarcastic demeanor that he had come to expect from the half-demon.

"If I have the answer, then you shall, too." The kindness in his own voice surprised him. Looking into her crimson eyes, the archangel had forgotten for a moment what she was. In his mind, however, there were few better proving grounds than the heat of battle, and Shandra had stood next to him through that already. Perhaps he was willing to give her a chance.

Shandra took another bite of bread and swallowed loudly before continuing. Her red eyes no longer met his.

"All of the memories I received from my mother, everything that the demon in me learned from her...she loved God." The sadness in her voice could not be hidden. He knew why she no longer looked at him. "She would literally drop to her knees and worship Him. She read all the stories, knew them by heart. The Creator, the Father, the All-Powerful. But how can something be so incredible and let all of this happen?" She gestured all around her, as if the crumbling stones around them were her entire world.

"How could He let everyone, angels and humans, be slaughtered?"

Uriel sat up straight and gazed at her. There was no fire to speak of, lest they attract any unwanted guests, but he could see her clearly enough. Her body was tense, anticipating an answer that she knew she would not like no matter what it was.

"You are mistaken," Uriel said with all the gentleness he could. It was a difficult subject for them both, not just the cambion. "He did not let this happen. It was written, long before you were born, that there would be a great battle between Heaven and Hell. This prophecy, which we all believed was the word of God Himself, claimed that we would be victorious. The world and all of humanity would enter a state of paradise.

"But we had sinned. Heaven and its angels had become arrogant. We thought that we would simply brush aside Lucifer and his forces. We were so very wrong. My Fallen brother and his army climbed out of the depths of Hell and decimated our ranks in the initial battles. For every angel there were ten thousand demons, and half that in other terrible creatures. And their bloodlust was second only to the power they had accumulated.

"You see, angels draw our power from Heaven, but Heaven's might is only a reflection of the goodness in each soul that our Father has made. Lucifer's forces, on the other hand, are empowered by the opposite. Every sin, every act of senseless horror fuels his legions. The more victories he claimed, the more powerful he became. It was not just the devil who defeated us, but the sins of angel and man. We were no match."

Uriel's eyes turned to the sky, as if he expected to see a blanket of stars above them. But he saw nothing, just a darkness as deep and empty as the void of space. No distant stars twinkled before him, no pinpricks of light dazzled him. He had been on both sides of that pitch curtain, but he had not truly known how bleak this planet was until now.

"Why are you here?" Shandra's voice was a welcomed reprieve from his thoughts.

"I am here to push back against the darkness. I am here to set things right."

“No.” Her tone took on an agitated edge. “I mean why are you here *now*? Where were you when the war was going on? Why were you safe and sound up in your palace in the sky while those...those things were butchering us?”

Uriel knew that the half-demon had countless questions for him, but he could not answer them. Some of those questions he had himself.

“I do not know,” he replied, unable to take his eyes from the starless sky. “I pleaded to be among the first to descend to Earth. I wanted—no, needed—to fight alongside my brothers and sisters. The battlefield is as much a home to me as Heaven itself, yet I was stuck in the latter. Our Father would not tell me why I had to stay, only that I had no choice. For years I stood sentinel, managing the affairs of Heaven and relaying what tactics I could as I watched angels and humans die in immeasurable numbers. That is, until these clouds blinded us. Then yesterday I was told that it was my time to descend to Earth, a decade after this war had begun. My Father told me to have faith, that I would return light to the world.”

Uriel finally tore his eyes from the unending darkness and looked at his companion. Shandra was not returning his gaze, though. She was stroking a strand of her hair and staring at the ground, as if the barren dirt would give her some answers. It was as helpful as the sky had been to the archangel. Then her eyes snapped up to his, a semblance of a smile on her face.

“Well, don’t you worry, choirboy. You have me now.” The half-demon yawned and lay down, using her half-empty bag as a makeshift pillow. “And, Uriel?”

“Yes?” he said as the wind around them died down for a moment. Her back was to him.

“Thank you for what you did for my sister this morning. She’s been alone before, but this time feels different. Let’s kill that son of a bitch Botis and get back to her quickly, okay?”

Uriel could not find an answer for the cambion. Somehow, she managed to be crude and warming all at once.

With no fire for the pair and the wind picking back up, the archangel noticed that Shandra was shivering. She tried to hide it, as if not wanting to show any weakness to her new ally. Uriel rose from his seat against the stone wall and moved as quietly as he could. There was a soft shuffle as he removed his long coat and lowered it onto Shandra’s chilled body. Without a word, he turned and took up a perch among the ruins, keeping watch while the half-demon slept.

The cambion gripped the coat tightly around her. Though she did not want to admit it to herself, Shandra had not felt this safe in a very long time.

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Shandra was roused from her sleep by the soft touch of the archangel, her eyes still clouded with the fog of her dreams. Normally she would have woken up at the first glow of the morning, but the mental and physical tolls from the previous day had been taxing on her. She shook off her exhaustion quickly, though, and looked up at Uriel.

“It is time for us to move,” he said in a voice that was a stark contrast to his usual warrior nature.

“Sorry,” the cambion muttered. The sky was mostly black, though not the darkness that accompanied the night. A red glow was just beginning to form. “I don’t usually oversleep.”

She glanced around and noticed two figures next to one of the ruined foundations. In a flash she was up and brandishing the dagger the archangel had given her, all remnants of sleep gone in a blink.

Uriel laughed. “Do not worry,” the angel said, gesturing for the half-demon to calm down.



“They wandered too close for my liking. I needed to deal with them.”

It was only then Shandra noticed that the two figures were corpses of demons, slumped against the weathered stones to hide them from view. One of them had its throat slit, the blood covering its grey, lifeless chest still wet. The other’s head hung at an unnatural angle, its neck clearly broken.

“Scared the shit out of me.” Shandra rubbed her eyes with her free hand while she chuckled. Already standing, she turned and rolled up her blanket, stuffed it in her pack and handed the jacket back to Uriel. She refused to look at him as she did. “Thanks,” she muttered.

Uriel nodded, an action the half-demon only saw out of the corner of her eye. The archangel donned the duster without a word.

“All set?” Shandra asked once her pack was tied. “If we get going, and we don’t run into anymore assholes, then we should get to Zezurat in half a day.”

Uriel nodded once again. He tried to hide the combination of anxiety and excitement that he felt. This was his mission, his very purpose. As the pair walked back towards the dry creek bed that marked their way, Uriel silently thanked the half-demon for helping him fulfill that purpose.

True to her word, Uriel spotted the silhouette of the city within a few hours, a jagged shadow on the dim horizon. The number of demons they saw seemed to increase in folds the closer they got to their destination, but Shandra knew the path well and was able to navigate their way without the two being seen. When Zezurat was just another hour or so away, Shandra called their march to a halt. They managed to find a copse of trees that provided them cover from the red glow but could do little against the heat that permeated the new world.

“Please, save it for yourself,” Uriel said, declining the food that Shandra offered. “I will eat once food is a little less scarce.”

“Suit yourself.” The half-demon shrugged and popped the last bit of dried meat in her mouth.

Uriel took the brief rest they had to remove his jacket. The wind from the previous day was gone, which Uriel was somewhat thankful for. It made the air almost unbearably stale and warm. He could feel his brow beaded with sweat after the morning’s travels. But no wind meant that his scent would not travel or give them away. The scent of an angel was euphoric to some creatures, like the hellhounds he had encountered before. This close to the city, Uriel did not want to attract any undue attention.

“Feeling the heat?” Shandra quipped. “I’m sure the weather is nicer in Heaven, but you’re going to have to keep yourself covered. Those tattoos are too obvious. You’d be noticed the first time a demon looked at you.”

She was right, the archangel knew. He could not afford the creature comforts of Heaven or even the old Earth. One misstep and his mission would be over. *He* would be over. With reluctance, Uriel put his duster on once more.

“Let us continue,” he said, falling in line behind the cambion.

As they moved closer to the metropolis, Uriel noticed that the entire place was walled in. It was more like a massive fortress than any kind of modern city. At the base of the walls were giant shards of jagged rock that pointed outwards like daggers. At first, the angel thought they might be some sort of defense. Then it dawned on him that this was not a city of Earth, but one that had been pulled from the depths of Hell itself. Somehow Botis had raised his own infernal kingdom from the bowels of the underworld.

The walls were sleek, glistening mirrors of black rock, streaked with veins of brilliant gold. Smoke billowed from within the city and from fissures outside of it, too. On one side of the city

was a massive chasm, the hot air shimmering above it as if a raging fire burned below. Above that chasm was a large drainage pipe, its fluid pouring into the chasm and out of sight.

Thankfully, the journey to the walls of Zezurat was fairly easy. Though there were several roads that funneled to the main gates, the area surrounding the city was littered with massive boulders and other debris that should have been underground. Uriel assumed that it had been flung aside when the city erupted from Hell and had simply been ignored since. Botis, the archangel knew, was a brilliant tactician but was lazy and arrogant. His faults were now their blessing as the pair used boulders and fallen trees as cover. It was slow but methodical.

When he got the chance, Uriel glanced at the main gates of Zezurat. He had not expected the demon lords to be so...civilized. The angel had expected this new Earth to be filled with constant warring factions of demons. Now that the angels and humans had been annihilated, they had only each other to fight. But the figures moving through the gates of Zezurat, both in and out, were not just demons. Among the other dark, sentient beings of the underworld, Uriel could see humans moving freely as well. They looked broken, like shells of what he knew humans to be. But they were alive!

"All right, pay attention and stay right behind me." Shandra's order snapped the archangel out of his observations. "If you don't, it's not a fun fall."

They had reached the edge of the chasm where the drain spilled out. A terrible stench accompanied an even greater heat, threatening to burn the angel's skin as well as his nose. Uriel glanced over the edge. The pit was deep, with its walls a series of vicious, fang-like rocks and its base a glowing river of lava. Any waste that was poured into the chasm merely burned up when it hit the molten rock, filling the air with a thick, noxious gas. It would have been a rather efficient system if it didn't poison the air around it. Not even his Father would know what it had done to the inhabitants of the city so far.

Without another word, Shandra reached out over the chasm and gripped onto the foundation of the city's wall. Unlike the rest of the walls, the jagged rocks of the chasm extended to a few metres above the drainpipe. With a keen, crimson eye, Shandra found some handholds in the ebony wall. Her grip secured, the cambion moved her foot out above the lava pit, then lifted the rest of her body after it. She was nimble and scaled the uneven surface quickly, confidently. Trusting his new ally, Uriel followed her, grabbing each protruding rock and stepping in each crack that she did, shadowing her every move. One false step, one misplaced hold, and every demon in the city would flock to the sight of his wings. Every rock that crumbled and fell away from the wall was a stark reminder of what the alternative to flying was.

The climb was short. It was only a moment or two before Shandra was on top of the drainpipe, keeping low to avoid any eyes that might glance their way. Uriel quickly joined her and knelt next to the edge of the pipe. Without a word, he offered the half-demon his hand.

"What a gentleman," Shandra said with a smirk.

Gripping her forearm, Uriel supported his companion as she lowered herself in front of the open pipe. He slowly swung her back and forth, gaining momentum each time. When he felt her grip loosen, he let his own do the same. He heard the half-demon's foot land with a splash, the kind one might hear if they jumped into the muddy shallows of a swamp. The angel spun himself over the edge of the drain, using his own momentum to duplicate the swing.

"Shit," Shandra muttered when he landed in the dirty, flowing water. "Literally."

The archangel tried not to think about it as he joined her farther in the sewers, finding a raised path that gave him some reprieve from the waste. Down the tunnel, he could see some dull, flickering lights incrementally lined along the wall. Apparently, the city had electricity, but

the angel did not know how far that grid extended. He was thankful, though. The dim red light of the world seemed to be as repulsed by the sewage as the archangel and half-demon were. It was dark in the sewers, limiting even for his vision. The lights along the wall provided pockets of illumination, but there were still stretches of shadows between them. Thankfully, Shandra led the way through the winding tunnels, confident in what Uriel only saw as a maze.

"I know someone in the city," Shandra explained as they walked. "We can crash at his place until you figure out—fuck!"

The cambion jumped back in fright. Uriel quickly shoved past her with a dagger in hand, ready to take on whatever threat might be down here. He saw what had startled Shandra, but it was no threat.

There, slumped against the wall, was a man in tattered clothing. Uriel did not know whether the man was alive or dead, but he had not reacted to the half-demon's cry or the sight of a blade. Crouching down to examine the body, Uriel could see that his face was yellowed and rotting. To the angel's horror, a hole was in his cheek. Uriel was certain that, had the lighting been better, he could have seen right into the man's mouth through that hole. His arms were limp, his skin loose and barely clinging to the gaunt limbs.

"What is this?" Uriel could barely force the words out of his mouth.

"Plague," Shandra said. She coughed at the stench of the rotting body, an odor somehow more powerful than the streams of waste running all around them. "Some strain of it, at least. In the city it's pretty common, and a lot of the time people will come down here to die. It seems to affect only humans, though. Demons never get it, and I've never contracted anything. I figure angels should be pretty safe, too."

The body suddenly shifted, and a noise, unintelligible, came from his mouth.

"Shit, is it still alive?" Shandra took a few steps back.

"It appears so." Uriel could not fathom the agony the man must have been in. "I will try and heal him," he said resolutely.

"Don't bother." The half-demon put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Even if you could, he's so far gone that it would take a lot of juice. So much that your new rune wouldn't be able to hide it. Do you really want to use that kind of power underneath a city full of demons?"

Uriel knew that his companion was right. With the man in this state of decomposition, Uriel did not know if he was a skilled enough healer to help him anyway. There was a difference between having the power to do something and knowing how to do it, and Uriel was not sure he had either in his current state.

"We have to do something."

Shandra walked past the angel, her dagger drawn. The half-demon pulled the man's head away from the wall, leaving behind clumps of rotted skin sticking to the stone, and drove her blade into the back of his skull. The weapon went in easily, the flesh and bone already softened by the disease. Uriel closed his eyes and whispered a word in the tongue of angels, wishing the soul a safe journey to Heaven. He tried not to think that, with the black curtain looming overhead, it might never reach there.

"We are wasting time," Shandra said as she wiped her blade clean on the man's tattered shirt. "Let's go." She dragged her hand along the sewer wall as she walked, leaving behind a piece of the man's skin.

They hardly made any ground before Uriel heard shuffling up ahead. The desolate tunnels could carry sound from far away, but this was different. It was close. Worse, the archangel felt something masked, something shrouded from his senses. He reached forward and grabbed

Shandra's arm to stop her advance.

"Wha—?"

But the angel's hand snapped up to cover her mouth. She nodded slowly in understanding while stepping back behind him. Whatever made the noise was hiding just ahead of them in one of the streaks of shadow. He considered using his light to illuminate the tunnel, but thought perhaps the presence in front of them might not be able to see them either. The archangel took another couple of steps, motioning for Shandra to remain where she was.

"Don't make another move," came a gruff voice from the darkness. "Turn around now and go back to wherever you came from, and I promise I won't kill you both."

Whoever—or whatever—it was could see them. That put the pair at a distinct disadvantage.

"I cannot do that," the archangel replied. "Nor am I intimidated by your threats."

There was a metallic click from within the darkness.

"He has a gun," Shandra whispered.

Uriel paused. He could handle most threats, but blindly rushing someone with a gun would not end well, even for him. Still, the archangel refused to be intimidated.

In a flourish, Uriel pulled on the golden grip of his sword. The weapon slid easily from its scabbard, its blade erupting in brilliant white flames as it was freed. The divine light reflected off the golden guard in a dance of deadly beauty. The weapon, a manifestation of Uriel's fire, defied anyone who would threaten him. There was a long period of silence, the gunman not making a sound until he spoke with a voice filled with realization.

"That sword. It can't be." It was not just realization in his voice. It was joy. "Brother? Uriel, is that you?"