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Penance: A Novel

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Abstract

Penance is a fictional novel written both as an Honors Capstone project and as a work that will be further revised and eventually submitted for professional publication.

The novel is set in modern day, in the fictional southern city of Avington. Avington, like the rest of the world, is home to a group of terrifying creatures called the nephilim, a name derived from Hebrew, meaning “the fallen.” The nephilim are humans who once died and were reborn as undead creatures; because of their insatiable thirst for human life energy, they are considered demons with the faces of men. Despite the threat of the nephilim, few people even know that they exist; those who do include the Church and secret societies such as the Vigil, an organization tasked with slaying these creatures. The main problem, however, is that the nephilim cannot be destroyed. Though their bodies can be “slain,” they are always reanimated soon after.

25-year-old waitress Dahlia Ellis is an avid member of the Vigil and has harbored an immense hatred of the nephilim ever since childhood, when she witnessed a naphil kill her older sister. Everything changes for Dahlia, however, when she meets a man named Seth, to whom she is inexplicably drawn despite his enigmatic presence. As Dahlia grows dangerously close to Seth, Dahlia’s boyfriend Law, a fanatical Vigil member in his own right, is visited by an angel named Nathaniel, who claims to know how to destroy the nephilim once and for all. The more time that Law spends with Nathaniel, however, the more he suspects that the angel’s motives may not be as pure as he originally thought.

After a twisted series of events, Dahlia finds herself sucked into the underground world of the nephilim and discovers the disturbing truth of their existence. Meanwhile, Law becomes an inadvertent pawn in a supernatural plot that threatens to destroy humanity and the world as he knows it.

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I want to honor the memory of Professor William West, who has just recently passed away. May he rest in eternal peace and joy.

I must thank my family whose unyielding love has nurtured me to become the woman and writer that I am. Mom, Dad, and David – I could not love you more. Thank you to my extended family and close friends, who might as well be blood. You are all so special to me.

I would like to thank God for His blessings and grace. Though I have struggled at times with my faith, my unshakable love for the divine has helped me through every hardship.

Finally, thank you to you, the reader, for picking up this book. I sincerely hope you find something that touches you in these pages.

PENANCE

A NOVEL BY RACHEL WEISER

FOR MY MOTHER.

PROLOGUE

December 24, 1990. Avington Square Mall. 9:00 P.M.

Like every Yule Eve, the mall bustled with hoards of last minute shoppers until mall security deployed their beefier guards to shove lingering patrons out the front doors. With an hour to go until closing, there was no longer any time for dawdling. Men and women, strapped down with shopping bags like oxen, darted methodically from boutique to boutique. Occasionally, in the spirit of the season, an “excuse me” would rise from the crowd.

That was no country for little girls. In the rush shopping, two sisters had gotten separated from their mother and wandered hand-in-hand through the rushing throngs like carp swimming upstream.

“I want Mommy,” the younger one said, fat tears rolling down her porcelain cheeks. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her free hand.

“Shh, Dolly, it’s okay,” Lucy the older one said, scanning the crowd with big blue eyes. I think we came inside over here.”

Dahlia minded her sister and began to cry quietly.

“Hold on, I think I see her,” Lucy said, yanking Dahlia in another direction.

Dahlia let out a little cry as she felt the tug but let herself be dragged by her confident older sister. Lucy’s blonde pigtails bounced as she scurried along intently. Dahlia had to hold on tightly to keep up.

“Excuse me. Sorry. ‘Scuse me,” Lucy said as the two girls swerved around grown ups in heavy winter coats clutching bulging shopping bags. Dahlia nearly lost her footing on the shiny tile floor, but Lucy caught her by the arm and righted her. Dahlia’s straight black hair had nearly come completely free of her barrette.

“Downstairs,” Lucy said, pointing at the ground floor through the glass railing. “C’mon let’s take the escalator.”

“I don’t wanna,” Dahlia pouted, wiping another stream of snot onto the sleeve of her fleece.

“Why not? I think I see Mom downstairs.”

“The escalator is scary,” Dahlia said, defiantly yanking her hand away from Lucy and crossing her pudgy arms in front of her chest.

Lucy sighed with pronounced exasperation for a seven-year-old. “Come on, you did it earlier. I’ll hold your hand.”

“No!” Dahlia began to cry harder. Her face swelled, growing hot with frustration. If she didn’t get her way, she considered her usual trick of holding her breath until her cheeks turned purple.

“Dahlia, come *on*!”

Dahlia slumped down against the glass railing and buried her face in her red skirt.

Lucy took a step in towards the escalator, as if she were contemplating leaving Dahlia and going the rest of the way herself. A family of five quickly brushed by her without a second glance from the harried parents. Each of the three sons had an FAO Schwarz bag on his arm and a smirk from ear to ear. The last one down the escalator turned around and stuck out his tongue at Lucy, who gave him a raspberry right back.

“Hey, are you lost?”

Lucy turned and craned her neck upwards to find a tall black haired man staring down at her. He was wearing a long fur-lined coat like one their dad owned, and his hands were shoved in the pockets. A thick dark beard covered his face, and his lips were pursed together in a tight line. On his head, he wore a plaid hunting hat.

A few feet behind him another man stood, similarly posed with his hands in his pockets. This man wore a leather jacket and a look of apprehension.

Lucy stuck her nose in the air and turned her face away. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

The bearded man let out a laugh that his companion did not echo. “Smart girl. And you’re right. But what if I told you that I know where your mommy is?”

Dahlia raised her head from her knees and sniffled. “Our mommy?”

“Yeah,” the bearded man said with a smile. “Yeah, your mommy. She sent me to find you. She’s really worried about you.”

Lucy looked the man up and down a few times, skepticism registering on her intense little face. She brushed a blonde ringlet out of her eyes as she had seen her mother do, and rocked her weight from one foot to the other. “You promise you’re telling the truth?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.” He made the accompanying physical motions, which earned a little giggle from Dahlia. “Now come on, let’s take you back to your mommy. She’s waiting for you.”

With a shrug, Lucy allowed the bearded man to take her by the hand and beckoned for Dahlia to follow. Dahlia scampered to her feet and rushed over to Lucy, grabbing a tight hold onto her sister’s free hand. She did not look up at either of the men.

The one with the leather jacket started to say something, but reconsidered and closed his mouth.

“It was so silly of you girls to get lost like this,” the man with the fur-lined coat said. Dahlia noticed for the first time that he talked with a strange accent. She started to whisper something to Lucy, but Lucy hushed her.

“You really should stay near your mother, you know.”

“Hey-” the other man said warningly.

The bearded man dismissed him with a wave of his hand and continued his lecture.

“It’s a good thing we found you, isn’t it? There are bad men out there, girls. Very bad men.”

As the group walked through Macy’s, Dahlia tried to whisper something to Lucy again, but her older sister would have none of it. She was hanging on every word the bearded man said, as if he had some magical power over her. Her lips were parted, her eyes were like two ping-pong balls, as she listened intently to what might as well have been the word of the Creator himself.

Dahlia pouted.

It wasn’t until they had exited into the chilly night air that Dahlia began to suspect something was wrong. The parking lot was still packed with cars but devoid of people. It was a relatively mild winter, with only a couple inches of

snow packed onto the ground, but Dahlia still felt her bones rattling as she shivered against a gust of wind.

Once they turned a corner to a loading dock, Lucy finally began to show signs of nervousness. Her palm felt slick in Dahlia's hand.

"Lucy," Dahlia said. Lucy did not hush her this time.

"Excuse me? Excuse me, where are we going?" Lucy spoke up, her voice wavering slightly as the man led them behind a row of dumpsters and finally came to a stop.

"To see your mommy."

Lucy bit her lower lip and looked around frantically. Tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes. "This isn't where our mommy is."

The man with the beard dropped her hand and let out a small unsettling laugh. "Okay. You got me."

"Take us back!" Lucy said, hands on her hips as she stared the man down.

"That's cute." The tall bearded man chuckled again and shot his companion a look. "Hold her."

Dahlia felt herself ensnared from behind by thick arms. The man in the leather jacket was holding her tightly to his chest, leaving hardly enough room for her to breathe. Dahlia let out a scream and fought frantically to wriggle out of his grasp, but she quickly grew tired and could not bring herself to fight anymore.

She watched, panicked, as the bearded man gathered Lucy up in his own arms. Lucy squirmed and kicked viciously at him for much longer than Dahlia had, but eventually she too gave in.

"Let me go! Stranger! Help!" Lucy screamed. He slapped her so hard that she went silent and hung limp in his arms.

"That's enough of that," the man said, taking her by the cheeks and staring intently into her face.

Dahlia could practically feel the weight of his concentration as he stared at Lucy. His eyes narrowed to dark slits, and he began to mutter something to himself so softly that Dahlia could not hear his voice. His lips moved quickly, changing shape only slightly. It looked more like he was chewing than speaking.

Lucy's body began to glow, illuminated by a light that seemed to come from inside her. Something about the light made Dahlia's skin tingle with goose bumps; she could not look at it for long before she felt her stomach churn.

That was when a whistle sounded in Dahlia's head. It was soft at first like a train in the distance, but quickly grew louder and louder until it was worse than the time she turned the television all the way up and couldn't figure out how to turn it down. Then it was even louder than that, louder than the ambulances that routinely raced down the street where she played. Her eardrums screamed and throbbed against the force of the sound, but all she could do was cry.

When she thought she couldn't take it any longer, she felt big hands clap over her ears. She could still hear the whistle through his palms, but the pain had dulled considerably thanks to the padding they provided. The throbbing in her head gradually ceased.

Through her tears, Dahlia watched as her sister's body began twitching violently in the bearded man's arms. She was shaking so hard, so fast, that she

looked like a blur, like a picture badly out of focus. The more she shook, the more her features disappeared until she was just a streak of colors, yellow where her hair had been, and a swirl of red dress and pink limbs.

Behind her, the bearded man opened his mouth and took a deep breath in. Dahlia watched with horror as the colors that had once been Lucy, the yellows and reds and pinks, were sucked up in a stream into his nose and mouth, like dust into the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner.

“Yes,” she saw the man mouth as he inhaled, eyes closed in rapture. “That’s it.”

With each greedy breath he took, the stream grew thinner- the light dimmer, the colors fainter.

Dahlia realized that it wouldn’t be long before he had consumed all of Lucy. She tried to cry out, but her throat was dry and tight, and she could not make a sound.

Dahlia watched as the man’s breaths became labored. Lucy’s back arched towards him as he struggled to inhale the last of the fading light.

Fight! Dahlia’s mind raged. Fight him, Lucy! Don’t leave!

The train whistle in Dahlia’s ears picked up again, this time louder than it had been before. The hands over her ears did little to help this time; she could feel her head pulsing harder and harder, like a time bomb threatening to explode. She gritted her teeth and tried her hardest to hang onto the consciousness that she felt slipping through her fingers like a slick rope.

The bearded man was shaking now as he struggled to break the tether that bound Lucy’s light to her body.

“Close your eyes,” Dahlia heard someone whisper in the back of her head.

Dahlia squeezed her eyes shut as she fought for her own life. She could feel the hands pressing harder over her ears, the arms wrapping tighter around her until she was almost entirely enveloped in his jacket.

And then there was an explosion, like a cannon going off in front of her face. In an instant, she felt the man turn with her, catching most of the blast with his back.

The shock of the explosion was still enough to wrestle her consciousness away. She felt her body weakening in the man’s arms.

The last thing she remembered was the smooth leather of his jacket against her face.

Twenty minutes later, mall security found Dahlia wrapped around Lucy’s corpse, smeared with blood, face buried in her sister’s chest. Lucy’s skin was like white wax, her hair wan and colorless. Her empty eye sockets would not stop leaking blood.

CHAPTER 1

“Excuse me, miss? Miss?”

As Dahlia spun around, she almost dropped the water pitcher she had wedged under one arm. The sculpture she clutched, of coffee mugs balanced on ketchup-smeared plates, swayed precariously.

Staring up at her was a four top of middle-aged women with a matching short, curly hairstyles and a total of twelve chins between them. One of them was frantically waving the bun of her hamburger in the air. “Excuse me! I asked for no mayonnaise.”

“Yes, ma’am, I put the order in with no mayonnaise.”

“Well I see mayonnaise on this bun. Come here and look at it.”

After whispering a prayer to the patron saint of not murdering strangers, Dahlia shuffled as close to the table as she could without pegging the lady on the outside of the booth with a saucer. The condiments were all swirled together in an indiscriminate light orange goop.

Steve’s favorite mantra echoed through her head. “The customer’s always right, Sunshine.” She straightened her shoulders.

“You’re totally right, ma’am. I’ll go right back to the kitchen and get the chef to toast you a new bun.”

“Oh no,” the woman said, as if Dahlia had just kindly suggested that she go fornicate herself. “Take the whole thing back. I’m horribly *allergic* to mayonnaise, you know. I could *die*.”

“Oh... damn. Well I’ll have the kitchen remake the burger then, I guess,” Dahlia said. “And uh, I’ll have my manager take it off the bill for your trouble.”

The woman smiled a grin of nicotine stains. “Well, doesn’t that sound better?”

In the kitchen, Dahlia hurled the plates so forcefully into the dishwashing tub that she chipped a saucer, which was no small feat given the strength of commercial dishware. Jose, the forty-year-old dishwasher with the acne of a fifteen-year-old, looked up at her from his station.

“Señorita?”

“Sorry.”

He shrugged and went back to scrubbing down a gravy boat.

Back in the dining room, Dahlia violently jammed the order for a new hamburger into the screen of the P.O.S.

As she turned to walk away she saw Krista, her closest friend at the diner, standing behind her with a thin eyebrow quirked. “You okay, girl?”

Dahlia shoved her order pad into her apron and sighed. “Yeah, it’s whatever. I don’t even want to talk about today.”

“Well, watch yourself. Apparently Steve’s wife put him on Weight Watchers or something and he’s been an epic pill today.”

Dahlia snorted. “No shit.”

“Yeah,” Krista said. “He’s been on the rag all day. Almost wrote Dwayne up for having his sleeves rolled the wrong way.”

“He would.”

“Yeah, but I just wanted to warn you. Whatever it is you got going on? Just let it go.”

“But-”

“Just let it go.”

Dahlia rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

“Hey, are you going to Happy Hour at Friday’s after shift?”

Dahlia shook her head. “Book club.”

“Oh that’s right. Book club on Saturdays, almost forgot. What are you guys reading these days?”

“Oh... Uh, something about horses.”

“I see you’ve been keeping up with the reading.”

“Yeah, I’ve been kind of busy lately, you know, with all these doubles and stuff. But um... I gotta go check my tables,” Dahlia said, shrugging off towards her section under the weight of Krista’s stare.

“Well, okay then,” Krista said. She shook her head and turned back towards the POS.

For every server, the Saturday lunch shift was a mad dash through the weeds.

The recently renovated dining room was impressive in size, boasting rows and rows of booths, which were upholstered in a shiny burgundy vinyl that matched the awning outside and the shirts that the servers wore. The staff affectionately dubbed this color “fucking ugly.”

Rudy, the new general manager, had not upgraded the number of P.O.S. machines in his renovation last summer, citing healthy competition between servers as the key to productivity. A month later, their state wages mysteriously disappeared, whereas the number of fake potted plants and plastic trellises increased. Rumor had it that Rudy planned to install a skylight later that year. Rumor also had it that he’d gotten his start in management at an Olive Garden before being fired for stealing hundreds of boxes of chalky dinner mints.

Finally it was 3:30, and the rush had begun to taper off. Having just closed out her last check, Dahlia stood over the P.O.S. debating whether she should bother attempting to wring the grease out of the veggie burger. Employee meals were half priced, but she could only handle indigestion so many days out of the week.

A finger poked her between the shoulder blades. She jumped, as usual.

“Damn it, Steve. You really need a new greeting.”

He smiled with all his teeth, and she knew she was done for.

“Hey Sunshine. Would you mind taking a walk to the kitchen with me? I have something I want to talk to you about.”

He put his trunk-like arm around her shoulders as if they were taking a casual stroll through the park. For all the dining room’s plastic foliage, they could have been. She could smell something sour emanating from the damp cave under his arm.

“So listen,” Steve said. “I was visiting with some of your guests, and I was a surprised to hear that you’ve been a bit of a grumpy pants today. Is there something going on that I should know about?”

As they passed through the swinging doors of the kitchen, Steve’s smile fell flat. Dahlia had to shrug off his arm.

“No... It’s just been one of those days, I guess.”

Steve leaned back on the edge of the metal countertop, folding his arms in his lap. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes still leered. “You *sure* there’s nothing you want to talk about?”

She shook her head.

“Well, Sunshine, I have to be honest. You’ve been having ‘one of these days’ a lot lately. You sure there’s nothing you have to tell me?”

“Look, I-”

“Yes?”

He was twiddling his pudgy thumbs in his lap as he watched her.

“Forget it. It’s nothing, Steve. Don’t worry.”

When she looked up at him again, he was smiling.

“Now here’s the thing, Sunshine. I’m the staff manager; I can’t just not worry about it.” He looked her up and down quickly, with what he probably thought was subtlety. “How long have you worked for me now?”

“Almost three years,” she said.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that you and I, we’ve got a history together. Now if you were some scrub pulling stuff like this, I wouldn’t be so quick to forgive. But you, Dahlia...”

She heard the counter groan as he stood up again. He stepped past her towards the kitchen door, pausing only to tangle his fingers through her dark brown ponytail. “I’m just saying keep your chin up, Sunshine. I don’t want to have this talk again.”

When he released her hair, it was slightly damp at the ends. He shot her another crooked grin and disappeared into the dining room.

Dahlia released the breath she had been clenching and bent over, holding onto the counter for support. The tile floor beneath her swayed and spun like a kaleidoscope.

A moment later, the kitchen door swung open again. Steve’s chubby head appeared in the doorframe like a hideous pimple.

“Oh and Sunshine? The customers aren’t the only ones who can smell the smoke on you. Consider yourself on probation.”

The metal door flapped on its hinges.

“Fuck,” Dahlia said, savoring the relief that came from cursing aloud.

“Fuck! FUCK!”

Her expletives were conveniently muffled by the mariachi music blaring from the back of the kitchen. Apparently Steve had yet to tell Armando to “turn that taco shit off.”

Dahlia crouched down to the floor, hugging her knees to her chest. A cockroach scurried busily from one cabinet to another. Behind the dishwashing station, Jose sorted the dirty dishes in a chorus of clinks as porcelain met metal. The beat of the clinks almost matched the upbeat rhythm of the mariachi music, which always seemed too happy for its own good. One of the line chefs began to sing to the radio. His voice warbled and cracked as he tried to hit the high notes.

“Fuck,” Dahlia said, feeling a frustrated tear trickle down her cheek. She wiped it away with her knuckles, only to find that her hand was smeared black with wet mascara.

It was bullshit. Everyone, down to the guy who came in to change the light bulbs every so often, smoked. And Steve was a first-class cigarette bum. With his

favorites, he would barter side-work for a smoke or two. With everybody else, he would barter their employment.

But probation?

“Damn it, Steve.”

Dahlia had barely muttered the words when in poked the head of Stephanie, the 16-year-old hostess. Her long blonde hair was swept back in an elaborate up-do of pink butterfly clips and braids.

“I sat you,” she said.

When Dahlia looked up, the head was gone.

“Fuck Stephanie and her fucking Lisa Frank pens,” Dahlia grumbled as she stood up and brushed off the knees of her pants. “She would.”

Instead of following Stephanie through the swinging doors, Dahlia wandered over to the employee bathroom and gave the door a few hard raps before entering. Her first year on the job, she had walked in on Oscar banging the new busgirl Yulia doggy-style on the toilet seat.

Dahlia flicked on the lights and pulled the door shut behind her, taking care to step over the streamers of dirty toilet paper that littered the floor. Perching her hands on the cracked sink, she stared into the mirror until her eyes began to burn.

Dahlia was quite literally a sight for sore eyes. Her light blue irises looked more translucent than usual, more grey than blue, and beneath her eye sockets she could see dashes of purple blood vessels. In the blinking fluorescent light her square cheeks looked hollow and her lips were deflated and pale. Her scrawny white neck sprouted like a stem from the collar of her maroon shirt.

“One more table,” she said to the shabby imitation of herself in the mirror. “That means one more tip. Think of the tip.”

She could swear she saw her own eyes illuminate at the very word.

She heaved a sigh and reached for the doorknob. “Fuck me.”

Dahlia trekked slowly through the kitchen and into the dining room, staring down at her Converse sneakers the whole way.

She rounded the corner to find that Stephanie had sat table 20, the four-top that only hours ago had housed Large Marge and friends. A single customer sat in the back corner of the booth, as far back as possible, behind the screen of an unfolded menu.

She took a deep breath, pulled her pad from the pocket of her dirty apron, and poised her pen over the paper as if she were about to write. It usually worked as the universal symbol for “stop wasting my time and order, asshole.” Usually.

The person behind the menu did not stir.

Just when she contemplated clearing her throat obnoxiously, the menu fell to the table, and Dahlia was face-to-face with a man she had never seen before in town.

He had a long face, with almond eyes set deep in dark brown skin. His cheekbones were flat and very high set, betraying what had to be Native American blood. His nose was bent at the bridge like it had never healed from its last break, and a cleft cut through the tip of his chin. Despite the roughness of his features, his peach lips looked surprisingly soft. His black hair was tied back by a

headband of black bandana and fell in waves just past his shoulder. He stared back at her from the shadow of his heavy brows, narrowing his black-lined eyes.

She took a deep breath.

“Hi, my name’s Dahlia and I’ll be taking care of you. Can I start you out with-”

“Jack Daniels,” he said. “No ice.” He pulled the collar of his heavy black trench coat up with both hands and glared at her over the upturned fabric.

Dahlia was surprised to find her fingers trembling as she punched the order for the liquor into the P.O.S. screen.

“Who let the thug in?” Krista spoke up from beside her, leaning back against the wall with her arms crossed in front of her chest. She wore her kinky blonde hair loose in defiance of the diner’s ponytail requirement.

“Thug? You think so?”

“I saw Stephanie seat him. He’s got knuckle tats.”

“No way. I didn’t notice.”

“I don’t know how.” Krista smirked, looking down at the P.O.S. over Dahlia’s shoulder. “And he orders a fucking glass of Jack. Classic.”

Dahlia shrugged. “I honestly don’t care, Kris. I just want to get through today.”

“Whatever. I’ll grab your Jack.”

When Dahlia delivered the drink she tried to look for the knuckle tattoos, but the man had hidden his hands beneath the table. He glowered at her as she set it down.

“One Jack Daniels,” she said. Her voice wavered, betraying the false cheeriness that she wore as the other part of her uniform. He did not thank her.

On days like this, Dahlia pictured her patience like a rubber band, twisting tighter and tighter inside her head.

“Would you like for some more time to decide?” Dahlia asked. The words felt like someone else had spoken them.

“No.” He stared down at the open menu.

Dahlia bit her lip and rocked back on her heels, praying to the ceiling that she wouldn’t lose it and throw her apron at Steve for the last time.

She glanced over her shoulder to find that the dining room had emptied entirely except for table 20. Most servers had cashed out, and Oscar was busy wiping down the tables one row over. The diamond studs in his ears glimmered beneath the fluorescent lighting. When he caught her eye, he nodded and licked his gold front teeth.

“Bacon cheeseburger,” the man at the table finally said. Dahlia didn’t bother to write it down.

“Fries okay with that?”

“Yeah, whatever.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand. She noticed that his knuckles were in fact tattooed in fancy black letters, but he did not hold still long enough for her to read them. On his fingers he wore a strange collection of big black rings, most of which were featured some sort of skull.

Dahlia snatched up the menu. She could feel his eyes boring holes in the back of her head as she walked away.

Back at the P.O.S., Krista hadn't lost her smirk. "Man he's getting to you. Your face is really red."

Dahlia cupped her cheeks to find that they were swollen and hot.

"Fuck him. He's just so..."

"Rude?"

"No, no. That's not it. I mean. I guess he is a jerk. But it's not really that that bothers me about him. It's like well... I don't really even know."

Krista shrugged. "Yeah, okay."

After silently delivering the food, Dahlia stood back over by the bar and watched as he meticulously examined the burger and sniffed it like an animal surveying a carcass.

"That's so weird," Krista said. "Who does that?"

"Yeah," Dahlia said mostly to feign paying attention.

Dahlia heard the familiar shuffling of someone heavy dragging their feet over to the bar. She turned and pretended to busy herself with the P.O.S.

"So's that our last one?" Steve asked with his mouth full, biting off a hunk of tuna sandwich. Tuna juice dripped down his pudgy fist, and he licked at it.

"Yeah."

"He yours?"

Dahlia nodded, though the phrasing of the question bothered her.

"Have you done your two minute check?" Steve finished off the sandwich and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Dahlia noticed that Krista had expertly vanished.

Hoping to save herself another little chat, she put on her most convincing smile. "Was just about to go do that, actually. Thanks. I'll be right back."

Steve nodded and waved her away.

"Just checking in to see how everything is," Dahlia said with a cheer that made her want to kick her own ass.

He stared up at her, eyebrows high on his forehead. There was barbecue sauce dotting the side of his mouth, and she wanted to wipe it away with a belt sander.

The rubber band in her head stretched tighter. "You know, the food?"

He shrugged.

She shot a look back at Steve, to find that he was busy harassing Stephanie at her podium. She could tell by the way he lifted his huge carriage that he was attempting to flirt.

The rubber band snapped. "Look," Dahlia said, leaning over the table so she could stare him right in his black beady eyes. "I don't know what the fuck your problem is, buddy, but the least you could do is answer me. You wanna try working here?"

The man was silent.

"You see that guy?" Dahlia motioned to Steve. "He's been trying to get in my pants for three years. He's got a wife and a new baby and he brags about the young girls he bangs on the side. You want to work for that fat motherfucker?"

"And then you come in here after my shift technically ends and start acting like you own the place? Be my fucking guest, buddy. Go on, buy the place

and then maybe we can get rid of these fucking dumb plants, and- Are you laughing at me?"

His smile of perfect white teeth illuminated his entire countenance. Instantly, he looked ten years younger.

"Sorry," he apologized with the first hint of sincerity he had displayed since he'd walked in.

"No, no, it's okay," she said. "Sorry to unload on you like that."

"Seth," he said simply, holding out a hand. Despite the tattoos and rings, his fingers had a delicate quality to them. The nails were immaculately painted black.

"Dahlia," she replied. She took his hand to shake it.

The second their hands made contact, a rush of cold dread exploded through Dahlia's body. The world in front of her was swallowed into a gulf of black, formless and soundless except for one tiny little whistle that started out so faint she barely heard it but quickly grew louder like a train hurtling towards her. Then everything exploded.

When Dahlia came to, her body was numb and seated at an empty booth. On the table were most of a cheeseburger and a twenty-dollar bill.

CHAPTER 2

Dahlia wrapped her fleece jacket tighter around her as she turned the corner onto Main. A chilly headwind picked up, tousling the dried leaves that littered the sidewalk and tangling Dahlia's loose hair. She shot a look behind her and quickened her pace.

She twitched, startled as a heavy chime rang out from the clock tower, so loud she could feel it in her chest. She stared upwards at the dome of the tower and was temporarily blinded by the rays of red sunlight reflected in its glass surface. The long spindly hands of the clock, capped with spades instead of arrows, announced 8:00.

The morning news had put sunset at 8:04.

Shoving her hands in her pockets, she walked briskly past city hall, trying not to look at its neatly trimmed courtyard of hedges and weeping willows and pebbled pathways twisting past tear-stained statues of creole girls. The building itself was massive and white and framed by columns and wooden shutters. The whole lot had once belonged to a powerful plantation owner; rumor had it that when the city workers had first tried to landscape the yard, they had uncovered mounds full of human skeletons, warped and twisted into impossible positions.

Dahlia shivered, only partially from the wind. She rubbed her hands up and down her crossed arms, but it didn't do much. The chill she felt was deeper, inside the marrow of her bones.

Avington was a relatively small city as cities went, but received its fair share of attention because of its "southern gothic" ambience, an ambience which the historical council went to great lengths to preserve. Every building façade was brick, every fence wrought iron and topped with tiny pointed spades. No structure

downtown stood higher than three or four stories, with the exception of the grand cathedral that glowered at the city from the top of the hill where it sat.

Brisk mornings and balmy afternoons meant that a layer of fog perpetually carpeted the city streets, particularly at night, scattering the light from the green lampposts like tiny comets. As if the fog weren't enough of a hazard, the city was overrun with statues of weeping stone angels that stood at random points on the sidewalks and planters, cracked in places from contact with elbows and hips. Dahlia had no idea what they meant, these angels, or more importantly why they were always so sad. There were a million angels in Avington, and all of them wept.

It was a beautiful city, but to Dahlia it always seemed just a little bit off – like the strained smile on a porcelain doll. Maybe it was the way the streets lurched haphazardly this way and that, cutting random alleys between buildings that only sometimes made sense. From afar, the street map looked like a shattered pane of glass.

Or maybe it was the blood spilled some nights, shining black like oil on the sidewalk, seeping down past the lattices down into the gutters. There was so much blood – surely the very sewers ran red.

But hardly anyone knew about the murders. The city had gotten good at removing the bodies before anyone woke up. The blood was hosed away and left behind only slight discolorations like bruises on the pavement.

Dahlia watched as a young couple crossed the street carelessly, swinging their intertwined hands back and forth as they walked. They had no clue about any of it, and they weren't the only ones. There were thousands of that couple wandering the town, stopping at every corner to kiss urgently, as though they would be separated at any time, with no idea that such a thought wasn't entirely off base.

And still the clubs kept their doors open until early morning, enticing Avington's young and horny with the pulse of electronic music, slow and sensual against the haze of cigarette smoke that made it impossible to see from one end of the room to another.

From her vantage point by city hall, Dahlia had a panoramic view of the entertainment district. The main drag of bars and lounges sprawled for what seemed like miles of neon signs. It was Saturday, which meant that Dahlia could already make out the silhouettes of girls hobbling awkwardly in high heels and guys in shirts with the collars popped up to their ears, all of them defenseless against the sweet lure of the clubs.

Just beyond the bars, looming like a parent with crossed arms, the steeple of the Avington Cathedral pierced the flaming sky.

A massive baroque cross, gleaming gold, shone like a beacon from the tallest tower; light flittered in red beams from the rose window below. The spires on the rooftops protruded like little needles, sharp as the grimaces on the faces of the gargoyles perched at the corners. Above the doors, carved in huge letters, were the words *Libera me Domine in morte aeterna*. At the entrance, instead of a statue of the Mother with open arms, a bronze statue of the bleeding Son stood

alone, fingers tucked into the open gash in his side. Oxygenation had turned his tears green.

The second she saw the steeple, Dahlia broke into a jog.

The quickest way to the church was through the graveyard, which was itself a marvel of gothic architecture. Beautiful marble mausoleums dating back to the eighteenth century housed Avington's most important citizens, and more statues of angels stood scattered across the sloping green landscape, easily mistaken for people in the fog. These angels were no exceptions to the others; they wept perhaps more bitterly for the life snuffed out around them.

Pulling the hood of her jacket up over her head, Dahlia raced down the hill and darted beneath an arch into the camposanto.

Gravel shuffled noisily beneath her feet as she made her way through the grounds. The tall evergreens that lined the paths looked black tonight. Dense warm mist choked the air and made it hard for Dahlia to breathe.

Something scurried past her so quickly that she almost didn't notice. The trees rustled, agitated by the intruder.

Dahlia froze, straining to listen for movement. Her hand immediately found its way to the inside pocket of her jacket.

A moment later she heard another rustle.

"Show yourself," Dahlia called to the trees, urging her voice not to tremble.

The rustling grew louder.

Dahlia took a slow step backwards. A dead branch snapped under her heel.

A shrill howl stirred the night air. Dahlia let out a little yelp of surprise as a dark figure sprung from the trees.

The cat hissed and growled, arching its back as it glared up at her.

Dahlia let out a relieved sigh.

"Shoo!"

She kicked the ground in the cat's direction, which was enough to send it scurrying back behind the trees. Clumps of matted fur floated to the ground behind it.

"Just a stupid cat," Dahlia said. She stretched her arms up over her shoulders until they felt limber again. "Nice one, Dahlia."

She shook her head, but still found herself walking slower and more carefully than before. Her watch had slipped down her forearm, and she shook her hand until it was back on her wrist. 8:16, the dial read. She would be on time, but just barely.

It was not like her to lose her wits over some dumb cat, but Dahlia had been on edge all day since that incident with the man named Seth. There was nothing overtly wrong with her, no aches or pains that hadn't been there before, no obvious hallucinations or signs of derangement, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something had subtly changed inside her, even on the molecular level – some atom had been knocked out of alignment somewhere. No matter what she did, she could not get her body to relax; the hairs still bristled on her forearms when she smoothed them down, and sometimes she caught herself looking out of the corner of her eye so hard it hurt.

Dahlia normally didn't mind the graveyard; she actually rather liked it. She wasn't big into superstition in spite of the nature of her work, or maybe because of it. She knew what *really* went bump in the night, and those things tended to stay away from the church grounds, mostly thanks to the holy runes of exorcism inscribed on every pillar and archway. Tonight, however, the stillness that she usually found so comforting wasn't doing her nerves any favors. Every step she took on the gravel echoed through the empty passages, volleyed back and forth from headstone to headstone.

A couple times she could've sworn she heard, or more so felt, something shifting behind her, and she almost called out to ask who was there. But her senses acted quicker than her fears, and forced the words back down her throat before they could emerge.

"It's all a bunch of nothing," she whispered to herself, just quietly enough that an echo could not pick up her words. "You need to get over yourself, Dahlia. You freak out on patrol like this and you're screwed."

Ahead of her the path forked in two. To the right the main road continued through to the cathedral, where she was headed. To the left, the path snaked its way to a rock garden, whose lattices in summer were wound with roses. Beyond the garden, little marble headstones dotted the hills like teeth – one for each child. Lucy's grave was three rows back, to the right.

A life-sized statue stood where the paths diverged, this one a nude cherub. Stone roses lay at its feet, their stems smooth without thorns. It held one chubby hand pressed to its face, wiping away its tears; the other hand clutched a blanket that spilled over the front of its body, preserving the mystery of its sex.

Dahlia could have sworn as she neared the statue that she heard it sniffle.

She was about to pinch the skin on her arm when she heard it again, this time louder. Another sniffle, and what sounded like a little gasp. A choke, a breath, then a sob.

"What the," she muttered, shaking her head so hard she was momentarily dizzy. She squeezed her eyes shut and blinked a few times, then pinched her nose, closed her mouth, and blew. Her sinuses popped like cherry bombs.

She had rebooted her senses to no avail. As soon as her ears cleared, she could hear the muffled gasps again.

"Why are you crying?" Dahlia asked before she could stop herself.

There was a distinct pause in the sniffing. "Who's there?" a bleary voice asked.

"Why are you crying?" Dahlia asked again.

"Who are you?"

"Well, I can see we're making great strides here," Dahlia said, rolling her eyes. "My name is Dahlia."

It took another second before reality settled in on her, and she remembered that she was in a cemetery after sunset holding a conversation with a statue. "I've really fucking lost it this time."

Dahlia rolled her eyes again and began to walk past the statue. As she rounded the other side, she realized that the shadow it cast was way too large and oddly shaped, and in fact appeared to be moving the longer she stared at it.

“Hey,” the voice said, sharper and more alert this time.

Dahlia almost jumped as she watched a thin figure stand up from behind the statue.

A man, terribly pale, about her age.

He was dressed all in black, which explained why she hadn’t seen him in the shadow at first; his limbs were so spindly they seemed to unfold as he stood. As her eyes adjusted to the sight of him, she noticed that he was wearing a pinstripe suit that hung on his bony frame as if he were more coat hanger than man. The long black scarf he wore coiled around his neck sort of made it look like his head was floating, if Dahlia squinted a little bit. A fraying top hat, a few sizes too small for his head, sat propped back on his tangled nest of hair.

“Will you help me find him?” he asked, smearing the tears from his eyes. She detected a hint of an accent in his voice, Scottish or Irish or something. The way he mumbled made it hard to tell.

“Find who?” Dahlia said.

Though the suddenness of his presence alarmed her, a couple glances up and down told her he was hardly any threat. Everything about him seemed brittle, like he was on the verge of collapsing inwards. She doubted he could even pick up a pebble from the path to fling at her.

Moreover, there was something eternally juvenile, even innocent about him. He might’ve looked like he was in his twenties, but it was clear that he had never mentally surpassed childhood. Fresh tears bubbled up from his eyes, spilling down his face.

Just looking at him made Dahlia’s chest ache with something that ran a little deeper than pity.

“Colin, my brother,” he said. “A monster’s got him.”

Dahlia resisted the urge to shudder and stood up straighter. “Monster?”

“Yeah, a man took him. He had these weird thingies on his arms, these black marks. Ain’t seen anything like ‘em.”

“Shit,” Dahlia said, feeling her heart beginning to thump harder in her chest. “Here? In the graveyard?”

“Yes,” the man-boy said. “We went on a walk, but we got lost. This man was gonna show us the way out, but when I asked him about the stuff on his arms he grabbed my brother and ran.” His voice cracked as he let out a sob. “My mom’s gonna be so mad!”

“How long ago did he take him?” Dahlia said.

“Just a minute ago before you came. They ran that way,” he said, pointing towards the children’s graves. “I chased ‘em as far as I could but my legs are no good, and I had to stop.”

“I’ll find him,” Dahlia said.

“Thank you,” the man-boy said. His mouth turned up as far as it could into something of a smile – any farther, and Dahlia was afraid his skin would split. “Please, you gotta go get him.”

“I will,” she said. “Stay here by this statue, okay? If anyone comes to you stay hidden.”

He nodded, slinking back behind the statue with his thin hands pressed up against its back. "I'm Eddie by the way," he said.

"I'll find your brother, Eddie," Dahlia said. "Be right back."

Dahlia sprinted all the way to the rock garden, urged on by the adrenaline of the chase and the desperation in Eddie's black eyes. Chances were the fiend hadn't gotten too far before the urge to feed had overcome him, and he'd had to stop to devour his catch. Sometimes they waited until they found cover, but rarely. The hunger usually seemed to dominate every other sense.

Nephilim was what the church called them – the most savage, primal of creatures – demons who wore the faces of the men they had once been. Sometimes the only thing that distinguished them at all was the mark of the beast on their forearms. The streets at night were their playground; the mortals were like dolls in their hands, forced to perform the same scenes with the same horrible endings. The splash of blood on the sidewalk was the curtain.

The victims were always found eyeless.

When Dahlia came to the rock garden, she paused, holding her breath so she could hear even the subtlest traces of movement. The world around her was still. Haze shrouded the air, unbroken in every direction.

Either she was too late, or the naphil had changed direction and headed off somewhere else. Desperate for anything that would point her on the right track, Dahlia did something she knew was idiotic – a rookie mistake. But it was all she could think to do, and the clock was swiftly winding down.

"Colin!" she called out as loud as she could. "Colin, can you hear me?"

The acoustics were different out in the hills. Instead of reverberating, her voice was trapped around her, dampened by the fog. She doubted anyone could hear her from more than a few feet away.

But still she persisted, calling Colin's name as she wound her way through the children's graveyard, and still the silence was crushing. She was on the verge of giving up on the area and heading back towards the main road when she heard the muffled cries.

"Colin? Is that you?"

"Help me," a little voice whimpered. "He hurt me bad."

"Hold on," she said. "Stay where you are."

"Please, miss. He's gonna come back."

Dahlia followed the sound of his whimpering to another plot a few feet away, beyond a tall oak. She spotted him easily behind a headstone. He was also dressed in all black, and curled into a little ball, his face pressed into his knees.

"Shh," she soothed, crouching down to his level slowly so as not to spook him. "I'm here to bring you back to your brother."

"You are?" His tone was incredulous, and he did not look up from his knees.

"Come on," Dahlia said, tugging gently on the child's shoulder. "We have to get out of here before the naphil comes back."

"Okay," he said, but still did not raise his face.

"Come on," Dahlia urged.

“Hold on,” he said. “I want to tell you something first. It’s a secret, though.”

“Uh,” Dahlia stammered, taking off guard by his request. “We need to go.”

“Please,” he said. “It’ll just take a second... Please, missus, I’m hurt.”

She had yet to see his face, but something in his voice made her think that, unlike his brother, he had all his mental faculties about him. If anything, he seemed too clever, too deliberate for his age. The wavering timber of his voice, the way his shoulders trembled ever so slightly to punctuate each phrase, the way he let out a little hiccup now and then as he smoothed his face on his jeans – every gesture almost seemed rehearsed, polished to maximum effect.

“We need to go,” she said, shifting with unease. She began to move her hand away from his shoulder, but he snatched it up before she could let go of him, with reflexes so quick she had hardly seen him move.

His grip felt like a cold metal handcuff.

“I said I wanted to tell you something,” he said, shedding his helplessness like an itchy sweater.

“Let me go,” she said.

“Stupid girl.”

He yanked her forward so hard that she lost her footing and tumbled into the grass beside him. She lay on her back for a moment, stunned and breathless by the sudden impact. He hiked the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows and took her by the shoulders. The black hydras on his forearms shook their many heads side-to-side, as if taunting her for forgetting that a little boy could wear the mark of the beast just as well as anyone.

“So my secret?” His face hovered above her, but in the shadow it was black and formless. It took her a moment for her eyes to adjust, and when they did she couldn’t help gasping a little.

He was a bit older than she had first thought – an adolescent, maybe twelve or thirteen – but his age would have been much easier to surmise were it not for the jagged slices that connected each corner of his mouth to each ear. The slices looked fresh – the opened skin was still red and angry – but no blood trickled from the wounds.

She shuddered in revulsion; her shoulders began to ache where he held them pinned to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Colin said, chiding her in a voice that would never deepen. As he spoke the thick flaps of skin opened, revealing the bleached bone underneath. “Everybody tells me I have the nicest smile.”

She closed her eyes, but it was only temporary relief, as he had begun to sing in sweet soprano, “*And from his nose unto his chin, the worms crawled out, the worms crawled in.*”

“Wait!”

“*Then she unto the parson said, shall I be so when I am dead?*”

“But the runes-”

“Runes? You think those pathetic things will protect you? They’re like a pinch or a bee sting. In fact, I laugh every time I pass one by. We both do.”

“Both,” Dahlia muttered. As the pieces finally came into place, she felt herself overcome by the urge to slam her fist down onto the ground, if only she could raise it first. “Damn it! Of course.”

“And what good do they do on pillars, anyway? You’d be better off putting them on the ground, for all they do.”

Dahlia heard shuffling not too far away and tilted her head to watch a set of scraggly paws saunter close to her. She recognized them immediately, as well as the pair of scuffed black oxfords that followed.

“I’m so sorry, missus,” Eddie said dolefully, picking the cat up and cuddling her to his chest. “I feel terrible after you were so awfully nice to me and Miss Annabel.”

“Stop sniveling,” Colin snapped. He leaned in closer to Dahlia, his face only inches from her own. “*O yes! O yes! The parson said. You will be so when you are dead.*”

Dahlia squirmed and thrashed, but the boy’s grip on her was too strong.

Colin pressed his horrible mask of a face into the crook of her neck and took one long sniff. “You smell fresh. Just like mother before the worms got her. Before they took her eyes.”

“Save it,” Dahlia said, though her voice was starting to crack. “Spare me the mind fuck.”

“Fuck,” Eddie giggled. He sat down on one of the gravestones and caressed the length of Miss Annabel’s shaggy tail.

Colin said nothing. He ran his hands up and down the sides of Dahlia’s arms, stroking her the way Eddie stroked the cat. Dahlia tried to look up, but all she could see was the terrible carved grin leering back at her.

She screamed.

“Aw, missus, please don’t yell like that,” Eddie said, stiffening. “Please, stop it.”

Colin closed his eyes and began to chant.

It began first as a twitch in her joints, a little uncontrolled spasm she hardly noticed. But then she began to feel it deeper in her bones, and then she could feel it in her joints, where the knobs of the bones rattled around in the sockets. Soon all of her limbs were quaking, smacking against the ground and sending pain rippling out from the points of contact. If she hit her head any harder, she knew she would be knocked unconscious.

She couldn’t feel her throat anymore, but she must have still been screaming because she could hear Eddie’s own anguished cries rising against hers.

“Please stop,” he pleaded. “I can’t bear to hear it.”

Tears dripped down his hollow cheeks. Miss Annabelle stood up on her hind legs and licked at the streams as they fell.

“Yes,” Colin whispered between chants. “That’s right. Scream for your Creator, little sister.”

Dahlia could feel something familiar swelling under her skin, something hot expanding like a balloon in her chest, growing bigger every time she cried out.

“Cry, sister. That’s right.”

“Stop!” Eddie shrieked, clapping his hands over his ears.

She could feel that hot balloon pressing harder against the inside of her body, ever expanding, seeking a way out. She could hardly breathe anymore. She bit her lip and pinched her eyes shut, focusing on the heat.

“What’s that?” Colin said, poking her on the forehead. “She’s tired herself out?”

“I can’t bear it.”

“Shut up, Eddie.”

“Serious, Colin, I can’t take it when they scream.”

“I said shut up. Let me concentrate.”

“I-”

“So help me, Eddie... Are you laughing?”

Eddie shook his head.

“What the-”

“She’s laughing,” Eddie remarked.

“What?”

Dahlia’s body still bucked and thrashed against the ground, but her face was no longer contorted in pain. Instead she was quietly chuckling to herself, as though she were reminiscing about the most fantastic joke to which only she knew the punch line.

“Why the hell would she be laughing?” Colin cried.

“Because I hate you,” she said.

Colin frowned and cocked his head.

As if on cue the balloon inside of her exploded, sending heat shooting out through her pores like flames through a vent.

Her body stopped thrashing at once. She could feel her pain receding as a stronger sensation took hold, and every molecule in her body became charged with an energy that she knew well – a heat that she craved when she was lying in bed at night, wishing she were pacing the streets instead. Her most beautiful passion: hatred.

Her hatred coursed through her veins like a new blood, pumping its way through her heart. It was her feast, her communion. The closer to death she let herself go, the faster the hot balloon of hatred expanded inside her until she could hardly contain it. And then it was time to dance.

Dahlia swatted Colin aside and sprung to her feet. He fell back to the ground, stunned cold.

She drew the dagger out from the inside of her coat and held it up in front of her. The blade shined like a mirror; in the two beveled surfaces, half of her face appeared to be grinning while the other half sneered. The embossed V on the handle cut into her palm the tighter she gripped it.

Colin pulled himself to his feet. “Vigil. I should’ve known.”

“Who else?”

“And here I was just thinking that you were stupid.”

“Beginner’s mistake.”

Colin straightened his shoulders, bringing his fists up to his chest like a boxer preparing for a match. He had regrouped and he was ready.

Dahlia took the first step forward to initiate.

She called it the Dance of the Dead. One-on-one it always went the same, that infernal tango, punctuated by back steps and slashes of her dagger. Colin stepped forward, and she slashed, and he ducked gracefully. Because of his size he hardly had to bend at all.

Man versus past-man, the almost dead versus the almost living. It was poetic, really. Colin danced well, nimble on his little feet as he bent beneath her dagger as though it were a limbo pole. He was a beautiful creature: a boy with a man's grace. A pity she'd have to destroy him.

The dance was all about endurance. Each step was tight, precise, building upon past steps and anticipating future ones. She held a map of their movements in her mind, along with their surroundings, which she felt more than saw. In the end, it came down to concentration. Whoever would falter first – a little misstep here, a hesitation there – would in essence be laying themselves before the other's feet. And then it was all elementary. A bold, closing stride and a slash, and it was done. And she would take a bow.

Colin was good, but she was better. And when Eddie let out a little panicked gasp, it was just enough to make Colin miss his sidestep and stumble out of synch. Dahlia seized the opportunity and lunged forward, grabbing the boy by the collar of his shirt.

"Dahlia!"

It was the last voice she had expected to hear.

Startled, she relaxed her grip on Colin's collar which was just enough to allow him to wrestle free of her grasp. He scampered off into the mist, Eddie at his heels.

"Law?"

Her boyfriend of two years sprinted towards her, stopping to catch his breath with one hand against a gravestone.

"Dahlia. I heard your screams."

"Of course you did," she said, frowning.

"I'm so glad I got here in time," Law said between pants. He smoothed his blonde bangs back from his sweaty forehead. His glasses were perched precariously at the end of his nose.

"In time? I had him."

"Dahlia, do you have any idea who the bloody hell that is?"

"Some brat named Colin. At least that's what his brother said. I think he's... you know. Slow."

"Dahlia," Law said gravely. He'd managed to regain most of his breath and, perhaps more importantly, his British indignance. "That's Wormboy."

"Wormboy," Dahlia repeated.

"As in the naphil child responsible for more gruesome murders than just about anyone in this town? Yes. That Wormboy."

"No shit," Dahlia said, sinking down against a gravestone as the weight of the realization bore down on her. "I just never knew he had a brother. Or that whole face thing."

“Disgusting, isn’t it? And to think it’s the last thing some people ever see.”

“Ew.” Dahlia ran her hand over her dagger as if cleansing it before sheathing it in the pocket of her jacket.

“So, as I said. It’s a damned good thing I got here in time.” Law straightened up, extending a hand to Dahlia. “Come on, we need to get moving.”

“Speaking of time, aren’t you super late too, Mr. Anal Retentively Punctual?”

“I had a meeting that ran late,” Law said, pulling Dahlia to her feet. “And speaking of which, say hello to the new junior partner at Marist and Penn.”

Dahlia brightened, bouncing up and down on the balls of her sneakers.

“Mr. Associate got promoted?”

“To the tune of a hundred twenty grand a year plus eight thousand signing bonus,” Law said, hardly able to conceal his grin.

“Come here, you!” Dahlia threw her arms around him, nearly wringing the life from him in the process, and smothered his face with kisses.

“Hey, easy there. Easy,” Law said, chuckling despite himself. “Watch the glasses.”

“We need to celebrate. I’ll make lasagna.”

“Hell, I think a night out is in order. But not this weekend; I’ve got a new office to move into and all.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Dahlia said. She kissed him again before letting him go.

“It’s about time. I didn’t go to Harvard Law to fetch coffee for a living,” Law said.

“Yeah,” Dahlia said, falling silent. She hadn’t gone to university for nothing either, but there she was: professional fetcher of coffee, soft drinks, burgers, and salads ten hours a day, five days a week. Sal’s – service with a smile!

Sometimes Dahlia wanted to punch herself in the face.

“Shit. 8:49. We’re already twenty minutes late,” Law said, glancing at the Rolex on the underside of his wrist.

“Guess we’re getting some penance tonight.”

Law cringed. “Let’s just hope Gregory’s had some of his sauce tonight, if you know what I mean.”

“Lawrence Clifton. Is that irreverence I detect?” She stuck out her tongue at him.

He grinned and shoved her sideways, nearly into one of the gravestones. “What can I say? I guess I’m in a good mood.”

“Hallelujah!”

“Watch yourself.”

“Whatever. I can outrun you.” And as if to prove her point, Dahlia took off like a shot towards the main road to the church.

“Hey!” Law called behind her. “Hey, that’s not fair. Get back here! False start! False start, I say!”

Her laughter drowned out his protests.

CHAPTER 3

“Miss Ellis, Mr. Clifton. You are late,” Monsignor Gregory said from the chapel’s lectern.

Rows of votive candles lined the altar, illuminating only the underside of his gaunt face. His grey lips were flattened into a line, and his knobby arthritic knuckles gripped the wooden ledge as if he were attempting to pry the lectern in two.

Dahlia emerged from the narthex, face flushed from having run the rest of the way. She nearly tripped over the hem of her hooded black robe as she made her way down the marble aisle of the dimly lit cathedral.

“I’m sorry, Monsignor,” she said.

Law followed a few steps behind her, about as composed as she wasn’t. His robe hung neatly, not a wrinkle or crease to be seen, and he carried himself with as much self-assurance as a church peon could have – shoulders straight, hands folded reverently.

“I apologize for our lateness, Monsignor. We had an incident in the cemetery.”

The ninety-eight men in the pews stared contemptuously at the latecomers from the protective shadows of their hoods.

At the lectern, Gregory crossed his skeletal arms in front of his chest. “The Vigil is a sacred organization, not to be disrespected, Missss Elliss. Missster Clifton.” He exaggerated the s’s in their names in long serpentine hisses. “Surely I don’t need to remind you of that.”

Dahlia shook her head quickly. “No Monsignor.”

Law was silent.

“Then surely,” he said, leaning down over the podium like a cobra about to strike, “you will have no trouble doing your penance.”

A buzz of snickers and scoffs hummed through the crowd. Law dismissed them with his hand, as though he were waving away a pesky mosquito.

“For your penance,” Gregory said, “Mr. Clifton, you will say the entire rosary. Miss Ellis, you will do the Stations of the Cross. On your knees.”

A stunned hush fell over the congregation. The disparity between those two penances was profound: the rosary was perhaps the mildest penance; any adept like Law could breeze through it before the meeting came to an end.

The Stations, on the other hand, was agony. The cathedral was the better part of a football field in size, and the tile was cold and unforgiving. The last time Dahlia had to perform the Stations of the Cross, she had torn a ligament in her knee.

Law bowed, pulling a strand of beads from the pocket of his robe. He took his place at the back of the congregation, unfolded the cushion from behind the pew, and knelt down, winding the rosary around his fingers.

Dahlia must have hesitated for too long, because the monsignor shot her a warning glare. “Miss Ellis?”

Heart fluttering in her chest, she scrambled towards the back left corner of the church where the first station was posted.

Before one hundred witnesses, she sunk down to her knees and stared up at the carving, hands clasped in prayer. The chill of the freezing marble seeped through her thin cotton pants and sent shivers up and down her legs. It was only a minute before her kneecaps began to throb against the hard floor.

“Station 1,” the gold plaque explained. “The Son is condemned to death.”

She stared up into the face of the tiny wooden Son. His hands were tied and bound with a long rope like a leash; a soldier carrying a spear held the other end. His back was turned, but his eyes lingered behind him to where the Betrayer stood numbly fingering a tiny pouch of silver. There was peace in the Son’s lineless face, but in his narrowed eyes lingered a hurt, honest and overwhelmingly human, that made Dahlia ache for him. She reached out with one hand to touch the wooden figure, but her arm fell short.

The congregation had since lost interest in Dahlia’s penance and moved on with the meeting. At the lectern, Monsignor Gregory raised his arms out towards the crowd in front of him. The long sleeves of his black cassock sprawled like dark wings; the huge silver V he wore around his neck glimmered orange in the candlelight.

“*Dominus pascit me*,” he said.

“*Et nihil mihi deerit*,” the congregation replied.

This creed continued for some time. Each man’s lips moved in perfect synch, for both conviction and fear of his own penance. All pairs of eyes, except for one, were focused ahead at the monsignor. The one exception, a young priest in the front row with a face as dark as his robes, stared with jaundiced eyes at Dahlia’s kneeling frame. He crossed himself and brought the crucifix around his neck to his lips.

“The autumnal equinox is upon us once more,” Gregory said, lowering his arms to his sides. “And the time has come again to dedicate ourselves to the Vigil’s sacred brotherhood.”

“Glory to the Vigil,” said the congregation. “Glory to the Creator.”

A teenage altar boy clad entirely in black appeared from behind the altar, clutching a richly ornamented silver bowl. Bowing, he handed the bowl up to the Monsignor and disappeared behind the altar just as quickly as he had come. Monsignor Gregory set the bowl down on the front ledge of the lectern and raised his arms again.

“In your veins flows the blood of divine retribution,” Gregory began. “With this blood, you pledge your life to the service of the church, to the eradication of evil on earth. More blood will be shed in the pursuit of the nephilim, but yours is a vital sacrifice. We cannot – *we will not* – allow the world to plunge into darkness. Tonight you renew your undying allegiance to the Vigil of light.”

“Glory to the Vigil!” the men cried. “Glory to the Creator!”

The monsignor descended from the altar, bowl in hands, followed by the altar boy who now clutched a stack of thin white cloths embroidered with the Vigil’s V.

Dahlia had reached the sixth station, where a lady knelt and wiped the face of the little wooden Son, when the Monsignor came upon her.

“Your penance, Miss Ellis, may wait.”

She stared up at Gregory’s towering figure; from her angle on the floor, he looked like a big, black pillar holding up the cathedral’s ceiling. Behind his robes, the altar boy peeked coyly at Dahlia, space oddity that she was.

“Come, Miss Ellis.” Only the monsignor’s beaked nose protruded from the shadows of his hood. He held out a hand, withered and mottled with liver spots, to beckon her forward.

Dahlia carefully pulled herself to her feet only to almost collapse back onto the ground. The moment she put any weight on her knees, they buckled numbly beneath her, and try as she might, she could not straighten them. In an effort to break her fall, she clung to a marble fount; the sleeves of her robe were quickly soaked in the holy water.

As she struggled to massage blood into her legs with one hand while holding onto the heavy fount with the other, she could feel the heat of the monsignor’s scrutiny on her face. The men in the congregation obediently stared forward at the altar, but she could tell they wanted to bear witness to the usual spectacle. The slick soles of her boots squeaked loudly on the tile as she fought to stand up.

Finally she was on her feet again, lumbering towards the scowling monsignor. There was a flutter of white from the shadows, as he rolled his eyes.

Dahlia stared down into the silver bowl he held. Thick crimson pooled in the bottom, a few cups of viscous liquid that glimmered like rubies in the flickering candlelight. Taking a deep breath, she slowly withdrew her dagger from the innermost pocket of the coat beneath her robe and opened her left hand over the bowl. Diagonally across her palm ran a raised ridge of scar tissue, faded but still pink from the summer solstice. For five years she had done this, but every time she stood before Gregory and his horrible bowl, she felt the same nervous twitch across the backs of her hands.

She urged her trembling hand still, raised the dagger, and closed her eyes. With one quick slash, she reopened the scar and immediately felt the rush as blood seeped from the wound. After the sharp sting subsided, a nauseating, throbbing pain coursed all the way up her arm. That was the worst part.

With his free hand, the monsignor grabbed Dahlia’s palm and wrung it out like a towel. She stifled a cry as her blood dripped freely into the bowl. Each drop resounded through the silent cathedral, echoing from every sloping pitch of the ceiling.

“Do you vow to preserve and honor the sanctity of the Vigil?”

“Y-yes, Monsignor,” Dahlia said, feeling her knees threatening to buckle beneath her again.

“Do you vow to give every last drop of your blood to the Creator and his service?”

“Yes, Monsignor.”

As she stared at her bleeding hand, a rush of nausea bubbled up from her stomach and she swallowed it with a grimace. The world around her grew dimmer and fuzzier with each pulsation. From the corner of her eye, she caught the half-lidded eyes of the weakened, partially conscious Son hanging above the altar.

“Very well. May the Creator bless you who serve his name. You are absolved.”

He released her hand and extended his own hand toward the altar boy, who immediately wiped away the traces of Dahlia’s blood with a moist towlette. Dahlia cupped her hand to keep the blood from spilling, but it managed to leak out from between her fingers and down her arm. She remembered why she no longer wore light colors beneath her robes.

Finally the altar boy handed Dahlia a cloth of her own. She snatched up the disparagingly thin material and wrapped it tightly around her pulsing hand, forcing her platelets to clot. The dizzy haze in her head subsided slightly as the bleeding slowed. She leaned up against the marble fount, staring down at the splotches of crimson that formed on the white linen.

“I expect you will finish your penance,” the Monsignor said curtly before turning and walking back towards the altar.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Nonsense. You shouldn’t walk alone,” Father Pierre said, as he and Dahlia crossed through the cemetery. The full moon had reached its peak in the sky overhead, and the chill of midnight picked up and rustled the high grasses, making the hills look like they were moving in the mist.

As they walked, Pierre’s dark eyes scanned the perimeter, always alert, never at ease. His shoulders stood tensely beneath his black cassock, and his hand lingered perpetually at the hilt of the dagger protruding from the leather satchel he wore over his shoulder.

His smooth mahogany skin caught the moonlight elegantly, emphasizing the prominent apples of his cheeks, the long bridge of his flat nose, and his full lips, whose corners dimpled as he smiled. Dahlia often found it hard to believe he was rounding forty.

“Law had some briefs or something to rush off to, otherwise he would’ve walked me home,” Dahlia said.

“Yes, of course,” Pierre said politely, but did not meet her eyes. Though he’d spent most of his life in this country, his deep voice still betrayed occasional hints of Haiti.

As her close friend and personal confessor, Pierre knew more about Dahlia than perhaps anyone else, herself often included. He was endlessly patient, which she appreciated, and wore his silence like the cloak of the eternal listener. But on those rare occasions when he actually spoke more than a few lines, when he opened himself up to her, every cell in her body strained to listen.

For a good ten minutes, the pair walked in silence towards the graveyard’s exit.

As they passed the statue of the cherub where her confrontation with Eddie had taken place only a couple hours earlier, she was surprised to find a lump forming in the back of her throat.

Nephilim like Wormboy were to be expected; roving fiends, mad with hunger and disdain for human life, striking out at the most unassuming – the

wide-eyed, ignorant gazelles. Those nephilim she could handle. They were always so eager to dance.

But Eddie? He was just as fragile as the human gazelles. And in that fragility was something innocent, some shred of humanity that took Dahlia off guard. She could not shake the image of his tears, round and fat on his cheeks, as the cat lapped them away. He could not bear the sounds of her screams.

As they crossed beneath the exit arch, Dahlia finally spoke up.

“Pierre?”

He raised both eyebrows in acknowledgement.

“Have you ever met a naphil that you felt sorry for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, with this whole Wormboy thing tonight. His brother, Eddie. He was like a child. You should’ve seen the way he laughed when I dropped an f-bomb.”

“I see,” Pierre said.

“I mean,” Dahlia continued, “I would’ve destroyed him after I took his brother down. He was a naphil, after all.”

“Right.”

“But I don’t know,” Dahlia said, frustrated that the words were so hard to string together. “I’ve been doing this for so long I don’t even think. A naphil’s a naphil. Hell, I bet I could kill them with my hands tied behind my back and a dagger in my teeth.”

“An interesting image,” Pierre said with a hint of amusement.

“But you know what I mean? I’ve never stopped, or questioned, or thought about anything before, but I’ve never had to. It just felt right. But this Eddie guy... To be honest, I’m not sure how I would’ve felt taking him down.”

“Guilty?” Pierre offered.

“Yeah,” Dahlia said. “I think I might have actually felt kind of guilty.”

Pierre took a deep breath and paused a moment in thought before answering. A chilly wind picked up, rattling the leaf carcasses on the sidewalk.

“I have had a few incidents like the one you’ve described. They are rare, but I cannot forget them, those creatures who are more pathetic than they are frightening... In destroying them, I felt only mercy.”

“Really? So I’m not the only one.”

Pierre nodded.

“They’re nephilim. They don’t give a shit about us. They killed my sister.”

Pierre patted her lightly but affectionately on the shoulder. “I understand, Dahlia.”

“So why would I ever feel bad like this?”

“Because things aren’t always so easily distinguished. Everything casts a shadow in the light. Don’t forget that, *ma chère* Dahlia.”

“Well don’t let Monsignor Gregory hear you say that,” Dahlia said, only partially teasing.

“Gregory is a good man,” Pierre replied, though she could sense his hesitance. “A very dogmatic man, but a good one.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Sometimes I think dogma is all he has.”

As they stepped down from the curb to cross the street, a stabbing pain shot its way through Dahlia's left knee, and she crumpled to the pavement.

"Dahlia!"

Pierre grabbed ahold of her arm and steadied her before she could hit the ground. The quickness of his reflexes always surprised her.

"I'm sorry," Dahlia said, smiling weakly as he held her arm and helped steady her on her feet. "Guess my knees haven't totally recovered."

"It was a harsh penance," Pierre said.

She cocked her head at him. "You think so?"

His expression darkened; he turned as if he did not want her to see. "You know, sometimes I wonder how you do it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he said, choosing his words carefully, "I suppose I have admired your distinction, being the first woman appointed to the Avington Vigil."

"Oh, right. That." She shrugged. "It's all whatever, I guess. When was the Vigil started? The 1300's?"

"1231. It was originally formed as part of the medieval inquisition."

"Yeah, there you go. Medieval times weren't exactly easy for women. And it's not like the church has ever been a big fan of us. I guess when you consider those factors it's no surprise it's taken them this long to finally draft someone with ovaries."

Dahlia shrugged off the subject as she always did, though she could not deny that the wax-sealed letter, hand-delivered to her college dorm almost five years ago, had been a point of contention ever since.

She had been at the beginning of a new life then, halfway through her college studies with the intention of settling into normal life anywhere but Avington. Her therapist had said she was almost ready.

It's not like she had had a choice in the matter. The honor of a Vigil appointment was not something that could be declined, much less by the first woman ever to receive such an honor. The letter had been signed by the Pope.

And the most ironic part was that the truth, which was painfully obvious to everyone else seated in the cathedral every Saturday night, had taken Dahlia years to figure out.

While she had been busy reading Chaucer and Milton in college, she had unknowingly become somewhat of a celebrity amongst the Vigil circles, all thanks to the one night she spent her life trying to forget.

Dahlia should have died. The sheer force of the energy that ripped Lucy's life from her body should've overwhelmed her, and her heart should have imploded in her chest, as though crushed by the hand of the Adversary himself. The police should have found two bodies slumped together, one bleeding from the eye sockets, the other from the mouth. But somehow the impossible had happened, and Dahlia had unwittingly made history as the only living witness to a naphil's feeding.

In all the years since then there had been no other.

"I'm home," Dahlia said as she let herself into the apartment and waved goodbye to Father Pierre's retreating figure.

Law glanced up at her over his glasses from the leather armchair in the living room. Beside him sat a stack of briefs nearly as tall as he was. The coffee table, as always, was littered with accordion folders, papers, and expensive uni-ball pens. He sat hunched over, one leg crossed over his lap, and for a moment she pictured her father sitting for hours in the same position, pouring over mountains of paperwork after a twelve-hour day at the office.

"Any trouble getting home?"

"Nah, streets are pretty quiet tonight." She kicked off her boots and neatly arranged them on the mat by the door, as Law preferred. Her leather jacket went on one of the pegs on the wall above the mat.

Yawning, she padded into the kitchen and opened the fridge door, idly staring at the contents inside. It was well stocked, something of her own doing, but she could not find the drive to actually make anything that required more energy than cold cereal. With a sigh, she shoved the door closed and meandered into the living room. Her stomach protested with a low growl.

Law was back in brief land, as his keen grey eyes scanned the page intently. Every so often, he'd pop the cap from a highlighter and swipe a line or two. There was a sort of hypnotic regularity to it all, every flick of his wrist and turn of the paper, and as Dahlia sunk into the loveseat, she felt herself melting into the caramel leather. For hours she could sit, buried in the back of her head, as he indulged himself in reams of ideas he fancied she would never understand.

Tonight she was uneasy. Everywhere she looked, she saw the wooden Son with Eddie's emaciated face, staring back at her as she pocketed a bag of silver.

"Fuck me," she groaned into her hands.

"Hm?" Law did not look up at her.

"Just wish it hadn't been such a rough evening."

"Oh." She heard a rustle as he turned the page. "Well, you need to be more careful, Dahlia."

"Yeah, I know."

"I mean, what if I hadn't been there in time?"

"I had him, Law," she said, unable to stop herself. "You interrupted."

"You forget who you're dealing with. Wormboy won't be so easily bested. The tables would've turned again."

"I'm not sure."

"They would've," Law said, a hint of irritation ruffling his voice.

"What about Eddie, though? Why doesn't anyone mention him?"

"I don't know. Not like he's much of a threat."

"I know," Dahlia said. "But doesn't that bother you? Since when were nephilim so pathetic?"

She heard him cap his pen, and then he was actually looking at her, staring up over his frameless glasses. His angular cheeks and square jaw were taught with tension, his thin lips drawn into a frown. His glasses balanced on the crest of his sloped, pointed nose. She could hear his teeth scraping together behind his lips.

“Listen to me, Dahlia,” he said sternly. “Leave it. I know how you get, how you like to ruminate. If the nephilim were humans once, it follows that a mentally retarded person could one day become a naphil. It’s not out of the question.”

“Yeah, I know, but-”

“I don’t know what your obsession is with this, but you have to let it go. He’s a naphil. At the end of the day, they’re all after one thing and that’s our life energy. You’d let him take your life because he has a gimp leg and a stammer?”

“No.”

“Then get off it. Geeze.”

Groaning as though she were being entirely unreasonable, Law uncapped his pen again and slipped back into his brief seamlessly, as though he had never left.

Dahlia stared down at her hands. Pierre had treated the wound with Neosporin before wrapping it tightly in gauze. He had learned well, after eight years now, to keep the two items in the pocket of his cassock every solstice and equinox. She bent the fingers of her left hand, pushing the limits of flexion before the pain picked up again, and she straightened her joints out. She could hardly make a fist.

“What do you think they do with it all?” Dahlia said.

Law shot her a warning glance.

“Do with what?” he finally asked, reluctant to indulge her.

“Oh, uh, the blood from the dedication ceremonies. Pierre once joked that they use it to water the plants.”

Law did not even crack a grin. “That’s none of your concern, really.”

“I know. I’m just curious, I guess.”

“Does it really matter though? The point is that we must shed blood for the Vigil, and we do. End of story. Frankly, I couldn’t give a damn whether they pour the whole thing down the fucking drain.”

She tried to remind herself that he was under stress lately, that he wasn’t always this humorless. Underneath the scowling and groaning there had to be the same Law with the boyish smile, who liked to tease her and poke her in the ribs until she cried for mercy. Two years ago, when he first walked through the cathedral doors and sat down in the pew next to her, they’d bonded over the South Park pin on her shoulder bag.

She looked back at him to find that he was chewing mindlessly on the end of his expensive pen as he read. Occasionally he withdrew it to scribble notes in the margins, eventually slipping it back between his peach-colored lips. She could see the tip of his tongue lazily settling up over his front lip, and a shiver coursed through her.

Dahlia stood up, crossing over to his chair.

“Dahlia?”

She yanked the pen from his fingers and kissed him forcibly on the mouth.

Law froze, startled for a moment, but within only seconds he was surrendering to her, as he always did. She took his hands and moved them up her

hips, allowing him to admire the tightness of her athletic build. It was her one bargaining chip, the only chisel she had to pry away at his professionalism.

Without breaking the kiss, Dahlia reached down and slid the folder of papers from Law's lap gently onto the stack beside the chair, with enough care that the gesture went unremarked. The armchair was wide enough that she could climb up into his lap and straddle him, all the while fumbling for the collar of his starched white shirt.

Law's thirst for her became more desperate, and he wound his fingers into the waves of Dahlia's long hair, grasping tighter until pinpricks of pain pierced her scalp. After prying his tie loose and unbuttoning his collar, Dahlia bent her head to kiss her way down his neck, from his rapidly pulsing jugular to the tiny dip at the center of his collarbone. He trembled beneath her touch, moaning lightly, as she fought to maintain her role as the aggressor before he would inevitably overpower her and take her on the loveseat.

Careful not to tear his expensive silk shirt, she made quick work of the buttons and pried it down his shoulders, exposing his tanned pectorals, taught from years of fencing and martial arts. Dahlia bit him hard on the shoulder, eliciting a louder moan, and let her hands wander down his back. She felt him wince as she tracked her fingers lower along a scabbed ridge of skin that rose across his back. Traces of oil clung to her fingertips.

Repulsed, she quickly withdrew her hands and sat up in his lap. "What the fuck?"

"It's nothing," he said, face reddening.

"Law, you've got like an open wound back there."

"It's nothing."

"Bullshit, Law. How did this happen? Did-"

"I said, it's nothing!" He shoved her out of his lap.

She fell backwards onto the carpet like a stack of dropped briefs. She stared up at him from where she lay, eyes wide and wounded.

"I need to get back to work," Law said, buttoning up his collar but not bothering to fix his tie, which hung limply around his neck.

"Yeah," Dahlia said as she gingerly pulled herself to her feet. "You do that."

Dahlia brushed herself off, feeling an ache settle in her lower back. She cringed and stepped into the kitchen, dousing her hands in running water until her fingertips were no longer slick when she rubbed them together.

"I'm going to bed," she announced as she switched off the faucet and dried her fingers off on her black pants. "I'm on at nine tomorrow."

Law gave her a disinterested nod.

Dismissing him with a shrug, she grabbed her bag from the loveseat and let herself into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. She left all her clothes but her underwear on a pile by the foot of the bed, which she knew would annoy him, and slid into the cold embrace of five hundred thread count sheets.

For almost twenty minutes she lay there in the dark, drumming her fingers on the comforter and calling upon a sleep that would not come.

Finally she heaved a sigh and sat up, switched on the bedside lamp, and leaned over to rummage through the nightstand drawer. After a moment she withdrew a thick volume from the pool of clutter. She blew across the surface of the book, dispersing a layer of dust mites that glittered in the air.

GRE Review Guide 2007, the bright green cover read. She took a deep breath, opened the book to the first chapter, and began reading.

CHAPTER 4

“Sweetheart, you look like crap,” Raven said affectionately as Dahlia took a seat at the bar.

“Thanks,” she said. “Gin and tonic, pronto.”

“You know, gin and tonic is what old men drink,” Raven said, as she poured a little extra gin into the glass.

Any other time Dahlia might have laughed, but the whole day had been shitty. She had spent most of the daytime running errands hoping to distract herself with something mundane enough to help her forget about stupid Strange Eddie and his stupid cat. When that did not work, she headed to kickboxing, hoping to box it out of her system. No such luck. In a spat of inattention, she had broken her sparring partner’s nose.

Now she found herself, yet again, sitting patrol at the Bat Cave, a campy little nightclub carved out of what had once been a textile factory. With its dark rave music and violet strobe lights, the Bat Cave was every goth kid’s paradise, and back in the 90’s had apparently hosted a rather regular crew of nephilim patrons. Black was the only dress code, though there was a tacit agreement on leather and vinyl as fabrics of choice. It was a good thing the club didn’t metal detect, or the security line would wrap around the block.

Raven, who manned the bar most nights, was a fabulous beaded and feathered transvestite with long purple hair and a perfectly glossed smile. Her eyelashes, which she swore up and down were natural, were longer than Dahlia’s, and she had an enviously tight figure. The only things that made her a bit “fishy” were her oversized hands and trunk-like neck.

Above all things, Raven was genuinely kind and witty, which made the evenings of trolling the club go relatively faster. Sometimes they would sit and people-watch, commenting on who would be going home with whom and whose outfit was so ugly they’d be going home alone. Dahlia used these games to keep an eye on which idiot was leaving with a member of the Antagonist’s Army, as the monsignor so affectionately dubbed them.

It was a dumb patrol assignment, all things considered, but it was only to be expected. The “serious” pursuits went to the big boys with the big guns in their pants.

“Is that man of yours giving you trouble again? ‘Cause if you’re getting sick of him, I’d more than gladly take him off your hands.” Raven chuckled as she pushed the drink over in front of Dahlia. Dahlia smiled in appreciation, but the gesture was half-hearted. Her long bangs fell over her face, and she did not bother move them aside.

“Baby girl, what is up with you tonight? Come on. Tell me all about it.” Batting her glittery eyelashes, Raven leaned over the black granite bar top and rested her elbows on the surface, face cupped in the heels of her hands. She stared at Dahlia expectantly with pursed lips, and looked so ridiculous that Dahlia couldn’t help but crack a grin.

“Okay, okay. Sorry to say it’s not Law.”

“Boo.”

“Yeah we’re doing okay. Today at least.”

Raven made a show of looking disappointed and nudged Dahlia to continue.

“No, really Raven, I can’t talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“I just- I can’t, okay? It’s personal.”

“Oh.” Raven took the hint and grabbed the towel from over her shoulder. She began to carefully wipe down the bar top, although the gleaming marble hardly needed the attention.

While Dahlia had never told her about the Vigil, Raven knew quite well that Dahlia was nursing a part of her life that was best kept out of sight. Dahlia figured Raven could relate, in some way, because whenever the subject came up Raven never pressed her for any further explanation. With everything else, she was relentlessly nosy.

“Yeah... Let’s just say something unpleasant happened the other day.”

Dahlia peeled her slick thighs from the vinyl barstool and re-crossed her legs.

“But, anyway, I’ve been feeling like crap ever since. This whole past week I keep having these weird dreams, and I have like no appetite – I don’t even enjoy sex as much.”

“Really? Even with that blonde hunk around?”

“Meh. He’s been a pain in the ass lately.”

“Well darling, I think you need a vacation,” Raven pronounced. “Go book yourself a week in the Caymans or something. Seriously. Bring Law, and if he can’t go, fuck him. Go anyway. You’ve clearly got way too much on your plate, and you just need to lighten up and have a little you time.”

Dahlia stared down into her gin and tonic as she stirred it with a little plastic pitchfork skewering an olive. “You think it’s that simple? A vacation?”

“Hell yeah, baby girl. As I said, all you have to do is get away from all this shit, excuse my French. You’re young and hot! And Avington isn’t exactly high excitement. Besides, hon, I suspect that...” Raven trailed off and stood frozen, towel poised against the bar.

“Raven? You suspect what?” Dahlia looked up from her drink to find her friend staring off towards the dance floor with a look of distant longing on her face. She recognized that look.

□ “Hey! Hey! Can you stop drooling over a guy please? I thought you wanted to talk to me.”

Raven brushed her aside. “Shh. Give me a second.”

“Hey, haven’t you heard of bros before hoes?”

“One, you’re not a bro-” □

“But you are,” Dahlia said, which Raven ignored.

“And two, will you just turn around and look at this eye candy before you get mad? I think you’ll understand.”

Dahlia gave in and exasperatedly swiveled around on her barstool “Look,” she said with rising irritation as she scanned the crowd. “I don’t even see the guy, and besides he can’t possibly be-”

Her voice died in her throat when she saw the man Raven had been ogling. It had to be him. Of course.

Fuck.

He was leaning up against a table, long legs crossed, hands casually shoved in the pockets of his long black trench coat, looking more and more like a lost cast member from that Kiefer Sutherland vampire movie.

On either side of him, girls dressed like nurses flirted mercilessly with him, but he wasn’t looking at them. Instead, beneath the curtain of his black hair, he stared forward with a glance as severe and dark as it had been that day at the diner.

“He’s looking at you, you know,” Raven said out of the corner of her mouth, shivering with excitement.

She was right, though. Dahlia could feel the heat of his glare on her face.

“Let him look,” she said, turning her head away. “I don’t care. He’s creepy anyway.”

“Ooh, cold,” Raven said, her voice dipping into a more masculine octave.

“Whatever.” Dahlia took a large sip of the gin and tonic and cringed slightly as it went down.

“Oh girl, I’m telling you. It’s your man. He’s making you as uptight as he is.”

“Maybe so.”

“I think you just need to have a little fun. Anyway, he’s coming over now, so you might as well think of something to say.”

Dahlia almost spit out her next sip of gin. “He what?” She swung around on her stool to watch the guy from the restaurant shove the clingy nurses away from him and stalk forward towards her. Watching his long, commanding strides made the back of her hands twitch.

He leaned up against the bar with one elbow, face tilted just right so he was staring down at her over the sharp peaks of his cheekbones. From that proximity, she could make out a jagged scar that cut across the left side of his jaw, faded but still visible, like a streak of war paint.

“So we meet again,” he said finally.

“Uh, hi?”

Dahlia tried not to stare, but this close he was hard to look away from.

He leaned further across the bar and fixed his eyes on Raven, who let out a tiny squeal.

“Bordeaux, something old.”

Raven scrambled for the wine rack.

“I’ve got a boyfriend,” Dahlia said when Raven had gone. “And I’m happy with him, thanks.”

“Whoa, slow down. You don’t take any prisoners, do you? It’s Dahlia, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Seth,” he reintroduced himself, extending a hand that she took reluctantly.

Dahlia braced herself for another shock, but this time she felt only warmth as she touched his chapped leather palm. She looked down and made out the word *Opus* tattooed across his knuckles.

“I remembered from the diner,” she said, as he released her hand and readjusted the ring on his index finger.

He cocked his head and grinned at her, allowing her another peek at his flawless row of teeth. Dahlia felt herself shiver.

“I have to be honest and say I never took you for the kind of person to hang out here,” he said, clearly amused.

She shrugged. “I’m here every so often. Been coming for a while.”

“Me too. Funny we haven’t run into each other before now.”

“Funny we haven’t,” Dahlia said, though she could swear was a hint of teasing in his voice. It gave her the strange impression that he knew something that she didn’t. Whatever it was, she was pretty sure he wasn’t telling.

He lifted his hand from his coat pocket and extended it towards her. “Feel like dancing?”

Dahlia numbly fingered the rim of her glass. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Come on. You look so bummed out,” he said. “You look like you could use some fun.”

“Do I, now?”

“Yeah.”

“And you could show me some fun?”

“I can try.”

“Ha,” Dahlia said, exhaling sharply through her nose. “I thought you said I was the one who took no prisoners.”

He cocked his head, looking her over for a moment that felt much longer than it really was. Finally he shrugged and shoved his hand back into his pocket.

“Well, have it your way. Nice running into you.” His heavy boots shuffled on the cement as he made his way back towards the crowd.

Something about hearing him walk away ignited a spark of panic in Dahlia. She was on her feet before her senses had the chance to intervene.

“Wait!”

There was another shuffle as he turned back around. “Yeah?”

“You know, I think I’ll take that dance after all.”

Seth grinned and shrugged off his coat, laying it over a table. The thin t-shirt he wore clung to his massive chest, so tight that Dahlia could practically make out every straining sinew of every muscle.

The longer that Dahlia looked at Seth, the more she felt like her reality was beginning to fray at the seams. He was entirely unreal – an impossible person – and yet he was there, as solid as the marble countertop she clutched, and Dahlia could not shake the feeling that she knew him somehow, and would one day find

him tucked away in the darkest parts of her memory. Every layer he stripped away made him all the more unreal to her, and yet closer, as though she were slowly edging towards that hidden memory.

Dazed, she pushed herself away from the bar and took his hand. He interlocked their fingers, and a tingle coursed up the veins of Dahlia's arm like the cold fluid of an IV.

He led her out towards the center of the floor; hand-in-hand they squeezed their way through the maze of gyrating couples.

Once they found a place, he let her go and stood back, silently watching her. His narrow eyes dared her to move.

All it took was one look at the flush welling in his cheeks and the bead of sweat slipping its way down the tendons of his neck, and she was done for. She stepped forward and desperately pressed her body up against his, bringing his hands down her sides and trembling as she felt him notch his thumbs into her hipbones. Though he was quite a bit taller than her, her face nestled perfectly in the crook of his shoulder as she brought her hands up to rest behind his neck. His long hair was soft like down against her naked wrists.

"I still shouldn't-" she said before he cut her off by trailing his fingertips further down the side of her hips.

"Let it go," he said. The softness in his eyes placated her, and she relaxed against him, surrendering to the surreal sway of the club.

"What happened?" she asked when she found her voice again.

"What do you mean?"

"When you took my hand in the diner. Something... happened."

"Oh. That," he said. "I saw your body weaken suddenly, like you were going to faint, so I laid you down in the booth. You were conscious but your eyes were empty. I think you blacked out."

"Why did you leave?"

"I didn't know what to do. I panicked."

He drew his fingers through her loose hair. The breaths she drew felt labored and hot through her nostrils.

"I felt," Dahlia began, fumbling for the right words. "I can't explain it. I just... Have you ever seen death?"

She felt him nod against her shoulder.

"It was like that when our hands met. It was like- like I was watching something die again. I could feel it."

"I'm sorry for that," he said, wrapping his arms tighter around her back, drawing her into his chest. "I'm honestly surprised you'd even want to touch me again after that."

She shrugged against him. "I don't know. I can't help it."

"Me neither," he said. He began to say something else, but a shriek from the speakers stole his speech. Dahlia waited to see if he would repeat himself, but he remained silent.

She closed her eyes and pressed her head against his chest.

The night raced on in sweaty entropy and when Seth took her hand and walked her away from the dance floor, Dahlia hardly felt like the same person

who had stepped onto it only a couple hours earlier. Her body was slick and shiny with sweat down to her leather dress, which clung to her body as though it were another layer of flesh.

“Do you have a jacket?” Seth said close to her ear, looking her up and down. Against the raging double bass, she did not hear his question so much as feel it.

She nodded. “It’s behind the bar with Raven.”

“It’s chilly outside.” He reached over to grab his own coat from the table where he’d left it, and Dahlia took the hint.

Dahlia wandered over to the bar, where Raven sat idly staring at the dancing crowd. A grin emerged on her glossy purple lips as Dahlia approached.

“Having fun, bad girl?”

“Oh yeah. Could I have my coat?”

“Are you leaving with him?”

“I don’t know. We’re going outside.”

Raven shrugged and ducked down under the bar, reappearing with Dahlia’s leather jacket. As Raven passed her the jacket, her hand lingered on Dahlia’s wrist. She stared her in the eye, digging her long nails in just a little too hard.

“Just be careful, girl.”

Dahlia felt her stomach churn uneasily. Pinpricks of pain rose from her wrist where Raven’s nails pressed. “Geeze, Raven. Sure, whatever. I will.”

Raven let her go.

Frowning, Dahlia grabbed her jacket and turned away from the bar. She rubbed her red wrist a few times.

“Have a good one,” Dahlia shot over her shoulder, and Raven gave her a slow wave.

Dahlia wrestled her sweaty arms into the jacket’s sleeves as she joined Seth at the exit. Taking her by the arm, he pushed the swinging doors open and the two stepped into the cold night air.

Dahlia wasn’t that drunk, but the chill of midnight was overwhelming; her jacket did nothing to keep her from shivering. Her eyes dried out immediately, and everything went blurry. She looked at Seth to find he had two faces.

The doors swung shut behind them, but the bass of the club still resounded deep in their chests.

Seth stepped forward and took her face between his hands, cradling her cheeks in his rough palms.

There was a striking tenderness in the way he looked at her – his lips parted slightly, his eyes carefully tracing the lines of her jaw. She noticed that there was no pressure from his hands on her face. His breath was sweet and dry and tingled as it settled over her cheeks, and when she breathed, she took it in.

“You know,” he began to say, “you almost...”

But then Seth froze. The lines in his face darkened, and Dahlia could smell panic mingled with the sweat that dripped down his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I have to go.”

“What?”

“Look, I’ll see you later.”

He let go of her and in the next moment was gone, as if he had never been there in the first place. Dahlia swiped at the air in front of her to find it was still warm.

“Seth!” she called out, fear curdling the blood in her veins. “Where the hell did you go?”

Her voice echoed through the empty alleyway.

“Seth?”

Dahlia slumped to her knees in the middle of the alley, and stayed there on the ground for what felt like a long time. She had bitten her lower lip so hard that it was bleeding down her chin.

“Damn it, Seth,” she said, pushing herself up off the ground. She wiped the dirt from her hands on her dress, but she did not bother wiping away the blood.

Cursing the heavy musk of his cologne, Dahlia stumbled the six blocks home.

When she let herself into the dark apartment, she nearly tripped over Law’s brown wingtips sitting lazily at the entrance to the living room. Law was splayed out on the loveseat, snoring softly, with Machiavelli’s *Prince* open on his chest. Dahlia kicked his shoes aside and tiptoed past him to the bedroom without giving him a backwards glance.

Dropping her jacket on the bed, she wandered into the bathroom and flicked the switch, wincing as her eyes stung in the white light. She turned the faucet on the tub as hot as it would go and sat on the rim of the basin.

The blank surface of the water became a screen on which her mind projected the shadows of his face.

“I’ll see you later,” the dark lips said, betraying her with one last smile.

She slashed at the surface of the water with her fist, watching as the face was shattered.

“Fuck you, Seth.”

Her eyes welled with what she decided was steam. She kicked off her boots and slid into the bath, dress and all.

CHAPTER 5

“Focus, Dahlia! Come on!”

Without her arms up to guard her, Dahlia took the full force of Law’s punch to the gut. She stumbled backwards, clenching her stomach and groaning.

“Goddamn it. That hurt.”

“No kidding. Gotta keep those arms up.”

She slumped down against the padded wall, hands still affixed to her stomach. “That was a sucker punch.”

“And you think the nephilim are just going to ask before they slug you?”

He was right, of course, but she waved his point aside.

“Come on,” Law said. He stepped over to her and extended a hand to help her up.

Law preferred to train in uniform: a white karate-gi with a black belt cinching his waist. Dahlia had her own black belt, but she preferred the less assuming feel of sweats.

She eyed his hand but did not take it immediately. The blow to the gut had made her dizzy; she had to wait for the world of powdered chalk and punching bags to slow its spinning before she could try to stand.

"Are you okay?" Law said. He furrowed his eyebrows and out of habit tried to push his absent glasses up the bridge of his nose. He ended up streaking his face with chalk.

"Yeah... yeah I'm fine," she said after a second. She grabbed ahold of his arm and let him pull her easily to her feet.

When she was back upright, Dahlia assumed a defensive stance with her legs spread slightly and her fists up to protect her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm a little distracted."

"You don't say," Law said with a frown. "That's the fourth hit you've let me get in since we started."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry. It's whatever."

"Do you want to take a break?"

"No, it's okay. I'm fine. Let's keep going." Dahlia bounced eagerly on the balls of her feet, hungering to land a good punch.

Law crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked her up and down.

"Are you sure? I am willing to talk about it, believe it or not. Whatever *it* is."

"There's no *it*, Law. It's fine. Talk later. Let's go now." Dahlia grunted and hooked the air with a force that betrayed her lack of muscle mass.

"Well, if you insist."

"I do."

Law took a step backwards, still eying her skeptically. After a second he shrugged and assumed a similar stance, raising his fists to just below eye-level.

"Bring it," Dahlia said with a grin, taunting him by extending a hand and gently curling her fingers. "Give me your worst."

Law struck her almost immediately with a right jab, which she blocked with her forearm. While she held his right arm disengaged, she swung a punch at his chest, which he took with a small groan. But he was far from bested and swung a high roundhouse kick at her face, which she only barely dodged by ducking.

"Still not so fast," he scolded as she blocked another punch at the last possible second.

"Speak for yourself."

The spar continued for a few more minutes with neither landing a good hit on the other. Both fighters could feel their bodies starting to strain, but they were well matched and equally stubborn.

Just when it seemed like a stalemate, Dahlia let out a determined cry and elbowed Law forcefully in the ribs. He recoiled in pain, and she took the opportunity to bend his incapacitated body over her shoulder. With what was left

of her energy, she rocked backwards and then slammed all 200 pounds of him onto the floor.

Law lay on his back cringing for some time. "Well... that'll do."

He sounded breathless and pained, and Dahlia was suddenly afraid that she might've actually hurt him.

"Are you okay?"

She leaned over to examine him closer.

What she didn't notice was the leg rising behind her until it swung out, hitting her across the ankles. She let out a startled yelp and fell to the mat beside him.

"You forgot the golden rule," he said, poking her in the ribs.

"The double-tap?"

"Exactly. When they're down they're usually down, but not always."

"Well, that hasn't happened to met yet," Dahlia said. "I play to win."

"You can't win them all."

"Apparently not. Well, here's to hoping I never have to slay *you* one day," she said. She stuck out her tongue and yelped again as he grabbed her by the waist and rolled her over on top of him.

"Dearest Dahlia," Law said, "if I become one of those *things*, please just lob my head off with a chainsaw." He chuckled and craned his neck up to kiss her.

She smiled and kissed him, but the gesture was noticeably half-hearted.

Law reached up and stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Come on, love. Here you go again. What's up with you?"

Dahlia sighed.

"Please? You know you can tell me anything."

"Fine," she said reluctantly. "I know it's retarded, but I'm just really dreading dinner tonight, okay?"

"That's what this is about?"

"I told you it's retarded."

"No it's not," Law said. "Your father's coming to dinner, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"See? There's nothing like spending time with your Achilles heel."

"Don't I know."

"Here, come on," Law urged, gesturing for her to move. She rolled off him and sat up and the two of them sat face-to-face.

"Look," Law said, staring her in the eye. It was rare she got to see his eyes without the shield of his glasses. They were a pretty, somber sort of grey. "I'm sorry I can't come with you tonight. I've just got so much to do for tomorrow."

"It's fine. It's not your fault."

"I know, but I feel bad anyway. I often wish I'd had siblings – then at least there would've been someone with me when I had to face my dad."

"Yeah," Dahlia said, looking away uncomfortably. The mention of Law's father always made her shudder. She had never met him before, but the legacy of scars he'd left across Law's shoulders and back was introduction enough. "At least I've got Gavin," she added.

“There you go. How long has it been now since you’ve seen him?”

“My dad? Oh I don’t know,” she said. “A month? Maybe six weeks? He’s not exactly into hands-on parenting. I don’t think he’d even bother showing up if Mom didn’t bribe him with meatloaf.”

“You’ll be fine,” Law said, leaning forward and kissing her forehead.

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dahlia said.

“And besides, what’s the worst that could happen? You get pissed, storm away from the table, and say, ‘jolly good time, Dad! Thanks again! Let’s do this again next month?’”

“Something like that.”

“So what are you so torn up about?”

Dahlia found herself honestly unable to answer.

“Honey, aren’t you hungry? You haven’t even touched your food,” Rosalind Ellis said, patting her daughter’s hand from across the table. “Is everything okay?”

Dahlia glanced at her father’s seat, still empty at almost half past seven, and forced a smile. “I’m fine, Mom. Really. I had a big lunch today.”

In reality, she hadn’t had a thing to eat all day. And while she should have been starving, the tense countdown until her father’s appearance at home never failed at erasing her appetite entirely.

He had known days in advance that she would be coming home for Sunday dinner and promised to be home on time, but she had learned by now that a promise did not hold much weight for the great Dr. Jude Ellis. A cardiothoracic surgeon, his job hardly held the standard hours, but came with the benefit of idolization in the eyes of young nurses hungry for a shinier life.

Next to Dahlia, at the other head of the table sat her 16-year-old brother, Gavin. A growing teenager, he’d had no problem wolfing down his steak and potatoes the minute they were seated. Their mother no longer bothered telling him to wait for Dad.

Rosalind would make him up a plate, send Dahlia’s regards, and reheat it so he could eat it in his study while he dictated charts. Then he would give her a kiss, wave her away, and spend the rest of the night doing god knows what until he finally crawled into bed. That was the way it worked.

“So Gav, how’s school going?” Dahlia asked.

It seemed like all they ever talked about was small talk, but that was the only territory unmarked by childhood tears.

Out of a desire to be independent and live away from the tension of home, she paid her own bills and maintained her own lifestyle with Law. Her father could have paid for an apartment five times the size of her current one without even breaking a sweat, but she didn’t want his money. She wanted something she knew he wouldn’t give her.

“It’s fine,” Gavin said, his voice cracking slightly. He was still in that awkward phase between a boy and a man, which his wavering voice and the forest of acne on his forehead reaffirmed. At over six feet, he had long surpassed

Dahlia in height. She wasn't sure she liked the fact that her little brother, the one who was once victim of countless noogies and wedgies, could now crack her skull open with a sidelong swing.

"You still playing football?" she asked, burying a stack of peas in her mashed potatoes. Her mother gave her a tired look.

"Yeah," he said. "It's fun. I wanna make varsity next year."

She had gone to a few of his games this season, but not all of them. Her mother, on the other hand, had attended every one. Their father had not come to a single game.

With straight auburn hair and thin, freckled limbs, Rosalind was a quiet, understated woman of just over 50. She had mastered the art of single parenting while still boasting a faded gold ring on her left hand.

Their father, on the other hand, was a brisk, clinical man who did as he pleased, and Dahlia would not be surprised if he was having a few affairs. Rosalind had never openly accused him.

So there they were, their sad, pathetic little family, trying so hard to cling to the slippery fish of normalcy. Like Dahlia, Gavin would move out of the house and start his own life and find his own peace of mind. But this was their mother's final destination.

"So how's Law?" her mother asked in the spirit of small talk.

Dahlia took a deep breath and straightened up in her chair. "Oh he's okay. Still busy. He wanted to come tonight, but he had so much work to do for Monday since he had to take a day off this week."

"Oh, I see." Rosalind nodded, though her concern was impossible to conceal. Dahlia's father was not the only man they knew who was far too devoted to his work.

Having always been very close to her mother, Dahlia wanted nothing more than to tell her everything, about the Vigil, about Seth, about the mounting friction between she and Law, about everything that had been plaguing her over the past few weeks. But she was a big girl, and those were *her* problems.

Still, Rosalind was no idiot. And like any mother, she knew when her child was keeping something from her. "That food's getting cold, honey. Are you sure you're not?"

"Yes I'm sure," Dahlia said, dropping her fork with a loud clang as stainless steel hit porcelain. She shoved the plate of food away from her.

"There's no need to bang stuff around, Dahlia," Rosalind said. She was slumped over in her chair like an abandoned marionette.

The squealing of the garage door as it lurched upwards brought a splash of stomach acid up in the back of Dahlia's throat. The tension in the room shattered into a frenzied, panicked energy. Even Gavin looked concerned as he wolfed down the rest of his veggies. Dahlia clung fast to the scalloped edge of the glass table and swore silently that she would rough out the storm. She hadn't seen her father in a few weeks.

Across the table, Rosalind winced as if she'd already been struck.

The kitchen door slammed and in stormed the good doctor, who did not know how to enter a room without a thunderous announcement of his presence.

He no longer wore his white coat, but instead a nicely tailored grey suit and rich lapis tie. His beard, thick and dark, accentuated the scowl on his face, and his eyes, brown and beady, assumed their perpetual squinting glare. He raked a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair, of which he still had a full head, and dropped a large stack of charts on the granite countertop.

Without a word, he strode over to the table, bent over to kiss the air next to Rosalind's cheek, and assumed his place at the head as if he had been there all along. He looked expectantly at his wife, and she in turn silently rose to prepare his plate. Smoothing his mustache with his finger and thumb, he glanced over at Dahlia disinterestedly, as if she dined there every day. For all he was home, she could have.

"Long afternoon at the office?" Rosalind piped up from the kitchen doorway, where she was scooping potatoes and steak out of Tupperware containers.

"Yes, very long. I had to fill out credentialing papers for all the hospitals, with deadlines coming soon and all. I hate tedious paperwork. But that's neither here nor there." He turned towards the others at the table with a wide grin. "Give your Dad a hello, kids."

Gavin said nothing.

"Hi, Dad," Dahlia said, her glance buried with the peas in her mashed potatoes. The microwave beeped and just a second later Rosalind set a steaming plate down in front of her husband. He nodded a thanks, and she disappeared back into the kitchen, fanning the pain out of her fingers.

"So how's it going? Long time no see, right?" he said and loudly inhaled the food in front of him. He was the only person Dahlia knew who managed to slurp solid food.

"I'm fine," Dahlia said. "I came over the other week, but you weren't."

"Yeah, that's right," he said, peas falling from his open mouth. "Your mother told me. I was on call that night."

"She said you were at a conference."

"Oh yeah, yeah you're right. I was at a conference. You know, doctor things. They all sort of blend together."

"I see."

He had spoken the word "doctor" as if he'd been referring to a higher, unreachable sanctum of intellect.

Compared to his 1600 on his SATs, early admission into medical school, and top notch MCAT scores, Dahlia was hardly impressive with A's and B's throughout high school and college. She was smart, extremely so, but he was genius. She often wondered whether perhaps instead of empathy he had been granted keener logical prowess.

"Yeah but anyway I'm sorry I didn't get to see you. You know how much I miss my girl."

Gavin let out a snort and stood up. "May I be excused?" He grabbed his plate and made for the kitchen before their father could answer.

A few minutes later, Dahlia heard the front door slam. A few months ago, Rosalind had mentioned that when she ventured upstairs sometimes, she found holes punched into the walls by Gavin's bed.

"So anyway, have you found a job yet?"

Dahlia raised her eyebrows. "A job?"

"You know, a real job, to replace that nonsense you've been doing for a while." He let out a loud burp and wiped his mustache with a napkin. "Excuse me."

"Well, I want to go to grad school."

"Have you considered perhaps law school?"

Dahlia crinkled her nose in disgust. "No way, Dad. The last thing I need is to sit all day with stacks of papers. Law does that enough for the both of us."

"Well your mother and I decided we've already let you have your fun, but now that you're going on your third year out of college it's time to get your foot in the door. You know your uncle has that accounting firm, so--"

"No," she said. Her fingertips began to tremble as she strummed them on the edge of table. "True I don't know exactly what I'm going to do yet, but I'm not going to sit in some stupid desk job. I'm still thinking about teaching, maybe."

"Oh please, tell me you don't want to be a wage slave at 30 grand a year."

She slammed her fist down on the table. The dishes rattled loudly. "Damn it, Dad! Not everything's about money."

"Calm down," Jude replied, throwing his hands up in the air. "I swear you and your mother both get so crazy over things. I'm just saying that it's something to think about, okay? Listen, Dahlia, I'm just looking out for what's best for you."

Dahlia almost gagged. "What's best for me? What's best for me? How the hell would you know what's best for me?"

It only took a second for her father to react with a wounded look in his wide brown eyes, as if her statement and its underlying emotion were completely ungrounded. That was one of Jude Ellis' strongest powers: the ability, when confronted, to deflect all blame and make the accuser feel as though they were going crazy.

Dahlia had to watch herself. Too many hours in her father's pathological wonderland, and she hardly knew which side was up.

"High school graduation, prom parties, every piano recital through fifth grade, parent-teacher conferences, basketball games, fucking family dinners," she counted off on her fingers.

"What do those have in common? You weren't there. Not a single fucking thing, Dad. And I... I just feel so *stupid* sitting here, knowing all that, but still praying for the miraculous day when you will want to start giving a shit about me, and I guess I just don't know how to give up, do I?" The lump in the back of her throat swelled to the size of a melon as tears squeezed their way from the corners of her eyes.

She watched as his expression of hurt morphed to one of attempted empathy. "Dahlia, honey, I've been putting work first for too long a time - and I know that - but sometimes you just have to let things stay in the past, so they

don't make you crazy." There it was again: crazy, his favorite keyword, most often applied to her mother.

"Past? What past? It's the past, present, and future! I can lie to make myself feel better, but you're still going to ignore that I even exist until you feel like being a dad for a second, and then you'll just waltz back into my life, like I'm some sort of doll you can take out of the box and then put back, and I'm supposed to feel guilty for refusing to just suck it up and smile? I'm *sick* of smiling through stuff that sucks, Dad. You have no idea how much stuff I smile through every day. You can't even possibly imagine."

By that point, the tears had begun flowing freely down her face in rivulets of black mascara. She wiped her cheeks and nose with the back of her hand and sniffled loudly, crying because she was upset and upset because she was crying. All the energy and fury she had worked up had abandoned her, and she felt like a spent, empty shell as she sat there trembling, her tears dotting the navy blue tablecloth.

Jude did not bat an eye at his usually collected daughter's emotional display. "Dahlia. Dahlia, calm down." He reached across the table and took her hand. His was cold to the touch and reeked of antiseptic. "Shh now. I'm here. Daddy's here. Look, honey, why don't you join me for dinner next week? Just you and me. We can go to the town club."

She stared down at the table. "Can we go to Romeo's instead?"

"Fine. Let's say Saturday night at eight. Does that sound good?"

She surrendered with a nod, feeling her head growing heavy as if she'd just taken a shot of grain alcohol.

"Good. Now hey, *hey*. Give me a smile?"

He reached over and grabbed her chin, pulling it upwards so he could see her face. Her eyes were red rimmed from crying and her cheeks were stained with black lines. Her defenses lay crumbled around her, remnants of her fallen citadels. It had been a drawn-out, valiant battle – perhaps her longest yet – but he had ultimately taken her king.

"Promise you'll be there, Dad?" she asked. "Promise me?"

"I promise," he said. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

Checkmate.

CHAPTER 6

"It's almost six, Dahlia. You really ought to get out of the house," Law said from the doorframe, poising his hands on his hips and staring at her over his glasses.

"Yeah," she replied distantly from her position on the couch, where she lay swaddled in Law's expensive microfleece throw. Deckhands from *Deadliest Catch* reeled in lobster pots on the flickering television screen.

Dahlia was going on hour six of staring at the TV, watching but seeing hardly anything as the capillaries strained in her eyes.

"Come on," Law persisted. "Some air would do you well."

Dahlia shrugged her shoulders underneath the blanket. “Whatever, it’s my day off.”

“‘Whatever’ all you like, but I’ve made up my mind. You’re coming with me. We’re going to the park.” Law grabbed the remote from the coffee table and clicked off the television.

Dahlia groaned in feeble protest.

“Get up.”

She murmured something to him, but hours of accumulated chap bound her lips together.

Law pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and crouched down to a squat so that his head was level with hers. “What was that?”

“You suck,” Dahlia said weakly.

“Nice try.” Law yanked the blanket from her so forcefully that she nearly rolled off the couch and into the glass coffee table.

“Jesus, Law-”

“You’ve got five minutes to freshen up and put on your trainers,” he said. “It’s a good thing you decided to get dressed this morning. I doubt anyone in Avington wants to take a constitutional with a woman wearing ducky pajama bottoms.”

“Constitutional is a stupid word.”

“Up. Time’s wasting. You’ve got,” he turned his wrist over to glance at the face of his Rolex, “four minutes and forty-seven seconds now.”

Dahlia groaned and grabbed a throw pillow from the floor to fling at Law, but she missed him by a couple of inches.

“Mhm. Care to try that shot again? And just so you know, you’re making it really hard to cheer you up.” Law punted the pillow across the living room and sat down next to her on the edge of the sofa.

“This is how you cheer me up?”

“Come on, Dahlia,” he said more seriously. “You can’t just pull the covers up over your head because you had a bad time at Mum and Dad’s.”

“I wish I could,” she said. He began to comb his fingers through her hair; she winced as he hit a snag.

“You can’t let your parents’ failings control your life, Dahlia,” he said softly, but firmly. “Honestly, what you really need to do is just sit them down and talk until you’ve said everything you’ve been meaning to say, even if it isn’t pretty.”

“I know.” Dahlia sighed. “But good fucking luck with that. I mean we’ve all got the avoidance thing down pat. Nobody even says her name.”

“Well of course it’s going to be difficult.”

“Difficult or impossible? Come on Law, they didn’t even tell Gavin that he’d had an older sister until he was seven. Mom got really drunk one day and threw some boxes of pictures down from the attic and made him look at them. He locked himself in his room for a long time.”

“That’s very sad,” Law said.

“I’m telling you, my family is FUBAR. You can throw them on an intervention show for all you want. Nothing’s going to help.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to work on accepting that and moving on.”

“I guess.”

“I mean, I had a lot to handle with my dad,” Law said, patting her on the top of the head. “Did ever I tell you about the time he beat me with a cricket bat for touching his trophy collection?”

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia said, though the words felt hollow, as they always did.

“It’s neither here nor there, I suppose. I survived, didn’t I? More importantly I’ve moved on, just as you need to move on.”

Dahlia reached up to touch his cheek. Her stomach began to churn, not for want of food but for realization of just how pathetic she was, down to the baggage she carried.

“It’s okay. Really,” Law whispered, trembling with vulnerability that she rarely witnessed. He bowed his head and planted a soft kiss on her hairline. “We get past these things. Life goes on.”

“That’s what they say,” Dahlia said. Over Law’s shoulder, she watched as a crow perched itself on the windowsill and began to pick at an open wound on its wing.

“Now come on,” Law said, jumping up and clapping. “You’ve got less than three minutes. Chop chop.”

By the time they crossed the bridge into the city park, the sun had begun its dangerous descent towards the horizon. The park stretched before Dahlia as far as she could see – an orange-tinted panorama of grassy hills like burial mounds, interspersed with the scraggly silhouettes of withering oak trees. A flock of geese took to the sky above them in a cacophony of flapping wings and anxious honking.

On a nearby hill a family sat on a plaid blanket, sharing sandwiches from a picnic basket and complacently watching the sun dip towards the earth. The father smiled and wrapped an arm around his youngest son, as the boy bit into a large slice of watermelon and dripped juice and seeds down his chin. The others laughed.

Dahlia shook her head and looked away.

“Pleasant evening, isn’t it?” Law said, unzipping his brown North Face and taking a deep drag of autumn air.

Dahlia cast him a skeptical glance. “You’re oddly chipper today.”

“And you’re complaining? You’re the one who always says I’m too grumpy.” Law bent down and picked up a stone, brushed it off, and flung it towards the pond in front of them. It skipped gracefully across the glassy surface of the water.

“Well no, but...”

“But what?”

Dahlia sighed. “I don’t know. Forget it. I’m being dumb.” She picked up a rock, brushed it off, and threw it like Law had done. It hit the water with a loud *plop* and sank immediately.

Law chuckled. “Here,” he said, leaning down and grabbing another stone. “You want one with a flat surface. And you want to chuck it like you would a

Frisbee. It's all in the wrist." He demonstrated each motion, flinging the stone with perfect form. The stone seemed to barely kiss the surface of the water with each bounce.

Dahlia tried again, but this time her rock made a bigger splash than before. "I think I'm a lost cause," she said.

"It's okay. Just keep practicing. I used to do this stuff all the time at our summer house in Yorkshire."

Law's smile seemed to strain at the thought; he stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned away from the pond.

"Man, a summer house. That must've been nice."

"I guess. It was rather boring most of the time. No telly there like we had in our London flat."

Law started back down the main path, shoulders hunched, hands jammed in the pockets of his fleece.

Dahlia hardly blinked at his sudden change in demeanor; she had come to realize a while ago that behavior like that was just part and parcel of being Lawrence Clifton III. She let her own hands rest in her pockets and followed half a step behind him as he led her deeper into the park.

It didn't take long for Dahlia's thoughts to wander back to her mother's thin, bony knuckles wrapped around the stem of a martini glass as though it were a life preserver. She could feel her father's empty gaze pressing on her shoulders, like a backpack full of bricks, trying to pull her down past the sidewalk – down, down into the earth below.

Law's arm across her chest startled her back to the park.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, straining to listen for something that Dahlia could not hear.

"No," she tried to say before he hushed her.

"There it is again," he said, closing his eyes. "I can hear it."

"Law, are you sure? I don't hear anything."

But she did, just then. A guttural moan that sent chills through her body.

"Damn," Dahlia said.

"It came from over here," Law said, gesturing towards the hedgerow beside the path.

Another moan rose from the hedges, this one more pained than the first. "Sounds like something's dying," Dahlia said. "We should probably just leave it be."

"Hold on," Law said. Dahlia recognized the look on his face – the furrowed brow, the bottom lip pinched intently between his teeth – Law was on the hunt.

"Hey, let's just get back to our walk."

"Something's not right," Law said, crouching down beside the hedgerow. "I can feel it."

"Right," Dahlia said, trying her best not to roll her eyes. Law was the king of tacit sensations, which usually turned out to be a load of crap, but he still carried himself as though he carried a CB radio tuned directly to God himself.

Law bent forward, prying apart the hedges with his hands. "I think I see something."

He began to reach into the opening, when a loud snarl erupted from inside. Law hardly had time to duck before a mass of grey fur shot out of the hedge, missing his face by only inches, and clawed its way towards the sidewalk, hissing and spitting all the while.

"Miss Annabelle," Dahlia said, feeling as though the breath has been suddenly knocked out of her.

"What?" Law asked, standing up indignantly. "Damn thing almost took my eyes out."

"Eddie's cat," Dahlia said. "Wormboy's brother."

"Oh, you mean Strange Eddie," Law replied. Dahlia hadn't heard the nickname before, but she nodded anyway. "He can't be too far, then."

"I think she's hurt," Dahlia said. The cat lingered on the sidewalk, licking a gash on its leg that had browned with dried blood.

"Come on," Law said. "The cat should lead us to him."

"No!" Dahlia said a bit too quickly. "I mean, shouldn't we see if we can take her to a vet or something? She's just a cat."

"A naphil's cat," Law said. "Please, Dahlia, don't tell me that you of all people have gone soft."

"No, but I—"

"Come on, then. Naphil filth deserves nothing but the blade of a dagger. You know that."

"Law," Dahlia protested, but he was no longer listening. How could she begin to explain that she wasn't as concerned about the cat as she was about not running into Eddie again? How could Law begin to understand the strange mixture of emotions that Eddie's childish grin roused inside her, like a dagger in her own chest?

"You," Law said to Miss Annabelle as though the cat could understand him. She glanced up from her licking and cast him a bored look. "You'll take us to Eddie or you'll get a brick to the head. Understood?"

The cat yawned and lay down on the pavement.

"Come on Law. This is ridiculous."

"Shut up."

"Let's just go."

"Damn it, Dahlia!" Law cried, kicking the ground so hard that he cringed with pain. "What's wrong with you? When have you ever backed down from the hunt?"

"I just don't think antagonizing a cat's the way to go about it," Dahlia said.

"Bullshit," Law said. He stalked towards her, eyes alight with something that made Dahlia take a few steps backwards. "This isn't about the damn cat, Dahlia. I can practically smell the terror on you. It's disgusting."

"I don't want to see Eddie," Dahlia said. "He's not right."

"No shit he's not right! He's a fucking fiend!"

“That’s not what I mean. He’s... He’s different. He’s like a baby,” she said, taking another step back. She could practically feel Miss Annabelle’s yellow eyes locked onto her, scrutinizing her every movement. “I can’t explain it Law, but I look at him, and it’s like all the hatred dies inside of me.”

“That’s pathetic,” Law said. “Snap out of it, Dahlia! Sympathy for the devil is nothing but a mark of insanity! Heathenism!”

Law stepped forward and grabbed Dahlia roughly by the shoulders. His blonde hair hung disheveled over his face; he was practically convulsing with rage.

“Law, please!”

“We are the chosen ones, Dahlia! We’re the last fucking chance this world has against the evil rotting inside it. Don’t you get that? Don’t you understand?” She cringed as he dug his fingers deeper into her collarbone. “We are the last barrier standing against the darkness. We’re it! If you crumble, you take the world down with you.”

“Let go of me!”

“Get over yourself, Dahlia. You can’t afford to be a selfish little brat anymore. You can’t live inside your own head.”

“Stop it!” Dahlia wrestled out of his grip, practically flinging herself onto the grass in the process.

Behind Law, Miss Annabelle scampered off deeper into the park.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Law said. Before Dahlia could say a word, he had turned and set off after the cat.

Dahlia stood there, numbly rubbing her shoulders and watching as the two of them disappeared beyond the bend in the path.

“Well, some constitutional,” she muttered. “Figures Crusader Law would come now.”

Dahlia yawned and made her way lethargically towards the other end of the park, figuring she’d run into Law when she did. He wasn’t worth chasing after when he got like this.

It took her a few minutes to reach the bend in the path where she’d lost sight of Law. The road actually forked there, though it was hard to tell from beyond the hill; the left fork that Law had taken continued farther into the park, and the right fork wound its way up to the top of the hill where a Victorian gazebo stood. It was a charming little thing, built a century ago but repainted every summer so young couples could take their wedding photos in front of it.

“Hm,” Dahlia said to herself. “Go find Mr. Happy, or watch the sunset and take a breather. Tough call.”

She turned right at the fork without hesitating.

Dahlia felt like her body was moving on autopilot as she scaled the stone steps to the hill’s crest. Her limbs were moving, but her head felt stuffy like she’d just taken a Sudafed or something, and everything was an extra degree removed from its usual place in reality. She found herself leaning up against the railing of the gazebo with hardly any memory of having stepped inside.

“Oh goody,” she said, glancing to either side of her. “Nice to know I’m really losing my mind.”

Out of the corner of her eye she could have sworn she saw the shadows stir.

“Who’s there?” she called. Her heart began to quiver nervously, and she frowned. When *had* she become so soft?

“Dahlia?”

Seth stepped out of the shadows, his black overcoat rustling around him. His wavy black hair was drawn back in a ponytail. A cigarette smoldered between the fingers of his left hand.

“Seth,” she said. Her voice cracked, betraying her surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I come here sometimes. I like to watch the sunset,” he said, leaning up against the railing beside her. “You?”

“Oh, same,” she said, trying not to ward him away with her eyes. Why did he always have to stand so close? “I, uh, needed a little break.”

“I understand,” Seth said, taking a drag from his cigarette. The smoke leaked slowly from his lips, as though it were reluctant to go.

“Yeah,” she said, shivering though she felt no wind. The gazebo afforded a nice view of the park, but she could not see Law or the cat – or Eddie for that matter – among the hills; she couldn’t decide whether to be comforted or bothered by the thought.

“Hey,” Seth, said turning towards her. “Look, I’m sorry I took off the other night.”

“It’s fine,” Dahlia said without looking at him.

“No, it’s not fine. It was rude.”

She heard him step closer towards her, but she was penned in by the railing and had nowhere to go. He snuffed the cigarette butt between his fingertips and tossed it into the bushes.

“It’s just,” he said, pausing as though searching for the right words. “I thought you looked like someone I knew a while ago, that’s all. I panicked.”

Dahlia looked up to find him studying her again. His eyes were so dark they were almost impossible to read, but she could not find any menace in them. Her shoulders relaxed a little, though the hackles on her neck still stood at attention.

“No, don’t worry about it.” She let herself smile. “I had a good time that night.”

“Yeah,” he said. “So did I.”

Dahlia started to get dizzy as she let herself return to that night in the club. She could practically feel his hands moving up her sides, pausing to notch his thumbs into the hollows of her hips. A shudder coursed through her.

“I don’t even know who you are,” she said.

“Well yeah,” he said, a hint of teasing in his voice. “We’ve met what? Three times now?”

“Yeah, but I guess-”

“So what’s your rush? You going somewhere?”

“No,” Dahlia admitted hesitantly.

Seth crept closer to her until she could feel his breath on her face again. Her mind screamed for his touch, even just the slight brush of his hand against her arm; anything.

"I just thought," Dahlia said, "you know, the other night, I thought maybe you were going to, well..."

She shivered as Seth cupped her cheeks and brought his face to hers. "Going to what?" he asked.

Her heart thundered in her ears as he leaned in.

Seth brought his mouth next to her ear and whispered, "Your boyfriend's coming over."

Dahlia frantically shoved him away as the top of Law's blonde hair popped up over the horizon.

"Shit."

"Is he the jealous type?"

"You could say that."

Seth straightened his coat, brushing off the front lapels. "Then this should be fun."

Dahlia shrunk back against the gazebo railing as Law's heavy footsteps raked through the loose gravel.

"Dahlia," Law said, stopping at the stairs and staring up at her. "I couldn't find him. We ought to go; it's getting dark."

Her eyes darted sideways to find that Seth had again sought refuge in the shadows.

"Yeah, okay. Let's go," she said, trying to pry her breath from the back of her throat.

She crossed to the entrance of the gazebo on wobbling legs and had to clutch the rail as she descended. Law did not offer her a hand.

Her chest tightened as she heard the footsteps shuffle behind her.

"Evening."

"Who the bloody hell are you?"

"Seth Kratos," he said. "No relation to the guy in the video game."

The pebbles crunched as Law shifted his weight from one leg to another. His eyes zigzagged contemptuously from Seth's black hair to the row of rings across his knuckles to the brushed steel tips of his boots.

"Friend of yours, Dahlia?" he asked.

"We've met," she said, staring off towards the cathedral in the distance.

"I see."

"I'm an acquaintance, I guess," Seth said.

"Lawrence Clifton," Law said finally, gesturing to his chest. "Dahlia's boyfriend."

"Yeah... She said a lot of nice things about you," Seth said.

"That's good to hear."

Seth shrugged, biting one of his nails. Dahlia noticed that the rest of them had been chewed down to beyond stubs. His black nail polish had been mostly chipped away.

"Do you live nearby?" asked Law.

“Kind of. I’m not too far down the road.”

“That’s good. You wouldn’t want to get caught outside at night. There are some bad people out.”

“Guess not.”

“Come on, Law,” Dahlia said, taking him by the wrist. “I think it’s time to go.”

“Nice meeting you,” Seth said to Law’s back.

“How come you never mentioned that guy?” Law said once they had descended the stone stairs.

Sweat dribbled down Dahlia’s wrists and settled between Law’s fingers and hers. “Oh, uh, I just met him recently. He’s a friend of Raven’s.”

“Well I guess that explains a lot.”

“He’s a nice guy.”

“Looks like a creepy douchebag to me.”

Dahlia said nothing as they turned at the fork and trudged back up the hill towards the exit. Their pace quickened with every gradient of darkness.

“I swear to God, you meet the biggest weirdoes at that club,” Law said.

Dahlia swiped tiredly at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Comes with the territory, I guess.”

“I’ve spoken to Gregory before about that assignment. I never felt good about you being there.”

“It’s fine, Law. The nephilim pretty much moved out when the goth kids took over in the 90’s. I think I could count the remaining fiends on one hand.”

“Well that’s the thing about fiends, Dahlia. You can’t always tell who they are.”

“I know that.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you really do,” he said.

Dahlia decided to let that one go.

As Law and Dahlia made their way back to their apartment, Dahlia could not keep herself from summoning the gentle tickle of Seth’s hands on her face. Her lips ached where he had failed to kiss her; her breath stood stagnant in her throat, stale and wasted.

Behind them, Seth stood alone in the gazebo and stared at the collage of grass and sky until she no longer burned in his eyes.

CHAPTER 7

It was a stance that Seth had perfected: shoulders rounded and hunched, hands buried in the felt pockets of his trench coat, eyes cast so far downward it was hard to tell at first glance if he had any. Walking like that he could perform an optical illusion; he could make a brown-skinned man of 6’3” built like a brick into a slumping, unassuming shadow across the pavement. After years of practice, he could no longer feel the eyes of passers by on his face.

Ghost that he was, he glided unremarked through the stream of people making their way home for the night. His footsteps were slow and thoughtless, even though his apartment stood on the other end of town.

At Grover and Water Street, he ducked under the glass awning of what had once been the midtown stop on the subway route, before the town had run out of money to keep the trains running. Some subway hubs had been demolished and filled in, but the entrance at midtown had years ago been covered in a cheesy mosaic scene of smiling children and dogs and sunshine over the city park. The town declared it a city monument, and flowers were planted to cover the iron grate that blocked anyone stupid enough from venturing down into the vacant tunnel.

He shot a glance over his shoulder and found nothing but the curtain of darkness behind him.

Stepping over a purple bougainvillea, he grabbed the metal bars with both fists. He pried the bars apart as if they were made of play dough, until he could just squeeze his body through, and once inside, bent them back. Only anybody who dared to step close enough to touch the bars would notice the tiny kinks on the metal where they had been constantly bent and straightened into place.

The darkened stairway was perpetually damp and smelled like soil and crypt. The rubber soles of his boots squeaked hideously on the tile stairs and echoed through the tunnel to match the squeals of hungry rats.

When he descended to the basement, Seth jumped a rusted turnstile and headed left for the uptown platform. A single bulb blinked overhead. The light was mostly unnecessary and only made the rows of abandoned ticket machines and faded city maps seem like they were watching his every move with jealous, defensive eyes.

Seth shuddered as he passed by. They could keep their secrets.

Down on the platform, the corners of his mouth no longer twitched nervously. With the liveness of a cat, he vaulted over the yellow line and landed down by the rails with hardly a sound. The dust swam in the air around him, as he straightened his coat and brushed his long black hair back out of his face. The bandana around his forehead was damp with what was either sweat or mildew from the dank subway air. He did not want to think about how he smelled.

Whistling to himself, he straightened up as he began his route up the uptown train tracks. Across the cement partition, he could see a rusting metal train sitting dormant on the downtown tracks like an orange worm. The lights inside the train had long since died.

Whenever he whistled, for some reason Purple Haze was the first thing that came to his lips. But he supposed that it made sense, since nostalgia for Seth was always shrouded in purple, like the bruises around his mother's eyes.

As he walked farther down the tunnel, the smells began to change from the dampness of mold to the sour stink of unwashed flesh. The rats rustling through the walls made the tiles seem to swim around him.

After half a mile, the tunnel turned sharply to the left. At the bend, the veil of darkness was lifted, and he found himself surrounded by pale orange light from lanterns hung overhead. The stained cement walls disappeared under thick shrouds of red velvet that were hung in swaths across the tunnel.

The faint spice of frankincense tickled his nostrils, which meant that Nomi was praying in her chamber.

He passed by rows of people huddled in blankets along the edges of the walls, moaning as they sat still as death in their clumps.

He did not hear their moans anymore. Pure misery resonated at a frequency that his ears refused to transmit. They were nothing but white noise to him.

Stepping over the occasional body slumped across the center of the path, Seth continued until a doorway finally broke the monotony of the tunnel. The incense was stronger here; he could practically feel it clearing away the decay in his chest. He stepped through the door and down a winding flight of stairs, to where the city sewer met the subway.

The tunnel tightened, and he had to hunch back down to the stance he assumed on the streets. He followed the rats to the other end of the pipe, where they gathered. Water dripped in surround sound.

He finally emerged in a huge stone cellar. The ceiling above him as vaulted so high he could barely see it. The walls extended so far into the darkness that sometimes he forgot they were there. He had to remind himself that he was really in a room and not in some sort of endless underground limbo.

Seth couldn't begin to understand how Nik preferred that aesthetic; how he seemed to thrive in the same shadows that Seth constantly found himself getting lost in.

Seth found Nik seated against the far wall. A Chinese paper lantern hung overhead, casting a sallow yellow spotlight on the ground that marked the edges of Nik's living quarters. It was the only light, and even then Nik kept it more for visitors than for himself.

Nik rubbed his neatly clipped beard as he stared intently at the iron chessboard before him, which held only a few glass figures. Across the board, atop a low stool, sat a grey sewer rat the size of a terrier.

"Seth," Nik mused without looking up from the chessboard. His black eyes were beadier than that of his rat and set deep in anemic sockets. His straight black hair was braided down his back.

"Evening," Seth said.

"Santino's cheating," Nik said, eying the rat suspiciously. "But I cannot figure out how."

Seth snickered and sunk down into a plush leather armchair a few feet from the chessboard. The brown cow's skin was chapped and threadbare in places, but it was a nice find. Nik said he'd swiped it from a banker.

"Told you that rat's a sneaky fuck."

"Language," Nik said with a *tsk*. "He's sensitive."

Seth turned sideways and kicked up his legs onto the arm of the chair. "He's a rat."

Santino let out a squeaky whimper and nudged one of the chess pieces with his pink nose.

Nik slumped forward onto his elbows. "Checkmate. I don't even know why I try."

With a satisfied snort, the rat jumped down from the stool and scampered off into the shadows of the crypt, his nails scraping like talons against the stone floor.

“Arrogant little prick,” Nik said, shaking his head as he reset the chess pieces on the board. “I spoil him.”

“You wanted to see me?”

Nik placed the last piece and stood up gracefully from his armchair. He was wearing a form-fitting leather vest over a puffy white linen shirt and a pair of black breeches that clung to his toothpick legs. He’d been wearing this sort of flamboyant attire for a few decades now; Seth always thought he looked an actor who’d wandered out of one of those colonial village reenactments.

“So I take it Eddie actually made himself useful for once,” Nik asked.

“He found me in the park before some douchebag chased him off. He said you wanted me to come down to see you?”

Nik crossed around the table slowly, his hands clasped behind his back as if he were a monarch about to take a stroll through the gardens of Versailles. “It’s a shame, you know. A good, reliable man is hard to find these days.”

“Come on Nik, stop fucking around. You know I hate coming down here.”

“Easy there,” Nik said with a smirk, running his hands slowly across the smooth surface of the chessboard. Like Seth, he had a penchant for wearing large rings on every bony knuckle. “You forget that you are a guest in my home.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Glad to see this power isn’t going to your head.”

“It was time for someone to step up as a leader,” Nik said, pressing his lips into a frown. “You’ve seen what they do when they’re left to their own devices – gorge themselves fat and then hate themselves for it and spend centuries wallowing underground while the city rebuilds itself on their backs. Enough. Someone has to try to stop the cycle.”

“Like they’re not wallowing now?”

“I never said it was going to be easy,” Nik said, staring at Seth with such intensity in his tight, lineless face that sweat began to drip down the back of Seth’s neck.

Nik’s shiny black eyes were completely empty; they reflected only what stood before them, even if that was cruelty beyond imagination. Nothing was too far, or too much for him.

Seth shifted uncomfortably. Nik was the only person that he had ever feared.

“I’ve heard rumors,” Nik said coolly, crossing his arms as Santino scampered up the length of his body and perched on his shoulder. His Eastern European accent tinted each word with a menace that no American voice could achieve. “Rather than entertain gossip,” he paused to let his words settle, “I wanted to come to you. I figured I owed you that, given our long friendship.”

Seth swung his legs around the chair, sitting up properly against the backrest. He felt the walls of his throat beginning to press together. “What have you heard?”

“Well, word has it you’ve been hanging out with a certain girl.”

“Last I heard that wasn’t a crime.”

Nik's face was expressionless. Santino, on the other hand, was glowering at Seth through red eyes nearly the size of marbles.

"Don't fuck with me. You know why I'm speaking to you about this," Nik said. "You know who she is and what she does. And worst of all, you know why."

"I think it's none of your business," Seth said simply.

"You're cozying up to an enemy and you don't think it's my business?"

Nik let out a little sardonic laugh that resonated lifelessly through the chamber.

"And do you really think she'll stick around when she finds out who you are? What you've done?"

Seth gritted his teeth so tightly he could feel a migraine beginning to pulsate behind his eyes.

"In Russian we have words for people like you," Nik said, "monsters with a deformed sense of morality, who think that they can do as they please because they are beyond judgment."

"You and I both know who the monster is here," Seth said as he stood up.

"I know my own sins," Nik said. "I've had a century to know them well. You refuse to see your own, and one day you will drown in them, Seth. Judgment will not be kind to you."

"Then tell me, *Gospodin* Nikolai, why you sit here in the dark brooding with your pet rat, as you've done every day for the past twenty years? Is that a mark of a man who knows his sins?"

"It's a mark of a man who knows his place," Nik said, stepping over towards his wooden writing desk. "You know I should be offended that you honestly think all I do is sit and brood, but you've never been the sharpest, so I'll forgive you. You think I haven't been meticulously planning, waiting for the precise hour when we can strike decisively instead of floundering?"

"I think you don't have a clue."

"It takes a foolish man to mistake patience for idleness," Nik said with a little snort. "Believe me, I if anyone should know the vital importance of timing to a revolution. Look at my 'friends' – what are they now but names scratched out of the book of history? Idiots."

"Right," Seth said. "Well, fuck that. Sorry, but I'm not going to camp out here underground with you waiting for the world to end so I can pop back up and reclaim it."

"Do you really think they don't see you there, Seth? You think they don't notice that a corpse walks among them?"

"They don't."

"Maybe not at first, but they will. Give them time to wonder why the mere sight of you makes them lose their appetites, and makes the hairs on the back of their necks stand up."

"Fuck you," Seth said. "You know, you have a lot to say for somebody who hasn't seen a human being since video cassettes were all the rage."

Nik stepped forward and placed a cold little hand on Seth's shoulder. "Curse me all you like, but do not forget what you are."

"Damn it, Nik. You think I ever could?"

"Of course not."

Seth let out a heavy sigh.

“But most importantly,” Nik said, “do not ask forgiveness.”

“I know.”

“Because she will certainly never forgive you.”

“I’m going out,” Dahlia said, brushing her way past Law as he came home from work. “See you later.”

He looked back over his shoulder to the melodramatic swirl of her long coat. Her leather heels picked up the sickly yellow light as she walked away.

“Uh, right then,” he said, mostly to himself. A gust of wind rose from the corridor and he shuddered, pulling the door shut with a slam.

Alone. His eyes wandered from the warped linoleum of the kitchen to the metal strip that marked the transition to the mud-stained carpet of the living room. His briefs were scattered across the glass kitchen table where he’d left them, alongside a mostly empty bottle of Jameson and a smeared tumbler. Also just where he’d left them.

Law shrugged to convince himself of his nonchalance and stepped over to the mess of papers he’d spent years learning how to love. More nights than he cared to admit were spent spooning a thick manila folder as he drifted into dreamless sleep.

With a sigh, he shirked his way out of his tan suede trench and folded it over the back of the chair.

“Hello, Lawrence,” a voice behind him said.

He nearly fell face-first into the collage of briefs, saved only by the thick edge of the kitchen table and reflexes that were keener than he was. “What the fuck?”

“Hey, calm down,” a strange man said, stepping into the buzzing fluorescent light. “It would be quite a pity if you had a heart attack on me now.”

Law could have sworn he smelled something pungent like sulfur as he looked the strange man up and down.

The man couldn’t have been more than five foot; his wrists were slender and delicate, his skin nearly as bleached as the outdated white pantsuit he wore. Instead of a tie, he wore a golden kerchief tied neatly around his neck. His long blonde hair was perfectly straight and parted in the center of his head and fell over his thickly padded shoulders like gold curtains.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Nathaniel, keeper of the Holy Flame, soldier of the order of the Seraphim, and leader of the Third Battalion of the Angelic phalanx,” the man said with a low, sweeping bow. “But you can call me Nate.”

The more Law looked at this bizarre fellow, the more his eyes strained, and his first thought was that his contacts were drying out. Then he remembered that he was wearing glasses.

“Look, there’s not much to take,” Law said quickly. “A laptop in a black case by the bed, if you haven’t seen it already. And uh, it’s kind of old, but maybe the telly would eBay for something. Just be quick about it.”

“I think you misunderstand me, Lawrence.”

“Wait a second. How did Dahlia not see you? I mean, she was just here, and...” Law trailed off as he imagined the pieces fitting together to form the only plausible, albeit hideous explanation. “*Damn it, Dahlia.*”

Law lunged forward and grabbed Nate by the kerchief so hard that the veins in his neck bulged like wires. The tiny man seemed to weigh nothing, and Law had his feet dangling helplessly in the air as he jerked him up so their faces were at almost the same height.

“So let me guess? You’re the guy who’s been letting himself into the house and fucking my girlfriend while I’ve been at work?”

Nate said nothing.

“If that’s true I swear to the Creator-”

Law’s voice went stale in his throat when he realized that he was speaking to kitchen air. His knuckles were still clenched and trembling with rage, but the fingers grasped nothing.

“Hey there,” Nate said from behind him. “I bruise easily.”

“How did you-”

“Did you miss the whole keeper of the Holy Flame, soldier of the order of the Seraphim thing? Because honestly I thought that was a dead giveaway.”

Law sunk down into the chair, flopping forward on his elbows. “Shit, mate. So you’re really... uh...”

“What English colloquialism would call an angel? Yes,” Nate replied, nudging himself up against the table next to Law. He leaned casually back against the glass, which came up past his waist.

“Not to be rude,” Law said, “but uh, you’re kind of um-”

“Short? Go ahead, you can say it.”

“Yeah...”

“Well, due to the restrictions of your human senses, what you’re seeing is I suppose more like a reflection of me – a translation, so to speak. In other words, I chose this form for you to see because you could not possibly process the grandeur of my true being.”

“Right, so why this form then?”

“What is this, twenty questions?” Nate brushed a thick sheet of hair from his shoulders, which caught a gleam that could not possibly have come from kitchen light. “I don’t know; I was always a fan of white pantsuits. I guess I spent a lot of time hanging out in the seventies. So sue me.”

“Oh man, this is unbelievable. I always, I mean, I guess I sort of dreamt something like this would happen, but I never thought...” Law tenderized his cheeks with both palms, yanking the skin down until his face looked more like a mask from the *Commedia dell’Arte*.

“Stop that. You look ridiculous.”

Law released his cheeks. “Sorry.”

“Anyway, since we’ve gotten introductions aside, I suppose we should get to discussing what I’m doing here, hm?”

“Uh, I guess?” Law said reluctantly.

“Okay, I’m going to throw you through a loop here first. You ready?”

Law nodded absently, and Nate stepped away from the table, thrusting his carriage forward with the stateliness of a monarch about to deliver an address to his court.

“Listen to me, and listen well. First of all, you have to get something through your head, alright?”

Law nodded again, this time more forcefully. He could feel his patience wearing thin, as he subtly glanced around the kitchen for some sort of hidden camera set up. This all had to be one big prank. The way Nate had disappeared from his grip had been impressive, but a parlor trick still the same. It had to be.

“Okay,” Nate said. “So I hate to break it to you, but the Creator doesn’t give a shit about you.”

Law snorted. “You’re kidding, right? That’s what you came here to tell me?”

“I’m serious,” Nate said, raising his hands defensively. “That Creator you worship – that guy you pray to every night for a cure to cancer, or ponies, or whatever – that guy might as well not exist.”

“No,” Law said, shaking his head. “You’re honestly trying to tell me that you’re an angel, and yet the Creator does not exist? That’s impossible.”

“You’re not listening,” Nate said with a groan. “I didn’t say that there is no Creator – there is. Rather, the Creator that you *think* exists, who intervenes in your pathetic lives on a daily basis, is a total fallacy. The real Creator is way too busy to even give this pathetic world a backwards glance.”

“That’s impossible.”

Nate brought his fingers up to his temples and rubbed them. “Look, I figured you’d have this sort of reaction, which is why I prepared a little history lesson. So sit down and shut up, handsome.”

“Why should I believe a word you say?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Nate said. “I didn’t want to have to wrinkle my jacket, but here you go. The things I do.”

He continued to mutter bitterly to himself as he carefully unbuttoned his jacket and laid it on the glass table. He undid his shirt and his kerchief and laid them too on the table. After removing his undershirt he was naked from the waist up, and Law could see just how pale and luminescent his skin was, with a twinge of rainbow like a pearl held up to the light.

“Since ‘seeing is believing’ to you little brats, here you go,” Nate said. “Feast your eyes.”

He bent over and cringed, grabbing ahold of the edge of the table to steady himself. His shoulders trembled ever so slightly, like the ground just before an earthquake. Before Law could even blink, two white pillars of muscle burst from his back; the feathers unfolded like fans.

Law sat still, barely breathing, feeling his face tickle every time Nate’s wings swatted the air.

“Holy shit,” Law said.

“Now can I continue?”

Law sat stunned in his chair, hardly able to move much less speak. He finally managed a pitiful little nod.

“Good.”

Nate began to pace uncomfortably, a few steps here and there, as though he were reluctant to be seen in his full form. He kept his wings tucked tight to his body, like a downy cape.

“As I said to you, there is in fact a Creator, who made us angels just as he made you mortals on earth. But he isn’t nearly as engaged as you’d want him to be.”

“I see,” Law said.

“We call him the Creator because that’s what he does; he creates. What does your Bible say about the creation of the universe? I think that’s one of the few things it got right, more or less.”

“In the beginning the Creator made the heavens and the earth,” Law recited.

“Yeah, yeah. Then what?”

“And he said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

“Aha! There you go. Separation of dark from light. It’s the first thing the Creator did to separate the chaos into order.”

“And?”

“And what is more powerful than dark and light? What do you think I, an immortal creature, am made entirely of?”

“Light,” Law mumbled.

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner! Somebody get this boy an ice cream sandwich.”

“But that’s only the first day,” Law interjected. “What about the rest? On the second day he separates the earth from the sky and creates the world.”

“And so on and so forth,” Nate said, “and fast-forward until you get to the really interesting part: life. I’m not going to split hairs over whether you or the animals or even the fucking dinosaurs came first. Long story short, the Creator made you humans a perfect mix of life and death. You have the power to willingly give life, just as you can take it away. You are both alive and dead the moment you come into this world; the passing of each day turns a day of life into death. But that’s nothing you don’t know already.”

“So what don’t I know, then?”

“Well, that’s what I was trying to get to, Mister Patience. Geeze, it’s a good thing you’re so handsome...”

“Yeah, good thing,” Law muttered.

“So once the Creator created the world, what do you think he did? Continue to lord over it? Please!” Nate scoffed. “Sure, he watched you for a bit to make sure things were stable at first, but after a little while he took off and left us in charge. You were a gift to us, he said, like our little pets or something. We were to take care of you, protect you, *love* you.”

“You make it sound like a chore.”

“And you think babysitting you narrow-minded little shits is a walk in the park? The Creator creates, and he moves on. We’ve barely seen the guy in centuries. He just sits tucked in his corner of the Empyrean, locked away and working on his next perfect venture, ironing out all the kinks. The explosion of

one world is just the failure of an experiment to him; it's back to the drawing board, and then he moves on."

"But we have seen the Creator!" Law said, jumping to his feet. He strode over to the bookshelf and ripped a thick volume from the rest, waving it in front of him. *Holy Bible* sparkled in gold script on the cover. "What about this? Is it all bullshit then?"

"You've seen what we've wanted you to see," Nate said. "You were our first gift; don't think we were professionals at taking care of you right off the bat. Sure, we had our share of disagreements about how things should be handled. But in the end we figured it would be easier just to let you keep up the singular Creator imagery and venerate us as servants of some fictional greater master."

"So all these encounters with the Creator-"

"Angels."

"The Son?"

"Angel," Nate replied, polishing his nails on his white linen pants. "Got it, now? We protect you, as we always have, from the Adversary. And you have no idea what sort of Adversary you're really up against. The behemoth? The leviathan? Those things really existed, at least for a little while. You know, until the angels destroyed them."

"Okay," Law said, visibly struggling against the information. "Okay. So let's say this is all true, and we really have been living with angels as guardians. How do you explain the nephilim? How'd they get through your security gate?"

"Funny you mention that," Nate said, "since it's much of the reason I came to visit you tonight."

He stepped closer to Law, his wings dangling behind him like an afterthought. "I told you the Adversary has it out for you, and believe me when I say he's tried for millions of years to get the best of his brother the Creator."

"His brother?"

"Brothers. Ain't that some shit? Lives holed up in his own sort of hell, plotting and scheming like a child, but you still exist so far, so he obviously hasn't been that successful. Now I honestly don't know much about why the nephilim exist, or how they got here, but I do know that they've been around almost as long as you humans have been, and I'd be willing to bet my wings that the Adversary has something to do with it."

"We've tried our best to fight them off," Law said, "the Vigil-"

"Is useless, let's face it," Nate interrupted, putting a finger to Law's mouth when he opened it to protest. "Shh, come on. You know as well as I do that slaying them, as you call it, just sends them back underground for a little while until they – *poof!* – reanimate again. The only reason the world isn't crawling with those things is that by the time they get super ancient, they start getting too lethargic to do much of anything but sit around and sulk."

"Well at least we can delay them for a little while."

"Yeah, you can put a wrinkle in their undies, but it's all short term, love."

Law took a deep breath and settled back into his chair. "So if you're so smart, then what do propose we do about them?"

“Well, that’s the thing. I think I’ve found just the ritual to get rid of those pesky creeps once and for all. You interested?”

“Am I?” Like that, Law was bolt upright again.

“Good.”

“So what do we do?”

“Well, that’s a little complicated. You’ve heard about the fall of Lucifer the morning star, right?”

“Of course,” Law said.

“Why do you think the Creator chose to entrap him, rather than simply destroy him?”

Law thought for a moment, but he could hardly focus on what he saw as needless digression. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Because he can’t,” Nate said. “Angels can’t be destroyed. Remember when I told you that light and dark energy are the most powerful energies? Even the Creator cannot undo what he has done by organizing the light into angelic forms. And so he was left with no choice but to cage the apostate angel and his fallen phalanx.”

“That’s too bad, but what does it have to do with the nephilim?”

“Everything,” Nate said. “But nothing to you right now. No, I think that’s enough story time for one night.” He took a step back, gripping the table again and closing his eyes as the wings were sucked right back into his shoulders, leaving pearlescent skin as unblemished as if it had never been penetrated at all. Law could not help but stare.

“So what’s the plan, then?” Law said, shaking himself back to attention. “What do we do?”

“It’ll unfold in time,” Nate said. “Rest assured that your part will come soon.”

“I don’t know,” Law said, standing up and pacing a few steps back and forth. “I mean, this is all just so insane. It’s impossible. All of this.”

Nate stepped forward, taking Law by the shoulders. He smirked, pressing a single delicate finger to Law’s lips. “Shh... Let it sink in. Let it envelop you. Soon you’ll know that it can be nothing but true.”

Law felt his body relaxing despite himself.

The smirk widened into a smile on Nate’s delicate face.

“This is crazy,” Law protested.

“I know it is, love.”

“You’re a dose of wormwood.”

“You don’t have any wormwood.”

“I think I need to see a doctor, frankly.”

“You’ll get over the sticker shock eventually, dear, but at least now you know why I’m here. You and I have some work to do together. And if you listen to me and do your part, I can promise that those annoying nephilim will conveniently disappear.”

“I guess I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Law asked.

“Well, in a manner of speaking, no. But won’t it be so much more *fun* if we’re both on the same page?” Nate let his fingers track across the stubble on Law’s face.

“Fine,” Law conceded, feeling like he had just run a marathon. “If what you say is true, I guess it won’t hurt to hang up our daggers one day.”

“That’s a good boy,” Nate said. “And if I may say so, this does appear to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Law stood silently as Nate hugged him a little too tightly, wondering what exactly he’d just gotten himself into.

CHAPTER 8

“Damn it, Armando,” Steve barked from the slide, waving the yellow slip so hard that his whole arm shook like a stocking full of Jell-O, “twenty minutes on a turkey burger?”

“I’m sorry, señor,” the harried line chef said, wiping a dirty rag across his forehead as he rocked a pan back and forth over an open flame. “The turkey burgers were delivered frozen this morning, and we had no time to thaw.”

“Save it, cabrón,” Steve said, rolling his eyes back in their puffy sockets. “You’re lucky I don’t turn all you shits into INS.”

“INS?” Cesar piped up from the cutting block at Armando’s side, where he was frantically dicing a tomato.

“Es una mierda,” Armando muttered over his shoulder.

“Yeah you go on thinking that. You Mexicans are a dime a dozen these days.”

As Dahlia left the kitchen with her arms heavy with salads, she imagined what would happen if Steve ever accidentally left his address lying around. A smile crept over her lips at the thought of a kitchen knife sticking up out of his fat windpipe with a little Mexican flag taped to the handle.

When she turned the corner to approach the table, she slowed as she realized the two women were mid argument. The younger, a skinny blonde thing in her late teens, tried adamantly to interject as the other blonde, in her mid forties or so and presumably her mother, bounced her head back and forth like a bobble head doll.

“Absolutely not,” the mother said.

“Come on, mom,” she could see the girl’s mouth form. “It’s not really your decision.”

“Of course it is,” the mom replied, folding her arms on the table. “Part of my responsibility as a parent is making sure you stay on the right track, and believe me, living in a cardboard box one day is not the right track.”

“Fuck that,” the girl said.

“Language, Melody!” The ringlets of the mother’s blonde perm jiggled as she waved a finger in her scowling daughter’s face.

“I’m going to Hampshire and that’s it. You think I want to throw my twenties away at med school like you and Dad so I can hang out in a hospital with dying people all day?”

“For the love of the Creator, Melody, you can’t be so short-sighted. We’re not saying you have to be a doctor, but can you get this crazy hippie school off your radar? A girl with your smarts could be anything. A lawyer, businesswoman, politician-”

“I told you, Mom. I want to be a writer.”

“Well, you have fun chasing that little pipe dream as long as you can, sweetie. Because as far as I’m concerned, when the real world sets in and you end up waiting tables or something, it won’t be pretty.”

“Whatever.”

The mother looked down at her oversized white leather wristwatch. “And damn it, where is our food?”

Dahlia stumbled forward, hastily setting down the salads in front of each woman. “House chicken Caesar and Asian salad with the dressing on the side. Is there anything else I can get you ladies?”

The mother cast her a smile that came out as more of a scowl, thanks mostly to her thin eyebrows, which seemed perpetually furrowed. Then again, that could’ve been a side effect of Botox. “No, we’re fine. Thanks.”

Dahlia smiled and shuffled off towards the POS station. Krista had the day off, which meant that Dahlia got to spend most of her shift single-handedly avoiding Carl, who had a habit of “accidentally” bumping into her backside as she refilled drinks at the narrow station. At the POS was Amanda, the six-foot-two former model who was pregnant with her fourth child from a different father, and often liked to describe to Dahlia in excruciating detail the sexual prowess of each current partner.

Dahlia tried not to look up as she grabbed a water pitcher and filled it at the tap. “Hey, ‘Manda.”

“Hey girl,” Amanda said, one hand resting on her bulging stomach. “Did I tell you it’s another boy? I swear to the Creator, there are way too many dicks in my house.”

Dahlia laughed nervously, brushing a strand of hair out of her lip gloss. “Nope, I don’t think you’ve mentioned it yet.”

“Yep,” Amanda said, letting out a little sigh. “Lord have mercy, boy number four. He’s gonna be tall and handsome like his father, I bet. Gonna have to beat the girls away with a baseball bat. Oh damn, if he’s anything like his father that means he’s gonna have a massive-”

“Hey, hold that thought,” Dahlia said quickly, grabbing the pitcher from the tap. “I have to float the room. Be right back?”

Amanda shrugged, leaning up against the POS as if it were her personal stoop. “Whatever. I’ll be here avoiding Steve. You know, same old.”

“Right.” Dahlia snaked her way through the room, reviving water glasses at all the servers’ tables. As she was tending to the row by the window, she watched out of the corner of her eye as a dark shadow darted by the frosted glass, and she almost poured water on the fingers of the woman who decided that the best way to refuse a refill was to cover the mouth of the glass with her hand. It was a good thing Dahlia wasn’t pouring hot coffee.

“Sorry,” she muttered, as the woman gave her an irritated glance.

Dahlia looked back at the window, but the shadow was gone.

At Melody and her mother's table, Dahlia was slightly relieved to find that the mother had gone to the bathroom or something, leaving her teenage daughter to idly stir her ice tea with the striped plastic straw.

"Do you think your mom wants some more water?" Dahlia asked gently as she approached, pitcher in hand.

Melody shrugged. "I don't know. She's weird about that stuff."

"Well okay," Dahlia said. "I guess I'll wait."

"Yeah," the teenage girl said sullenly.

"Look," Dahlia interjected. "I don't mean to be rude and I'm sorry if this isn't my place, but I sorta heard some of what your mom was saying to you, and I think it's quite honestly a load of bullshit. My parents gave me the same spiel for majoring in English."

Melody's raised her eyes from the tablecloth. "Really?"

"Yeah. I graduated a few years ago with a B.A. in English, and honestly I'm glad I did."

"Wait," Melody said, twirling a piece of her dirty blonde hair around one finger. "You think that's supposed to make me feel better?"

Dahlia groped for something to say, feeling like she had been thrust back into middle school. "I'm sorry, I just--"

"Damn it," Melody said, groaning into her hands. "So I will end up waiting tables. Fuck that, maybe I'll become an accountant after all."

Dahlia silently snuck away from the table, holding her breath to keep tears of frustration from forming in her eyes. She hurled the pitcher in the sink and joined Amanda at the POS.

Melody's mother could shove her damn refill up her ass.

"Hey, I'll see you later," Dahlia said to Amanda as she swiped her card to clock out at the end of her shift. The little bungee cord at her waist snapped it back to her, reminding her like always that she would be tethered to this greasy hell until the day she grew a pair and left her apron on the floor behind her.

"Peace," Amanda said, filing her nails as she leaned against the counter. She usually took the graveyard shift until dinner started at six, just for the extra bucks. Steve didn't seem to have a problem with it; then again, Amanda was the only person that Dahlia knew who could tell Steve to go sodomize himself with a rusty spatula and still keep her job.

Dahlia grabbed her jacket and purse from the cabinet by the host's podium and waltzed out into the afternoon sun with the jubilation of a freed carrier pigeon.

"Hey," she heard from the door, as she stepped onto the sidewalk.

Her heart skipped a beat as she looked over her shoulder to find Seth leaning against the corner of the building, hands shoved in his pockets. An unlit cigarette hung from his lips.

"For fuck's sake, Seth. Don't do that to people!"

"Do what?"

"You know," she gestured wildly with her hands. "Sneak up on them!"

"Sorry," he said with a look that hinted that he was anything but.

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I was in the area,” he said, peeling himself away from the wall to join her in the middle of the sidewalk.

Dahlia noticed that he seemed oddly out of place in the sun, as if he might melt with too much direct exposure to the light. As if confirming her thoughts, he raised his hand up like a visor over his eyes.

“Yeah, okay,” Dahlia said, frowning.

“Well,” he said, “you can be sure I didn’t come here for the food. I swear to the Creator, I thought I was going spend a week in the bathroom after that hamburger. I think it was the sauce.”

“Are you following me?”

“No. Are you following me?”

She sighed and began to walk away, but she could practically feel him following at her heels. “What do you want, Seth?” she said without turning around.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t usually... *like* a lot of people, I guess you could say.”

“And you like me?” she said, turning her head and looking him in the almond shaped eyes and immediately regretting it when sweat began to trickle down the small of her back.

“I don’t dislike you,” he said simply, shrugging. “I guess that’s all I can say.”

“Well, okay,” Dahlia said. “Good for you. Now if you don’t mind...”

She pushed past him, and this time he did not follow.

Dahlia walked to the corner and stood waiting for the light to change, dazedly watching the pedestrians cross in the other direction.

It was like a dream, all of the sudden. Everything shrouded in haze, everything a little bit blurrier than it should have been.

She saw a woman holding a squirming toddler in her arms; a man with a briefcase and Bluetooth headset; a teenage boy carrying a longboard. They all marched like ants, noble, heads held high on strong necks.

Dahlia found herself longing to be one of those people, to cross the street as proudly as they had crossed. She wanted to walk, for once, without lugging around that backpack of bricks.

She stepped determinedly into the crosswalk.

Before she could take another step forward, she felt arms around her, yanking her back onto the sidewalk. The honk of a blue sedan brought her to the present, and she saw the four lanes of cars rushing past her.

She reached down and touched the rough skin of Seth’s hands around her waist, holding her steady on the curb.

“What just happened?” she said.

“I don’t know. You were about to walk into traffic.”

Dahlia felt the hands drop bashfully from around her waist. She turned to find Seth staring at her, his eyes wide with something she had never sensed on him before: fear. It practically dripped from his pores.

“That was... It’s like I just checked out or something,” she said, “Like I was living some sort of virtual reality. Why does this weird stuff keep happening when I’m with you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, tucking his hands safely into his pockets again. The skin on her waist was still warm where his hands had pressed into her.

Dahlia thought about walking on by herself, but she was so shaken that she hardly trusted herself to make the crossing. She didn’t ask him to come with her, but somehow he knew, and he walked unobtrusively by her side.

She realized at some point that she had no idea where she was going; the apartment was only a few blocks away, but she wasn’t ready to stop walking. Whatever it was that was haunting her, she would outpace it.

“So what do you do, Seth?” Dahlia asked to break the silence.

“What do you mean?” Seth asked. “What I do?”

“Like for a living,” she said.

“Oh. Right. Odd jobs, I guess. Believe it or not, I really wanted to be a priest for a while there.”

She had to keep herself from snickering. “Really? You? A priest?”

“I tried the practical route first – went to trade school, tried to be a mechanic. Failed out midway through just ‘cause I couldn’t give a damn. So I asked my parents if I could go to seminary. They were more than happy to oblige.”

“No shit,” Dahlia said, stopping to stare at him as they paused to let another stream of traffic go by. “Somehow I just can’t see you in those robes.”

Seth shrugged, a gesture that made him seem even more massive than he was – a brick wall of a man. Dahlia felt herself naturally backing down next to him.

“My step-dad was pretty excited about the idea,” he said. “Greek Orthodox and all. He probably figured it would get me out of his hair, at least.”

“So what happened?”

“I made it a couple years before I realized it was too much for me. I’ve always been a believer myself, but all that liturgy... I don’t know. I couldn’t handle it. Here,” he said, tugging at the sleeve of her jacket.

Dahlia stopped in place and watched as Seth shrugged off his coat and placed it on the ground beside him. He turned around, his back towards her, and wrestled his shirt up high enough until she could see the massive cross tattooed on his back, morphing grotesquely as his muscles shifted underneath. It was textured to look like the same cracked stone of those angel statues, but something about it seemed weathered, like a neglected grave marker.

Dahlia felt a twinge of relief when Seth pulled his shirt back down.

“I spent years getting inked for the Creator, so I figured it wouldn’t be that much of a stretch to join the clergy,” Seth said. “I was young and stupid, though. What the fuck did I know?”

“You couldn’t have been that young,” Dahlia remarked, letting her eyes linger on his unblemished olive skin.

Seth must not have heard her, or else he chose not to respond. He shoved his arms back into his jacket, dusted off the front of it, and they were on their way again.

“So anyway,” he said after a moment, “after I dropped out of seminary I was in and out of jobs for a while, and then I started cage fighting to pay the bills. Crazy M.M.A. stuff – it’s kind of brutal, but the money’s good. And I guess the rest is history.”

“You, a fighter? Now that’s something I can picture somehow,” Dahlia said.

They said little else as they wandered through the city blocks, past honking rush hour traffic and business people swarming from the doors of office buildings. City buses hulked on every corner, spewing black soot from trembling tailpipes.

Dahlia was almost surprised when she saw the wrought iron gates of the city park looming in front of her. Flat grey clouds hung in the sky, hurling shadows down at the earth. One such cloud was shaped like a giant saucer and shaded the whole park, turning the grass more grey than green.

“Guess we’re going to the park,” she muttered.

“It’s nice out,” Seth said.

“So I have this hill I like to hang out on,” Dahlia said, gesturing towards the sloping grass in the distance. “I think it’s the highest point in the park. You can see pretty much everything, like the bay beyond the esplanade.”

“Why don’t you show me?” he said.

Dahlia usually loved the crunching of the gravel under her feet, the rhythm of her steady steps as she made her way up to the top of the hill. But something about four feet instead of two made her uneasy, gave her the impression she was being stalked. The truth of the matter was that her shadow now had a face, and it was one she could not get out of her head.

She snuck a glance back at him at some point during their walk and watched his profile against the dimming sun, as the wind whipped tendrils of his hair wildly about his face. He looked something like she imagined the first man looked – beautiful but primal, even a bit feral. She hardly understood him, but maybe that was the best part about him.

At last they reached the crest of the hill and sat down in the cold grass, and for the first few minutes they said nothing. Her legs were crossed underneath her, “Indian style” as her kindergarten teacher had once called it; “Indigenous American Person style” as her fifth grade teacher had corrected. He sat with one knee bent and the other straight out in front of him. His back was curved without tension, and he rested his forearms on his bent knee as he stared out into the distance.

After a moment he drew a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered them towards Dahlia. She took one with a nod of thanks, and he placed one between his own lips, lighting the tip with a zippo before tossing the lighter to her.

Dahlia lit her own cigarette and took a deep drag on her oldest vice.

The water of the bay looked black, like churning oil.

Dahlia could detect the faint hint of a grin at the corners of Seth's lips.

"Neat view, right?" she said finally, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't think I've sat up here before."

"They used to have a pagan altar up here," she said, "or so I heard.

Apparently the puritans tore it down a couple centuries ago."

"Sounds about right," Seth mused.

"Can I ask you something?"

She heard him shift next to her, and when she looked back at him he was sitting with his chin rested on his knee, his cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. "Sure."

"This is going to sound weird, but uh, do you ever feel sometimes like you're... like you're not right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," she said, rustling the grass under her open hand, her fingers spread like a starfish. "I guess I mean like, well, okay so I'm in this club, right? I'm not really supposed to talk about it, so I can't tell you what it's all about. But it's a pretty serious deal. Okay?"

Seth nodded against his kneecap.

"Right, so well this club is like really, really traditional. Very old laws and whatever. There weren't even supposed to be any girls in it at the start, but something weird happened to me."

Seth squirmed again beside her. "Oh?" His response, for some reason, sounded forced.

"Yeah. When I was a kid." Dahlia sighed, unable to help herself, and began to pluck more vigorously at the wet blades of grass.

"What happened?" He paused then added quickly: "you know, if you don't mind me asking."

Dahlia crawled over closer to Seth, kneeling so that she was facing him. He relaxed his legs in front of him, but kept his eyes on the ground.

"When I was a little girl, my sister and I were at the mall. We got lost somehow, I don't really remember much. I was pretty young. We ran into a man, he seemed really tall at the time and his face is blurred to me now. But I remember thinking he had a strange voice."

Dahlia realized she was breathing too heavily. She snuffed out the cigarette in the grass before the embers could burn through the filter.

"Well, um, I just remember going outside with him. I can't really remember much after then, but I know the man killed her in front of me. I think I sort of blocked out the memory," she said, trembling as she forced the emotion down below the lump in her throat. "I should've died that night. No one has ever survived witnessing something like that – I did research on it when I was older. I read every book I could get my hands on. Nothing. No one has since. I'm the only one."

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching out slowly as if he wanted to touch her. But after a second, he seemed to think twice and let the hand fall into his lap. "You never should have had to go through that."

"I survived," Dahlia said, staring down at his hand with a strange flurry of feelings. "But I saw the mouth of hell open that day. I discovered evil, and I can't let that go. That's why I'm in this club. That's the promise they made to me."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. "It just doesn't feel right. Something about it. I can't put my finger on it. I want to believe so badly that we're the good guys, doing the right thing. But something tells me it's not that simple."

"There's no such thing as good and evil," Seth said.

"That's what Father Pierre said, but I'm not sure I completely agree. I've seen evil, Seth. I've seen it so many times I don't feel anything anymore when I look into eyes knowing there's no soul behind them."

Seth didn't seem to know what to say, and Dahlia pressed on. She realized at some point that she was rambling a bit disjointedly, but she couldn't stop herself once she'd started.

"I've learned to run on hatred," she said. "It's like a balloon inside of me, and I just keep feeding it until it explodes, and then I'm not myself anymore. I'm some sort of creature like they are, and we're dancing, and I'm actually loving it. Sometimes I find myself craving the dance. Law says I'm one of those people born with one foot in the grave, but what the fuck does he know? Isn't everybody a little self-destructive? Aren't we all born to die?"

Seth listened to her tirade politely, nodding as though he actually understood. Dahlia, in the midst of her rant, hardly noticed that he had not met her eyes once.

"Sometimes I think everything's just a big trick somebody's playing. We think we know so much, only to find out that we're like the ant on the blade of grass thinking he understands the world," Dahlia concluded.

"I don't think we know anything. Not really," Seth said.

"So when people tell me that there's no good or evil, I'm sort of inclined to believe them, because nothing could be that simple. Nothing's simple at all."

"Nothing ever is."

"Like I'm supposed to meet my father for dinner in a few hours," Dahlia said, "the one guy whose love I've been working to earn all of my life, and I don't even want to go. Isn't that fucked up?"

Seth let out a little snort. "Love shouldn't be worked for. And fathers are overrated."

"Tell me about it," she said.

"All I can say," he said, "is that nobody's got this stuff figured out. We're all in this together. Anyone who pretends like they really know themselves, like they know their own sins, is a liar."

"Yeah, I know a few people like that," Dahlia said. She found herself for some reason picturing the crow that picked at its festering wound on the windowsill while Law told her, more or less, to get over herself.

"Fuck those people," Seth said with a grin.

“Hell yeah,” she said, laughing and lying back in the grass.

Dahlia and Seth sat together for the rest of the afternoon in silence, close enough that they could have touched if they had wanted to, or if they had built up the nerve, but Dahlia had already gotten too close for comfort. Seth did not reach for her again.

CHAPTER 9

“You’ve reached the voicemail of Jude B. Ellis. Please leave me a message, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Dahlia snapped the phone shut in her lap. The teenage hostess looked down at her with sympathy over the wooden podium. “Should we hold your reservation? We can usually keep you on the books for an hour or two.”

“Fuck it,” Dahlia said, standing up and dusting off the front of her nice black pants. She’d even dressed up for the occasion, with slacks and a new lavender chiffon tank. She picked up her leather jacket from the back of the chair and slung it over her shoulder. “It’s been almost an hour now, I think I get the hint.”

“I’m so sorry,” the hostess said as if she wished she could offer Dahlia more than a minty toothpick in consolation.

“It’s fine. I’m used to it, honestly.”

“Would you like to reschedule?” The hostess began to chew uncomfortably on the tip of her ballpoint pen.

“No, I’m okay. Sorry about this.”

Dahlia ducked out of the restaurant, gritting her teeth and making a mental note not to come back to Romeo’s anytime soon.

“Damn it,” she muttered, kicking an empty beer bottle across the pavement. “Why am I so gullible?”

When Jude had called her that morning to ask her to dinner, and they had spoken for a few minutes, negotiating the details, she should have noticed that her father sounded more like he was scheduling a dentist appointment than an evening at a nice restaurant. He always sounded like that, and she always failed to notice until she was standing there with nothing but his voicemail and pitying looks from the hostess.

It was their little ritual, and yet somehow she always left the restaurant feeling smaller than ever before. At some point, if they kept it up, she would take a step outside and simply cease to exist.

Since the thought of coming home to Law was hardly palatable, Dahlia made her way almost habitually over to the red light district and into the dark fog of the Bat Cave.

For almost three hours Dahlia sat at the bar eyeing the crowd with boredom as she took the smallest sips possible from her gin and tonic. She examined the comers and goers with the usual scrutiny, but no one roused her interest, not even remotely. She could not remember the last time the Bat Cave had been this quiet.

When midnight finally hit she threw up her hands in defeat. The club goers could take care of themselves.

Dahlia wandered listlessly away from the club, feeling numb with every step she took. She hardly registered where she was going, though she had the general idea that she was moving north, towards the section 8 housing and the abandoned cement factories. Any other day she might have considered the north side slightly out of her comfort zone, but this night the idea of comfort hardly registered.

She couldn't say how long she spent walking past rows and rows of those dilapidated, boarded up houses, set on lots choked with thistles and dead grass. Most of the windows were broken out, and shards of glass lay beneath the frames, glimmering like tears in the lamplight.

Shadowy faces stared out at her from the windows, with eyes vacant as the buildings they occupied. She could see the shadows of bodies hunched over behind the windowsills, trembling from ingesting substances that had been made underneath a kitchen sink.

A man on a rotting porch waved at her, and when she looked back at him, she realized his eye sockets were stitched shut.

For miles it was all the same; the unchanging tableau of desolation gave Dahlia the feeling that she was walking in suspended animation. Nothing really moved, not even to breathe, except the millions of eyes that moved with her – never falling behind, never blinking.

Dahlia slowed down when she came to a rusting railroad overpass. "Line 51" was stamped haphazardly across the side in white ink. She'd never heard of it.

She was finally beginning to register unease when a low moan rose from somewhere close by.

Her hand immediately found its way to the innermost pocket of her jacket. "Who's there?" Dahlia asked reflexively.

The anxiety of realizing that she was actually lost had been enough to rouse her from her stupor; her senses were quickly flooding back now, and she found herself biting her lip and cringing.

Dahlia hadn't expected a response to her idiotic question and almost jumped when she heard the moan again, this time made louder and more desperate by her presence. Someone – something – definitely knew she was there.

The hairs bristled on the back of her neck as she took a step forward. Between two of the houses, a footstep rustled the dead leaves and Dahlia froze in place, straining to catch another step.

Then she heard it again, the unmistakable crunching of dead leaves beneath the weight of a foot. Another crunch, and another, louder this time. Approaching.

It would be better not to be caught off guard, Dahlia told herself. Better to get the jump on whatever it was than try to run, leaving her back open and vulnerable. That was what she told herself, though as she drew her dagger from her jacket she could feel her hand trembling with something more than anxiety. She shivered when she felt the drops of sweat rolling down the arch of her spine.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she raced across the yard towards the only alley carpeted in dead leaves. Sure enough, she could see a shadow fluttering between the houses like a skittish animal. It retreated into the backyard before she could make out any form or shape.

Dahlia did not give herself time to hesitate, but hacked her way through the weed-choked alley. The streetlights did not reach too far between the houses, which meant that Dahlia spent far too long awkwardly groping around in the dark. When she finally emerged in the backyard, she found herself on the very edge of a forest, too thick to see through to the other side.

Against the back of the house lay a collapsed porch that looked more like a pile of broken toothpicks. Thick veins of thorns devoured the sides of the lifeless structure. The grass in the back yard was no better than in the front – dry and patchy, littered with gravel; the trees were gnarled and diseased.

A lonely weeping willow stood in the center of the yard. In sharp contrast to everything else, it seemed defiantly healthy and vibrant. Its long tendrils picked at the ground below it, as if it were trying to uproot itself and escape.

Dahlia crossed over to the tree and reached out to grab one of its leafy vines.

“Poor tree,” Dahlia said to herself as she stroked the leaves with her fingertips. They were soft to the touch, a little moist and strangely warm, like the feel of human flesh. “It’s rooted in a fate worse than death.”

“Like me?”

Dahlia whipped around to find a girl in a tattered white nightgown standing next to her. The girl peered at her with amusement through round, dark eyes. Her long auburn hair was tangled and matted with dirt; her face was also filthy. Her smile, however, boasted a perfect row of white teeth.

Dahlia took a step backwards.

The girl let out a shrill giggle. “You have no idea, do you? The restlessness. The hunger. Food tastes like ash in your mouth. Alcohol’s like water. You’d eat your own eyeballs if you could.”

She raised her forearms upwards into the light. The sleeves of her dirty nightgown slipped down her arms to reveal the horrible black hydras moving underneath her skin, whipping their heads around haughtily as Dahlia looked on.

“You have no idea what it’s like,” the girl said.

“You’re sick,” Dahlia said with a shudder, brandishing her dagger for the naphil to see. “All of you are sick.”

“Oooooooh,” the girl said. “You’re one of those. Come to send me on vacation, have you?”

“More like to put you out of your misery.”

“Well good luck with that,” the girl said, giggling. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid it’s naptime now for you. Byebye!”

Before she could register those words, something solid struck Dahlia in the back of the head.

Stunned, she fell forward to her knees and fainted. The last thing she saw was the naphil girl’s gnarled brown toes peeking out from under the hem of her nightgown.

When Dahlia awoke, her first thought was that she had gone blind.

She opened her eyes to blackness in every direction, unbroken by even the tiniest source of light. She brought a hand up in front of her face and tried wiggling her fingers, but she could not see the motion at all.

Panic squeezed her chest. She took her forehead in her hands and rocked back and forth until the ground finally began to stir beneath her, little by little, as her eyes adjusted.

It was a few minutes before Dahlia could make out the shape of her legs and feet. She was lying on a stiff sofa upholstered in something tattered and silky, with a bit of an acrid, musty smell to it. For some reason she could not get the idea of coffin lining out of her head, and she found herself quickly clamoring to stand.

She groaned, realizing her mistake immediately. Her body felt like it was mottled with bruises, like she'd gotten trapped on the wrong end of a driving range, and she could hardly put pressure on her feet without igniting a highway of pain. Whoever had taken her – the naphil girl's accomplice, no doubt – had roughed her up quite a bit, though Dahlia had to admit her surprise that she even still had pain to feel.

Whatever their intentions, apparently killing her wasn't first on the list.

It was hardly any comfort. An avid reader, Dahlia was well versed with the depraved contortions of the human mind, and she had to imagine that the naphil mind was only worse.

Dahlia tentatively hobbled forward, waving her arms in front of her to keep from running into anything substantial. The space was narrow, she came to realize; she could almost touch the opposite walls with her arms outstretched. She felt three of the walls – one against which the sofa rested, and the perpendicular two – but instead of a fourth wall there was only cold, undisturbed air.

Careful not to prick herself on rusty nails or other sharp protrusions, Dahlia gingerly tracked her fingertips over the three walls. Her examination was slow and futile; there were no doors or seams to be found in the peeling wallpaper. She rapped gently on the walls, but they were solid drywall.

All options exhausted, Dahlia moved her arms in front of her face and slowly walked away from the back wall. She had walked a good twenty paces or so, albeit small paces with her awkward lumbering, but still she had not encountered an opposite wall or any sort of doorway.

She was in some sort of hallway, she concluded, but what hallway had no doors?

A creak echoed through the corridor, and Dahlia could practically hear her heart throbbing in her ears. She cringed against the pain as she walked faster and faster, still sensing nothing but hallway before her. Another twenty paces, and then another, and *damn it, how long could this thing be?*

Dahlia knew at once when the hallway ended and she'd stepped into a different room.

The stuffiness of the tight hall was released, replaced by a cold gush of air from a larger, more open space. She had the strange sensation she had stepped into a freezer. She could no longer feel the walls hugging her to either side.

Dahlia took a few steps forward, and the door she had wandered through slammed shut behind her. Panic flooded her veins, and as she turned around, prepared to claw her way back out, a light flickered on in the middle of the ceiling.

The bulb was small and shed hardly any more light than a flashlight, but it was enough that she realized immediately where she was. Every inch of the circular wall was lined with framed mirrors. Their black glass surfaces reflected the pinprick of sharp bluish light from the ceiling fixture, even though the room was still choked with shadows.

She had never been in a funhouse like this, but she knew there was always some trick with these mirrors. They would distort her image, and display strange, out-of-place things just to unnerve her. It was probably no mistake that she had been led into this room.

As she stepped closer to the mirrors, her reflection appeared in the panoramic surfaces, and she met the eyes of a dozen different Dahlias. As she twitched, so did they. As she reached up to scratch her head, so they too scratched their own. And then the overhead light blinked off, just for a second, but long enough to plunge the room in complete darkness again.

When the light returned, Dahlia looked back into the mirror directly across from her. The same disheveled, wide-eyed Dahlia stared back. But in the other mirrors, the images had changed. Immediately to her left appeared a dark-skinned woman with long black hair, gold jewelry, and a flowing white linen dress. To the right, a paler blonde in an intricately brocaded dress of navy blue satin. Her hair was done up in an extravagant style, something right out of King Louis' court. Farther to the right was a striking woman in a light red summer kimono. To the far left, a muscular, bruised young girl toting a long sword and a mammoth shield emblazoned with a skull. A handful of different-looking women with the same clear blue eyes.

She reached forward and pressed her palm against the mirror. The glass was cold as ice beneath her touch. In tandem, each of the Dahlias reached out to touch her, palms flat against the mirrored surfaces.

And then something in front of her moved unexpectedly. Startled, she took a step back and examined the mirror directly before her, the only one that bore her actual reflection.

It took one glance to know that there was something wrong with it. A shiver wracked its way down her back as she stared at the mirror image with accusation in her eyes. Her reflection echoed this glance, but with a hint of smarm that she knew was not there.

"Caught you," she and the mirror Dahlia said in tandem.

She crept forward again, inch by inch, but her reflection did not follow. It had given up all pretenses. Instead it crossed its arms in front of its chest, staring her down with the sort of inhuman malice she had only seen in the eyes of the nephilim. The longer she stared into its dark eyes, the dizzier she became.

“What are you?” she asked her reflection.

The naphil Dahlia smiled a terrible smile. “I think you know.”

And then it let out the most horrifying, ear-splitting screech that Dahlia had ever heard. She immediately clapped her hands over her ears but it was hardly enough to block out the shrill buzz that pulsated, hot and heavy in her ears, threatening to burst her eardrums.

The mirror in front of her shattered, and the naphil girl she had encountered earlier lunged towards her through the empty frame.

In her disorientation, Dahlia was powerless to prevent herself from being tackled to the ground. The naphil’s nails ripped at her unblemished skin, tearing jagged cuts down her arms and shredding her leather coat in the process.

A second later, the rest of the mirrors shattered simultaneously, exposing a hidden chamber from which dozens of nephilim emerged. They stepped through the frames and lumbered towards their incapacitated prey in the middle of the room.

Asphyxiating under the weight of the ravenous coven, Dahlia felt her consciousness wavering dangerously, as the world around her faded in and out of blackness. The searing pain in her limbs pulsated as the nephilim suckled at her life energy. She could feel a tug from the innermost part of her, as if something was threatening to come unstitched.

The world was quickly fading.

She did not question the blinding burst of light that filled the room, or the black silhouette of a massive creature covered in black scales. Death had obviously come for her.

The winged creature began to chant some sort of incantation, and the nephilim retracted from her, clearly startled.

Evidently she was not the only one who could see it.

She watched the bright bursts of motion as naphil after naphil lunged at the approaching figure. But each of them let out a howl and exploded in a burst of black flame before they could even reach it. One of the few remaining nephilim tried to flee back through a shattered mirror frame, but erupted in flame with only one leg swung through the gap.

Soon only the naphil girl remained, clutching Dahlia to her chest. She stared down at Dahlia with mock adoration, as if she were her child. “Mine.”

The word died on her lips as her whole form was incinerated. No longer supported, Dahlia fell backwards onto the ground with a thud. She felt it growing increasingly difficult to keep her eyes open. A wave of heaviness cascaded over her; every one of her muscles became numb and useless.

“So this is it, I guess,” she said to herself.

But before she could let herself drift away, arms encircled her body, pulling her close to a warm torso.

“Dahlia. Dahlia, look at me,” a voice spoke from the back of her head, urging her towards consciousness. She felt the leathery wings rustling close to her face.

“Open your eyes, Dahlia.”

After a moment of strain, she finally summoned the energy to force her eyes open. Light from the hallway poured into the circular room and was just enough to illuminate the countenance of the creature holding her.

Bare-chested, olive skin gleaming in the rush of illumination, black eyes, black hair, black malformed wings, which radiated a sort of deathly essence that chilled her blood. Sheer terror was written all over his expression, terror entirely uncharacteristic of a creature like him.

"Come on now, come on," he said frantically, pulling her to his chest and rocking her back and forth. Cheek pressed against his shoulder, she breathed in his scent, as unmistakable as he was, the smell of cigarettes and cracked leather. What she'd thought were scales was actually a faded black jacket.

"S-Seth?" she murmured.

"Shh," he whispered, kissing her hair. "Just rest. I'm here. You're safe, I promise."

She closed her eyes, unsure if she would ever open them again.

CHAPTER 10

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I had no choice. They were going to kill her."

"Kill her? You should've been so lucky!"

"Nik-"

"But why bring her here? Honestly, that's the part that gets me. Do you seriously not listen to anything I say?"

"She wasn't stable. They'd nearly pried out her soul, for fuck's sake. She needs Nomi's help."

"Nomi, Nomi, Nomi. You're lucky everything's a charity case to her."

"So she'll help her?"

"I sent her in a couple hours ago on your behalf. Consider this a parting gift."

"Parting gift?"

"You know, one last favor before you tell her to take a hike."

"I swear to the Creator, Nik-"

"Come on, Seth, let's be grown men here. Everyone knows what must be done. Even you."

"I-"

"*Especially* you."

"Shh, careful now."

Dahlia tried to speak, but found that her lips were zipped together. Her eyes felt like they were held shut by line of hot glue underneath her lashes.

Everything was red. Hot red. She'd been swimming in a sac of blood. Slick, wet. She could taste the iron on her tongue, tangy like when she'd licked a penny. The heat was almost unbearable.

"Shh, easy. Easy. Flailing like that won't help."

Mother. The warmth of mother's blood. The font of creation. It was everywhere around her, in her hair and her eyes. Slick and wet on her lips. She called for her mother, but nothing would come from her lips.

"What's wrong with her?"

The voice of the father ruptured her warm sac. The blood spilled out everywhere around her, seeping through the cracks of the floor. She tried to cup it, but it ran through her fingers and dried to dust.

"One more fever. Her last, I think. It's breaking now."

"Good. I'm going out of my damn mind having her here, you know that."

"Yes."

"The things I do. Find me when she wakes."

Dahlia was cold. Very cold. The shivers pried their way through every muscle, like electricity making her body dance. She danced on the mat the same trembling dance she imagined hanged men danced on their ropes. Her skin was wet.

Dahlia gasped desperately for breath, like a drowning victim emerging over the waves. She clung to her throat, kicking her legs up as she flailed.

"Easy, easy," she heard, as thin arms pinned her back to the mat with surprising strength. There was gentleness in the hands, a maternal touch.

She opened her eyes.

There was another face hovering over hers, a wide unlined face that looked like it was carved from stone. The face was crowned with a halo of wild black hair, some strands in ringlets, others tied together with colorful strings. When the face moved, Dahlia could hear a faint spray of bells.

"Welcome back." The curved brown lips turned into a smile.

"Nomi," Dahlia said numbly, surprised by the sound of her own voice.

"Yes," the woman nodded to a symphony of bells. There was a flutter of thick black eyelashes, and Dahlia found herself staring into the purest green eyes she had ever seen. Not a hint of brown, but vibrant like the algae of the tropics.

Dahlia turned her head to its side inch by inch, feeling stabs of resistance from the tight cords in her neck. She found herself staring at a wall covered by blankets and tapestries, all bearing strange swirling fractal designs that reminded her of the time she'd tried acid in college.

"What is this place?"

"It's not important," Nomi said. Dahlia felt a hand on her forehead, with skin as light and moist as the petals on a flower.

"Your fever's broken. Good."

Dahlia's stomach lurched, and a spasm shook its way up from the bottoms of her feet. She pulled herself up onto her hands and knees and heaved, feeling much like a tube of toothpaste being rung out from the bottom. All she tasted was saliva on her tongue.

"You haven't eaten real food in days," Nomi said, "Your stomach's empty."

"I feel... I feel like shit," Dahlia said, collapsing back onto the mat.

"I know," Nomi said, stroking her hair with another soft hand. "But it will pass."

"I told you to find me when she woke up," a voice commanded from the doorway.

Dahlia felt something cold drip its way down her backbone.

"She only woke up moments ago," Nomi said. The linen of her skirts rustled around her as she stood up. "It's best not to overwhelm her."

"Forget that, Nomi," the man said, heels clicking on the stone floor as he made his way over. "You know who she is."

"Judgment is not mine to pass."

"But you don't have a coven to look after."

She felt something heavy sink down onto the mat next to her. There was an impatient snap next to her ear.

"You. Wake up. Look at me."

"Nik, please."

"Come on. Turn over and look at me."

Dahlia hesitantly complied, inching her way over onto her side despite protests from popping joints. There was another face hovering just above her, but this one was different in every possible way. Sharp, angular. A long crooked nose, thatched brows thick over black eyes like marbles. His lips were so thin that they almost disappeared in the forest of his beard.

"Good. Now let me tell you a few things."

"Who are you?"

"It's none of your concern."

"Nomi called you Nik?"

She watched his chest rise slowly in irritation. The eyebrows bore even harder down on his eyes, pressing them to shining black slits.

"Yes, but I don't expect you to call me anything. You won't be here long enough."

"Where am I? She wouldn't tell me."

"And neither will I," he said with a snarl. "Now listen to me, girl. You've had a stroke of fortune, but you'll find that it's quickly running out. Had it not been for, shall we say a friendly favor, you would be rotting in a gutter outside the city."

"Do I know you?" she said, unsure of where the words had come from.

He froze mid-sentence, cocking his head as he meticulously studied every shadow on her face. "I don't."

"It's just, I feel like I've met you before. Your voice."

She could have sworn she saw something flash in his eyes, but the light had just as quickly gone out. "There are a lot of Russian immigrants in this city. You probably overheard someone ordering kielbasa on a street corner."

He stood up quickly, brushing off his black cropped pants. "As soon as she's well enough to stand, I want her out of here. She can say her goodbyes to Seth on the way out."

"Seth?" Dahlia echoed.

"Yes," Nik said, bending over to stare down at her. "You're a lucky girl he has such a *thing* for you. Then again he's always been quite fond of playing with fire. You should ask him how he died."

He straightened up, and his heels clicked rapidly like gunfire as he made for the door.

“Don’t disappoint me, Nomi,” he said over his shoulder. And then he was gone.

Dahlia grunted as she forced herself from her side to her back. “He’s a winner,” she said, feeling a hint of herself beginning to return. The blood pulsed louder and louder in her head.

“He wasn’t always so gruff,” Nomi said, kneeling down beside her with a sweep of her skirts. “I think time is the best disenchantment.”

“Hard to imagine him all sunshine and rainbows.”

Nomi began to grin slightly as she considered the image. “Well, no, he wasn’t ever much of a guy to enjoy a belly laugh. But he lived during a hostile time in Russia, at the height of the Bolshevik rebellion. He’s a good man underneath everything.”

“Bolshevik? No shit. So he really is naph-”

“We don’t like to rehash that name,” Nomi interrupted, folding her hands in her lap.

Dahlia’s eyes instinctually sought out Nomi’s forearms, but she found nothing but unbroken caramel flesh. “Wait, but you’re not-”

Nomi shook her head, a sad smile on her lips. “No, but they need me. I can soothe them.”

Dahlia sat up slowly, feeling the blood rush immediately to the back of her head. She clawed onto to the mat until the wave of dizziness subsided. “Damn.”

“Take it slow,” Nomi said. “You will see him in time.”

“Him? Oh shit, that’s right. Seth!”

Dahlia pushed herself up, almost falling over sideways when she tried to take her first step.

Nomi shot to her feet, and before Dahlia could register the movement, had her by the arms. “You shouldn’t be standing up like that. If you knock yourself out, you could slip into a coma.”

“I need to see him,” Dahlia said.

“You need more rest.”

“No!”

Nomi let out a deep sigh. “If you insist.”

When Nomi let go of her arms, Dahlia nearly toppled back to the mat. But just as she lost her balance, she managed to grab ahold of one of the tapestries on the wall, which was tacked just securely enough into place that it didn’t come off in her hands.

“I told you to take it easy.”

“Fuck that,” Dahlia said, gritting her teeth and urging one foot in front of the other.

“You’re quite the stubborn thing,” Nomi said with what sounded like amusement. Dahlia could feel her smile burn like sunlight on her back.

With her arms spread to either side like a trapeze artist, Dahlia made her way step by step out of the room, wobbling occasionally on the uneven stones.

Outside the door she found herself staring down a long narrow hallway, and that was when it sunk in that she had essentially no idea where she was going.

“Seth!” she called hoarsely, setting off down the hallway in her trapeze stance. Her voice bounced from wall to wall, as aimless as she felt. She had the strange feeling it would never reach another pair of ears.

“Seth! Come on! Where are you?”

A chill snaked its way up her body, and she realized how little she was wearing. A simple green linen had been wrapped around her body like a sarong, crisscrossed over her breasts, and tied behind her neck. The fabric was so sheer that she feared for what would happen if the cold breeze picked up again.

“Seth!”

A face popped out of the darkness in front of her, and she let out a tiny scream. It did not take her long to recognize the thin, emaciated face and the Glasgow smile that had been crudely patched with common thread.

“Dahlia!”

“Eddie,” Dahlia said, feeling her stomach begin to churn. “What are you doing here?”

He cocked his head at her like a puppy, and the oversized top hat nearly tumbled from his crown. “Silly, I live here.”

“You live...” A cold itchy sweat pooled in the small of her back, like a slimy hand touching her. “Shit. So you mean I’m-”

“Welcome to the Underground, Mum,” Eddie said with a curtsy, removing his hat and sweeping his arm to the side. “It’s not much, but we make do.”

The floor underfoot seemed more like moss than stone. Dahlia felt like her lungs had been crushed in with one swift blow as she collapsed to the ground. Her head caught the corner of the wall as she fell, knocking her into cool blackness again.

The blackness did not last long before a burst of white light permeated her vision. She saw the shadow rise against the light, with those horrible scales rippling around the muscular beast. As the shadow closed in on her, she saw a tiny sliver of his face. Almond eyes, broken nose, and a jagged scar across one cheek.

“Seth!”

She opened her eyes to find herself staring into his face, just as it had been in her nightmare. She could feel the roughness of his felt trench against her skin, as he rocked her to him.

“Dahlia,” he said, looking down into her face with relief. “Eddie came and got me when you collapsed.”

“You lied to me, Seth.”

“How was I supposed to tell you?”

She wriggled out of his grasp and slowly stood up. The ground swaying underneath her like a seesaw alerted her that she’d made a mistake.

His arms were around her, steadying her before she could slip again, before she could even blink.

“I don’t know how I didn’t know,” Dahlia said, bristling in his arms. “For fuck’s sake!”

"I'm sorry," he said, blank faced.

She recoiled. "Let me go!"

He hesitantly released her, careful to lean her up against the wall for support. She swatted his arms away as he withdrew them from beneath her breasts.

"Sunlight!" Dahlia announced, thrusting her finger upwards as if she had just solved the ultimate Sherlock Holmes mystery. "What were you doing outside? Nephilim can't go outside during the day."

"Well, that's not really true," Seth said reluctantly. "We *can* actually go outside, but most of us choose not to. The sunlight makes it harder to hide that we're... not right." He cast his eyes firmly on the ground.

She looked at him, and his tousled hair and soft lips struck another nerve in her, and she felt her thighs beginning to tremble. She took a hot, deep breath.

"You knew who I was. Didn't you? It was all a fucking game to you."

Seth continued to stare silently at the ground.

"For fuck's sake, Seth! Did you or did you not know who I was when you came into the restaurant?" She could feel something wet on her face, but refused to acknowledge its significance.

"There's not a naphil who doesn't know who you are," he said finally.

"Damn it! I knew it!" Dahlia frantically looked to either side to find nothing but endless stone hallway in both directions. She sunk down to the dampness of the ground, throwing her head back and pinching her eyes shut. "Why?"

"I tried to push you away," he said. She could hear his boots creak as he knelt down in front of her. "But you got under my skin. I just... I couldn't get away."

"Am I some sort of conquest in your fucked up little Underground? Are there posters of me down here spread-eagled on a bed all *come get me boys*?"

"For fuck's sake, Dahlia, of course not."

She let out a stale laugh toward the ceiling. "Right, since you've never lied to me before, I should believe anything you say now."

"Dahlia, look. Hanging out with you was my own death sentence. You think I don't know how easy it would be for you to summon a group of your Vigil cronies to cut me to chunks?"

"Please."

"I told you, I tried to push you away. But I don't know, there's just something about you. I can't even tell you what it is. It makes me want to put myself on the line."

She sighed and opened her eyes to find him crouched in front of her, wringing his huge hands together. For such a big man he looked too vulnerable huddled up like that, shoulders hunched so far that they would nearly disappear were it not for the stiffness of his coat.

"So you feel it too?" Dahlia asked, chewing on her lower lip. "That weird reckless urge?"

"Every time I look at you. I don't know what it is."

“I think somewhere inside me I knew what you were. Maybe that’s why I didn’t try to run from you.”

He shrugged. “I mean, any sane woman probably would’ve called the cops on me for stalking at least a week ago.”

She rasped out another laugh.

“So I take it you met Nik?” Seth said. “Yea high? Bad temper? Dresses like George Washington?”

Dahlia nodded, smirking.

“Well he’s sort of the boss around these parts.”

“I see.”

“Yeah.”

“Nomi said he was in the Bolshevik rebellion.”

Seth frowned, brushing away a thick black lock of hair that had fallen in his face. “Yeah, he’s got a lot of unresolved anger, you could say.”

“I don’t like him.”

“You don’t have to. If things go my way, you won’t be seeing much of him again.”

“Do you live here?” Dahlia motioned down the hallway.

“You mean here?” Seth looked over his shoulder. “The Underground?”

She nodded.

“No,” he said between clenched teeth.

“Oh.”

“Look,” Seth said, fidgeting as he grabbed her hands again. “Nik told me earlier that I’m not supposed to see you anymore.”

“What business is it of his?”

“He’s the boss. He makes the rules.”

Dahlia crinkled her nose like an insubordinate child. “Fuck his rules.”

“He can land both of us in a world of hurt if we piss him off, Dahlia.”

“Let him try.”

“Well...”

Dahlia frowned, searching his face for some emotional cue, but coming up empty. His lineless olive skin betrayed nothing.

“Look, for your safety I should let you go,” he said. “I should leave you alone.”

“Come on, Seth.”

“Seriously. You’d never have to see me again. Your life would go back to normal – you on your team, me on mine.”

She squeezed his hand so tightly she felt her knuckles popping. “You know that’s not what I want.”

He groaned and crossed himself quickly with his free hand, a gesture that Dahlia found both comforting and unnerving.

“Fuck it. I can’t leave you,” he said. “Call it my death wish.”

Dahlia let out the breath she’d been holding in. “Damn it, Seth.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re not?”

She shoved him in the side, which was about as effective as trying to punch a brick wall.

“So what are we going to do about Nik, then?” she said.

He shrugged. “Not much we can do. Bring him a pretty plaything and hope he gets distracted, maybe.”

A smile played on Dahlia’s mouth as she let her hand wander over Seth’s cheek. The skin was surprisingly soft for its leathery appearance, and she could feel warmth radiating from his temples.

“You’re going to be the death of me, aren’t you?” she said.

He smoothed her hair back with the palms of his hands. “Probably.”

CHAPTER 11

“Damn it,” Law said, taking another shot of whiskey as easily as if it had been water. He sat hunched over the kitchen table, wearing an undershirt that was more grey than white and yellowed a bit under the arms. The briefs on the table had been shoved to one side in a mountainous heap of papers and manila folders, with no regard to order or organization. He rattled the shot glass nervously against the glass to the same beat to which he bounced his left leg up and down, a nervous gesture he’d nursed since childhood.

“For the love of the Creator, stop it,” Nate said from the counter where he leaned, clapping his hands over the ears hidden somewhere under his sheets of yellow hair.

“Eight o’clock,” Law said, increasing the tempo of his drumming. “Where the fuck is she?”

“A whole night and she doesn’t come back,” Nate commented with a *tsk*. “That doesn’t look too good, does it?”

“I know that,” Law said, shoving the shot glass across the table and sending it skidding into the pile of papers.

“Temper, temper.”

“Whatever.”

Nate uncrossed his legs and sauntered over to Law’s seat, circling him a couple times like a rancher surveying a steer. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think a shower would be in your best interest.”

“Does part of your plan to destroy the nephilim involve bothering me to death?” Law snapped, slamming a fist down on the table. “For the last two days all you’ve done is sit there and flap your lips like some tireless prat.”

“I beg your pardon,” Nate said a bit too gently, reaching for Law’s face with a pale little hand.

Law instinctually drew back, but Nate had him by the forehead before he could offer much resistance.

The pain was sharp and immediate, like a drill bit boring into the deepest part of his brain. A red film settled over his eyes. He felt his body stand up, even though he’d given it no command to do so.

Law sat helplessly trapped in the back of his head as his body walked over to the kitchen counter and swiftly withdrew a butcher's knife from the knife block. His other hand came to rest on the thick wooden cutting board.

"Listen to me Lawrence," Nate's voice echoed in his ears. Each syllable heightened the drilling in his head.

"Please," Law said.

"You do not speak to me like that."

Law's hand raised the knife and with a quick flick of the wrist, drew a line across the other hand on the board. Blood bubbled up immediately from the seam, trickling down the side of his palm and staining the cutting board, which had seen nothing but the blood of beasts in its use.

The pain tingled up his arm, like hot little needles poking the undersides of his skin.

"Remember what happens to those who are naughty," Nate said.

The hand clutching the knife swung upwards, hovering up over the bleeding hand. The weight of the knife was immense; the rough wooden handle threatened to peel itself out of his fingers. The mirrored blade thirsted for flesh.

He pinched his eyes shut.

There was a sickening chop as metal met wood so hard that the blade was driven a few centimeters into the surface. The pain was so swift, he felt almost nothing at all.

Vomit welled in the back of his throat as he finally squeezed one eye open.

The knife stood out of the board only a hair's width from his fingertips.

"You have a part in this, Law, but I will not hesitate to punish you if you test me. Are we clear?"

Tears of relief dribbled down Law's grizzled cheek. His head trembled up and down.

"Good."

The drilling in Law's head subsided all at once, and the film retracted from his eyes. He made his way back to his chair and slumped forward onto the table, bruising his chin against the glass.

"Angels are both beautiful and terrible creatures, Law," Nate said above him. "You cannot have good without evil, but I suppose you know that. To try to get rid of one, well that would just throw the balance off, wouldn't it?"

Law gurgled a response.

"There, there," Nate said, straightening up and patting Law's sweaty hair gently. "I know, that's some intense medicine. So sorry to have to do it, but I thought you and I needed to clear the air just a bit."

Nate folded his arms behind his back and began to pace. "Now, Dahlia's on her way here."

Law lifted his head at the mention of her name. "She is?"

"Yes," Nate said decisively.

"Is she okay?"

"Yes. Well, in a manner of speaking."

Law sat up in the chair, his rough hands gripping the wrought iron arms so hard they creaked. “What do you mean ‘in a manner of speaking?’”

Nate paused, bringing his feet together. His small chest rose and fell a couple of times with heavy breaths as he seemed to consider something. The tip of his tongue lolled across his parted lips.

“Maybe it’s better I show you instead,” he said finally.

“Show me?”

Law watched as Nate reached into the inside pocket of his blazer and withdrew a tiny crystal bottle with a rubber stopper. The liquid inside was prismatic under the light and shone with an infinite combination of colors that did not merge to create white, but rather stayed separated in each hue, in defiance of everything Law knew about physics.

Nate stepped forward, pinching the rubber stopper between his talon-like fingernails and wrenching it from the bottle with surprising effort. The little stopper just barely gave way.

“Tilt your head back,” he said to Law.

“What?”

“Tilt your head back.”

“Wait, you mean that stuff is going in-”

With his free hand, Nate reached forward and seized Law by the hair, yanking his head downward until his face was parallel with the ceiling. Law bit his lip to keep from wincing.

“What did I say about giving me a hard time? Seriously.”

Nate shook his head and brought the vial a few inches over Law’s face.

“Keep your eyes open. It’ll sting a little at first.”

With a quick flick of his wrists, Nate shook two drops in the left eye and then in the right. He unwound his fingers from Law’s hair and stepped back, forcing the stopper back into the bottle and pocketing the concoction.

The second the impossible liquid touched his corneas, Law felt as though the surface of his eye had been transformed into churning, boiling lava. His whole body shook as he forced his eyelids to stay open.

“It’s okay,” Nate said beside him. “Fight it.”

His eye sockets pulsed with unbearable heat that he could feel all the way in the back of his head. He looked up to see tiny rainbow flames licking up at the ceiling above him.

“What’s happening to me?”

“It’s almost over.”

There was a horrible burning smell, like incinerated plastic. Something in front of his eyes was being eaten away by enlarging brown circles, like a photograph eaten by flames.

He caught a faint whiff of smoke, and then it was over. The prismatic fire died away.

“Now you can close your eyes,” Nate said.

Law did not hesitate. The lids were like cooling aloe on his stinging corneas. The enveloping darkness was the most comforting thing he had known in days.

“Now open them again,” Nate told him. “And try not to piss yourself.”

Law was reluctant to leave the darkness’s cool haven, but remembering the line of blood crusted across his left hand, he begrudgingly obeyed.

When he opened his eyes, he nearly fell forward out of the chair. He saw the kitchen in front of him, just as it had always been with its white laminate cabinets and yellowing appliances, but it was now just a tiny point of infinitely many other points. Just as he saw the kitchen, he saw the bedroom, and the bathroom. He saw the sink; he saw behind the sink, under, above, even inside. He could see every inch of every foot of every place there ever was. He knew instinctually that he was looking into every particle of the universe at that moment, without overlap or intersection or the slightest confusion.

He could see himself sitting there in the wrought iron kitchen chair, clenching the arms to keep from spilling forward. He could see inside of himself; he could see the tangle of blue and red cords pumping life through his body. He looked down at his mess of dirty blonde hair from the ceiling.

“What is this?” Law said.

The infinite collage of Nates smiled before him. “I’ve temporarily removed the myopia of your mortal birth. Now you see as we sometimes see, when we summon the energy to do so.”

“Bloody hell.”

“You men have only occasionally flirted with this Sight. There are places across the world, ‘hot spots’ shall we say where the infinity of the universe resonates. I’ve heard of a temple pillar, for instance, where pilgrims press their ears for hope of hearing what you see now. But of course I’ve never seen such a place.”

“How long will this last?”

“Briefly. The strongest angels can hardly handle more than fifteen seconds of the Sight. So quickly, narrow in on what you’re looking for. Think of her, and you will find her.”

Law frowned. He could see the angel’s earlier words in his head as oscillating wavelengths of sound: *Maybe it’s better I show you instead.*

Dahlia.

Combing through the infinite multitude of points was surprisingly easy. As if his mind were performing a search function, he simply fixated on the thought of Dahlia, of her unique individual essence, and finally the image of her person appeared in front of him.

She was not far from the apartment, only a few blocks away by the 24-hour CVS on the corner where the only staff member sat holed up in a back room with a huge silver broadsword across his lap.

He immediately recognized the man beside her, the tall dark-skinned creature with the shoulder span of a linebacker and the long black hair of a washed up 80’s rock star. He found himself more fascinated by the moment with this man, whose atrophied heart looked like a withered bell pepper in his chest, yet whose flesh still radiated a little heat. The glow around him was hardly as vibrant as Dahlia’s, but it was unmistakably there.

Across the city shadows emerged; the fallen, trapped by their very existences, began to skulk out of the sewers and walk the streets. But not a single one of them shared the flicker of life that he saw on this man. And Dahlia stood beside him fearlessly, the knuckles of her hand occasionally brushing coyly against his.

Her feelings for this man were as visible to Law as the wavelengths of the words Nate had spoken. They hung in the air around her, as intriguing a contradiction as the heat of the naphil man's flesh.

Law realized that he was clenching his jaw so tightly, he'd given himself a cramp.

"And now you see," Nate spoke up from beside him.

"Yes," Law said. "I see everything."

"Good. Then it has done its job."

Just as he had spoken, the infinite pieces of the universe rushed together, like an accordion slamming closed, shut up in the folds of Law's immediate senses. He strained for the sight of Dahlia, but she was gone. He blinked, and he saw nothing but Nate standing in front of him in that white walled kitchen, with the sad, outdated furnishings and the mound of paperwork beside him. There was nothing in Law's world anymore but that.

"He's a naphil," Law said.

"You knew that the moment you first saw him though, didn't you?"

"I wanted to think Dahlia knew better," he said somberly.

"So did she."

"How far is she now?"

"Not long. Just wait."

Only a few seconds later, Law could hear the scraping of a key sliding into the deadbolt, and a click as the lock was undone. The front door creaked open painfully.

"I'm home," Dahlia said simply, kicking the door shut behind her. Just before the door closed, Law could see a shadow retreating across the pavement outside. He felt his stomach beginning to churn.

She looked at him, and he recognized the pity in her eyes. It was as if she had known he was watching her, and every molecule of her body was unabashed.

"What've you been up to?" she asked nonchalantly.

It took Law a moment to gather the voice to reply. "I think I ought to ask you the same question."

"I was attacked north of the city," Dahlia said, stepping over to the cabinet and withdrawing a glass, which she filled at the sink. "But I'm okay."

"What the hell were you doing north?"

She shrugged, downing the water in one long sip.

"Dahlia, you know *I* don't even go north. It's dangerous up there."

"Yeah," she said chucking the glass in the sink. "I noticed."

He pushed himself up from the chair, closing in on her with a few quick strides and taking her by the shoulders. "Dahlia, please. What the hell is wrong with you?"

She would not meet his eyes, but kept her head bowed to the side. “Nothing,” she said over his shoulder.

“Bullshit,” he said. “I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re not right. What’s going on? Why are you doing this?”

“It’s not worth talking about.”

“For fuck’s sake, Dahlia, of course it is! Something wrong with you is something wrong with me. You know that.”

She began to wriggle out of his grasp, and after a second he let her go. She retreated towards the living room, wringing her hands in front of her. “Law, I just. I don’t feel right, okay?”

“She doesn’t feel right? How delightfully vague.” Nate spoke up from the kitchen table, where he sat. Law’s heart began to pound as he looked back at Dahlia, but she seemed not to have heard the comment at all.

“What do you mean?” Law asked nervously.

“Look,” Dahlia said turning back around towards him. “You know I’ve never been exactly the most zealous member of the Vigil.”

“Ah,” Nate interjected like a sports commentator. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Law shot him a dirty look.

“You’ve done your job,” Law said. “You’ve done what needs to be done.”

“Have I?” she asked, her voice beginning to tremble and rise. “Fuck, Law, I don’t even know what side is up anymore. What the hell do we do besides shove them back underground?”

“And you’d have them walking the streets instead?”

“I don’t know!”

Law remembered what he saw in the air around Dahlia as her fingertips brushed the naphil man’s, and a rush of hot anger bloated his chest. “They’re nephilim, Dahlia. Fucking undead fiends. The same things that killed your sister Lucy and apparently almost you yesterday.”

When Dahlia looked back at him, her eyes were alight with rage. “Don’t you *ever* talk about Lucy to me.”

Instead of backing down, Law felt her flames igniting the fuel of his own ire. He stormed in closer to her, his footsteps so heavy they shook the floor. “I’ll talk about whatever I want. And why not? It was her death that made you what you are.”

“Fuck you,” Dahlia spat.

“Yeah, okay. You can whine and cry and stick your head in the sand, but you have a destiny, Dahlia! Do you know how many people would give their left arms for that?”

“They can have it!”

“Oh boo hoo, Dahlia! You know what your problem is? You’re a coward. A fucking coward! You have a problem and you run from it, because that’s all you know how to do.”

“Just shut up!”

“Well you can’t run forever! Eventually your shit is going to catch up to you, and when it does, you’ll be drowning in it.”

She slapped him so hard that he could feel welts immediately beginning to form where her hand had been.

Dizzy with rage, Law grabbed her by the throat and shook her until her limbs flopped like rags beside her. “You think I don’t know what you’re up to?”

She strained violently between his hands, but his grasp only tightened around her throat.

“That’s right! That’s it,” Nate cheered from the sidelines. “Harness the anger! Feel it!”

“You think I’m a fucking idiot? Do you?”

“Harder now!”

Her face was beginning to pale, and her struggling weakened.

“I could kill you in a second! I could snap your neck like a fucking twig.”

“That’s right! Feel it!”

A bluish sheen began to settle over her skin, casting a horrible pallor over her delicate face. Her usual dark shadows looked more like bruises.

“You are mine, Dahlia! Don’t you ever forget. You belong to me.”

“It’s all over now! Finish it!”

Something snapped inside of Law, and the furious haze leaked from his head in one quick burst like helium from a balloon. He saw Dahlia’s body limp in his hands and let out a horrified cry.

“What are you doing?” Nate cried.

“What the fuck have I done?”

He released her throat and scrambled to carry her over to the living room sofa. Panic-stricken, he felt around the side of her neck until he found a faint pulse trembling beneath his fingertips.

“Oh shit, Dahlia. I am so sorry,” he said, parting her lips and tilting her head back. He pinched her nose and breathed deeply into her mouth, watching her chest rise and fall with each inhalation.

“Come on, for the love of the Creator.”

“Aw, you were so close,” Nate said, appearing beside him.

“Shut the fuck up!” Law barked over his shoulder, frantically continuing his rescue breaths.

“She is the greatest obstacle, Lawrence. Your success hinges on her destruction.”

“I said shut the fuck up! I don’t care about that anymore, alright?”

His tears splattered on Dahlia’s ashen face as he breathed into her one last time and buried his wet face in her chest.

“Well good going,” Nate said, rolling his eyes.

There was a sudden sputtering, and Law felt Dahlia’s diaphragm heave underneath him. He sat up quickly, propping her head up higher with a throw pillow.

Her breaths were tentative and shaky at first but finally deepened as her eyes fluttered open. “Law, what happened?” she said hoarsely.

“Shh,” he urged, kissing her face over and over. “Just rest, Dahlia.”

“I don’t... I don’t really remember. Were we fighting?”

Law realized that the steady oxygen depletion had probably muddled her short-term memory. Tears of relief and anxiety dotted his vision.

"It's okay, honey. We were having a little tiff and you uh- you passed out, you see. You scared me so much."

"Oh," she said, seeming to accept his explanation. She closed her eyes again. "I'm sorry to scare you."

"It's okay."

"My throat hurts a little, but I think I'm okay. It's been a rough couple days."

"I know."

She coughed up something wet sounding in her chest, and Law cringed.

"Look, Dahlia--"

"It's okay," she said, dismissing him with a floppy wave of her hand. There was a loopy grin on her face. "You don't have to say it. I love you too, Law."

He nodded, taking her hands between his and kissing them. "Rest now, okay? I'm here."

The grin hardly faded as she drifted into shallow sleep.

Law did not allow himself to turn around. The little hairs on the back of his neck all bristled at once, perhaps in recognition of just how terribly he'd pay for this.

Behind him Nate leaned up against the mantle, clutching a book he'd pulled from the shelf, some textbook on Frank Lloyd Wright from when Law had fancied himself an amateur architect. He whispered something to himself, and the book began to change; the modern, cardboard cover became green leather, which appeared worn from a century of handling. The pages were yellowed and musty, and when Nate opened the book again to examine the transformation, the pungent odor of mothballs drifted upwards from the pages.

"Perfect," he said, snapping the cover shut again.

CHAPTER 12

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming. It's not often I must call one of these emergency convergences, but we have terrible things to discuss."

Monsignor Gregory adjusted and straightened his hood, as if he had quickly thrown it on earlier in his haste to call the meeting. There had been no time to light the hundreds of votive candles splayed across the altar and lectern. For once natural daylight seeped through the stained glass windows, illuminating Gregory's withered frame mercilessly and revealing just how far he had begun to stoop over at the waist.

He coughed and pushed his humorously oversized glasses back up the bridge of his raptor's nose with one taloned finger.

"Two nights ago, our instruments here at the church began to go wild. I thought it was a fluke at first, perhaps a malfunction, but even the electromagnetic spectrometers reported the same thing. Energy, gentlemen. Deathly energy in the most incredible concentration."

An excited frenzy of chatter passed through the sea of bobbing black hoods.

Gregory rapped sharply on the lectern with his thin silver scepter. "According to the instruments, the spike occurred just a little past one A.M. Monday morning within a ten mile radius of what was the old highway 51 overpass, north of the city."

At the mention of north, the hoods turned every direction, eying each other anxiously.

"Monday morning I sent a reconnaissance team to investigate the spike. They reported back last evening with findings that, well, I believe you ought to hear about firsthand."

Monsignor Gregory gestured, and two Vigil members climbed the steps to the altar, men who looked more like two massive pillars swathed in black cloaks. Law, who himself would have been dwarfed beside them, figured it was no wonder they represented the Vigil's A-Team. A man like James Gregory clearly did not mess around.

As the men crossed to the lectern, a pair of altar boys scrambled to erect a collapsible white screen just in front of the altar. A third boy carefully set down a strange gold device beneath a glass dome that almost resembled a clock with its many delicate gears and cogs. With utmost concentration, the boy removed the dome, careful not to allow its sides to scrape against the sensitive parts of the golden instrument.

The two men at the lectern removed their hoods to reveal pale faces that were similarly scarred and unsettling pink eyes so light that they blended into the whites at a distance. One man sported a shock of pigment-less hair, whereas the other's head was completely shaved and gleamed insidiously in the red light from the rose window.

After staring at them for a moment, Law realized the two were twins. The sparse hairs of the bald man's eyebrows were translucent white straws.

Law had heard about men like these, albinos who were said to possess heightened extrasensory powers. Something about their lack of melanin was supposedly related to less metaphysical interruption, or something. Law shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Good afternoon," the bald one began. The gruff timber of his voice made him sound more like he was growling than speaking. "For those who do not know us, I am Herbert. This is my brother Donne." The white haired man nodded beside him.

"We have been assigned to this Order because of our special training in metaphysical instrumentation. When Monsignor Gregory called us to investigate, well," he paused for a long while, as if momentarily unable to gather his thoughts. "Well, let's say we were not quite prepared for what we found."

Herbert rested his massive forearms against the lectern, which looked like a child's toy next to him. The railing came only to his waist.

Behind him, Donne crossed over to the golden device and knelt down, fiddling with the dials and gears in a blur of astonishing speed and precision that

betrayed the sheer size of his freckled hands. Law's eyes could hardly follow what he did.

After a moment, the little clock-like thing roared to life with a buzzing that would have drowned out a swarm of ten thousand bees. The gears began to turn in every direction, in time with a series of clicks that reminded Law of an old film projector.

On the white screen appeared the dimly lit inside of a circular room. From each wall protruded the jagged teeth of shattered mirror glass, which littered the floor like millions of misshapen stars.

The camera turned every direction to show a dozen similarly broken mirrors and one single door that hung lifelessly on rusting hinges.

"We pinpointed the energy to an abandoned carnival building," Herbert narrated from the lectern as the camera returned to its starting point. The image on the screen occasionally flickered, and Law swore he could see shadows rising and falling in the periphery of the camera's eye.

"What we saw led us to conclude, without a doubt, that this was an expulsion of deathly power. In short, a naphil."

Whispers began to churn through the congregation. A single dark hand shot up from the second row.

Herbert, who was clearly not used to fielding questions, narrowed his pink eyes to slits and nodded with visible impatience. "Yes?"

Law recognized the rich, heavily accented voice of Father Pierre at once. "How do you know this was a naphil? I have never seen any display of power from a naphil that would nearly match what you are describing."

"Oh, we know," Herbert growled. His increasingly wolfish demeanor made his sheep-like features seem even more ill placed and unnatural. Law could not bear looking at him any longer and let his eyes wander back to the flickering screen.

"Please hold your questions until the end," Donne spoke up from beside the golden projector. His voice, in contrast to his brother's, was oddly high pitched and squeaked as he hit his upper register. Law had to pretend to cough in order to muffle his snicker.

"Yes," Herbert said. "You'll see for yourself soon enough."

He cleared his throat, which did little to loose the grit that coated each word he spoke. "Now as you all surely know, this world exists by mercy of energy, constantly ebbing and flowing but neither created nor destroyed. All particles of life, even we humans, are made of energy; Newton discovered this fact centuries ago." He paused, and Gregory urged him on with an impatient nod.

"Well, what Newton didn't know, however, was that there exist different types of energy. And some energy is, in fact, morally charged. They say science can be neither good nor evil? They are wrong.

"What separates us humans from creatures like naphil and angels is that our energy is a balance of death and life; it remains neutral energy, so to speak. Angels are creatures of entirely light energy, whereas nephilim are manifestations of death energy. Evil energy. Whenever they act, they both consume and expel death energy, which leaves a permanent imprint on the surrounding matter.

“In short, nephilic power – like angelic power – leaves a fingerprint behind. While this energy is invisible to the human senses, it can be picked up using devices sensitive to the moral charge of surrounding energy.”

Donne knelt down next to the projector again and flipped a series of dials. The image on the screen morphed significantly. Law could still make out the faint contours of the room and the broken mirrors, but everything was grey and amebic and reminded Law of looking through a heat-seeking camera, only there was no heat to be found.

“By filtering out the neutral energy particles, we are able to set a contrast to see energy that is morally charged – be it by light or dark, life or death. We set the camera out on a time lapse of over twelve hours, hoping to capture an echo of the initial event being replayed again and again.”

Herbert took a deep breath. Law could see the sweat glistening down his slick skin from where it bubbled up atop his shiny dome. He was nervous.

“Well, I think you’ll just need to see it,” he said finally.

Donne flicked another switch and the picture on the screen began to tremble, as if the camera were held by anxious human hands. For the first couple minutes, nothing out of the ordinary appeared among the sea of oscillating grey blobs. Law could track some slight motion among the grey, which out of the corner of his eye almost looked assumed the figure of a person moving slowly about the room.

The projector emitted a loud shattering noise, and even Herbert at the lectern seemed to jump. Faint smears of dark purple entered the frame, searing their way through the grey haze. The mere sight of this purple light, faded as it was, made Law feel sick on a visceral level. His head began to throb; he tried to close his eyes but somehow he could not look away from what he could only think to describe as whirlwinds of despair.

The smears of purple pulsed; occasionally they increased in intensity, but they faded quickly, as if they were unable to sustain this concentration. He could have sworn the grey matter was fading too.

And then he saw it. A flash of piercing violet, and one of the smears of dark purple disappeared. Another flash, this one more horrible, and another smear was gone. Again and again and again, flashes that wrenched at his gut with more horror than anything he could conceive of. He could not imagine a sight that would evoke more gut-level terror within him, not even the bloody concentration camps of world wars, or the screams of children slaughtered in their beds, or mangled pieces of soldiers littering the trenches.

The pain was unbearable. All around him, men more stoic than he were leaning over and vomiting into the marble aisles. Even Monsignor Gregory sat with his face screwed up in pain, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with a white embroidered handkerchief. The awful dirge of groans was nearly as horrifying as the sight itself.

There was one last dark explosion, this one the most intense of all, and then all they could see was grey. Donne scrambled on his hands and knees for the golden projector. This time his movements were not nearly as lithe as he frantically disabled the device. One final click and the screen went blank.

Painful silence pressed down on them as the men struggled to regain themselves again. Men sat hunched over their knees, wiping their mouths with the backs of their sleeves. Pierre slouched over with his head nestled tight in his palms, moaning with agitation as his shoulders swayed from side to side.

Law had not thrown up but still had the distinct sensation of having been repeatedly curb stomped. His head seared with a migraine that he knew no medicine would relieve.

In the adjacent aisle, Nate stood unfazed with his hands perched on his hips. “You know, for a bunch of slayers you guys sure can’t hold your cookies very well.”

“What was all that?” Law whispered.

“Really? You have no idea?”

“All I could think of was the pain and how I really didn’t want to puke all over myself.”

“Baby,” Nate said, rolling his eyes. “Fine. You saw those fainter purple things, right?”

Law nodded a little too vigorously, and felt the nausea building in the back of his head. He swallowed hard.

“Alright, so those are nephilim.”

“Figures.”

“Yeah, makes you feel like shit just looking at them, right? It should. They’re made of pure death.”

“But that wasn’t nearly as bad-”

“As the explosions? Of course,” Nate said, folding his arms in front of his chest. “That’s some hardcore concentrated death energy there, enough to wipe out the other nephilim in the blink of an eye. Not destroy them, mind you, but banish them back underground until they respawn. Quite a bit more efficient than your stupid dagger trick, right?”

“No shit.”

“Please, have you no sense of propriety? You’re in a church,” Nate said with a wink.

Law was about to respond when the room went eerily quiet again. Monsignor Gregory had returned to the lectern while Herbert and Donne stood solemnly to each side, hands clasped in front of them like the handles on huge medieval doors.

“Now you see what we’re up against,” Gregory said, his voice noticeably shaky at first. He pushed his glasses back again. “The forces of evil are mounting, and it is more imperative than ever that we start seeking more permanent solutions.”

Law felt something solid jab into his shoulder, and he looked up to find Nate beaming beside him.

Gregory continued, his voice quick to assume its usual stifling power. “The nephilim must be destroyed once and for all. Herbert and Donne have already sent a copy of this footage to the Vatican, and I am anticipating their response within hours.”

“Now, I know that I do not need to remind you that as the Vigil, your vigilance in all respects is of utmost importance. Any anomalies or things even slightly out of the ordinary must be reported immediately. If I discover any of you are withholding information of even the least importance, believe me when I say,” he paused, letting his beady eyes make a long, uncomfortable sweep across the crowd. Law could feel his migraine sizzle as the Monsignor’s gaze lingered on his face. “The consequences will be unspeakably grave.”

The men adjourned after a few final remarks, and the flock of black hoods made their way wearily towards the doors. Some stumbled lethargically, some almost tripped on the hems of their robes. The usual energized chatter had entirely died away, replaced by a sporadic refrain of uncomfortable groans.

“You heard the man,” Nate spoke up as Law stood. He puffed out his chest, mimicking the Monsignor’s self-important drone with impressive accuracy. “The consequences will be unspeakably grave.”

“I know, I know,” Law said, waving him away like a mosquito. “I got it.”

Behind him, Father Pierre lingered at the door to watch Law’s exchange with furrowed brows.

With the green leather volume tucked under his arm, Law pushed his way through the crowd up toward the lectern to where Monsignor Gregory was gathering his papers. Herbert and Donne stood a few feet away, speaking to each other in hushed voices and eying Law severely.

“Monsignor,” Law spoke up, Nate a few steps behind him.

The old man looked up over his glasses at Law. He did not seem to notice the small blonde man in the outdated white suit.

“Yes, Lawrence?”

“I,” Law began, fidgeting under the scrutiny of the albino twins’ gaze. He drummed his fingers against the book and tried his best not to look at them. “I uh, I have something I need to show you.”

The monsignor arched a speckled caterpillar of an eyebrow, rustling the papers between his bony fingers. “Oh?”

“Yeah, um,” Law heard a snicker from the twins and took a deep breath.

“Yeah, but not here. Can we go to your office?”

“Very well,” the monsignor said, drawing back his hood. “Come with me, then.”

Law shot Herbert and Donne a dark look as he turned and followed at the monsignor’s heels. Behind him, Nate flicked them off.

“By the way,” Gregory began when they were midway out of the cathedral, “so I could not help but notice that Miss Ellis was not here today. Is she ill?”

“Oh, right. Dahlia,” Law said, taken off guard and slightly stammering.

“Oh no, she’s fine. Yeah, uh, her mom called. She had to rush home for a family emergency.”

“I see,” Gregory replied, pressing his colorless lips together. Law wasn’t sure whether or not he believed him, but he seemed satisfied, and the three men continued to his office in silence.

“I can’t believe it,” Dahlia murmured.

She was sitting in the family room, on the blue leather loveseat that had long been a family favorite for snacking and watching TV, and had the ice cream stains to show for it. Beside her sat her mother, dabbing at her running mascara with a shredded tissue. Gavin was scowling in an armchair across the coffee table, his arms crossed in front of him.

"And he just left, just like that," Rosalind said, her tiny back shuddering with a mixture of a hiccup and a sob. "He said she's pregnant, and he's going to take responsibility for the baby."

"Like he's ever taken any responsibility for us. Give him a few years and that kid will get boring to him too," Dahlia said, putting a hand on her mother's trembling shoulder.

"I hate that asshole," Gavin chimed from across the table. Rosalind didn't bother to scold his language.

"I just feel so bad for you kids that I picked such a crappy father for you."

"Please Mom," Dahlia said. "If you hadn't had kids with that guy, we wouldn't exist, remember? Don't beat yourself up. Besides, I feel bad for the future baby. It has no idea what it's getting itself into."

"Yeah," said Gavin.

Rosalind sniffled.

"So what's going to happen?" Dahlia asked gently.

"He's moving in with her, I guess," Rosalind replied, folding the stained tissue over to a clean side and wiping her nose. "I still would like him to be in you children's lives, and he said he would."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Gavin muttered, and Dahlia shot him a warning look.

"Frankly, I'm glad he's gone. Why should we put up with his behavior anymore, anyway?" Dahlia said, though each word felt number in her mouth and harder to chew. She cupped her palms with her hands and tried to sigh quietly enough that her mother wouldn't hear it.

"Well at least we've got each other, right?" Rosalind smiled, which made her look even more grotesque with the dark blackish brown mascara settling into the creases of her face.

"Yeah," Dahlia said, chewing on her bottom lip.

Gavin tried to smile, but it came out looking like more of a grimace.

"So where is he now?" Dahlia asked.

"I don't know where he went. He didn't even pack a bag. After we he told me that his girlfriend was pregnant and we talked about some logistical things, he just turned his back and walked away. I'll have to find him to serve him with divorce papers, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"I've never seen him so cold." Rosalind shuddered with another sob.

Dahlia gathered her mother's shaking body in her arms, and ran her hands softly over her back. "So what do we do now?"

"Nothing now," Rosalind said into Dahlia's shoulder. "Your father says he'll pay to keep us here so Gavin can go to his same school. But after he graduates, I think I might move up the turnpike by where Aunt Susie lives."

Gavin shrugged. "Mom, I don't care. Seriously. I hate it here anyway."

"You've got one more year left after this one," Rosalind said, withdrawing from Dahlia's embrace. Her tone was sharpening the way it always did when Gavin teased the limits of her patience. "You can finish up. I'm not moving you again and having you fail your classes."

"Whatever," he said, rolling his eyes. "Can I go upstairs and play PlayStation?"

She nodded, and he sprang from the chair, clomping his way up the wooden staircase with feet that he had yet to fully grow into.

"I'm sorry," Rosalind said to Dahlia after they heard the door to his room slam.

"It's okay, Mom. Can't pick your parents, as they say."

"No, but you can pick your spouse. And I hope you can do a better job than I did, for your children's sake."

Dahlia sighed, resisting the urge to bring Law's name up in any manner. She folded her hands in her lap to keep from fidgeting.

"Do I think things are really going to get better now that he's left the house?" Rosalind said in a manner that suggested she was speaking more to herself than Dahlia. "Honestly, I wish I could say yes."

"Mom, seriously," Dahlia said, more forcefully this time. "Don't beat yourself up."

The two women sat side-by-side, slumped over against the opposite arms of the chair in itchy silence. Dahlia pictured her father leaving for work time and time again, his lean shoulders rigid underneath his pressed silk shirts, his knuckles tight around the handle of his shiny black briefcase, which always bulged past the limit of its straining gold hinges. Since she was a child he had come home late, long after she'd gone to bed. Her mother wouldn't let her wait up.

That was all she knew of her father: the back of a man walking away. That was the only legacy he'd left her.

But how could she connect with the back of a man? What could she hold onto of a person whose eyebrows and hairline she'd inherited, when the role of "father" was a social convention that always seemed to be just beyond his ken? What was he to her besides a father-shaped hole in her life?

She wanted to say he was nothing to her, that his influence amounted to a pain that had dulled to an ache when she left for college and had finally subsided now that he was moving out of the home and, by most likelihood, her life. But whether she liked it or not, he had changed her, shaped her in ways that were impossible to conceive without long, intense meditation.

People always called her "her father's daughter," year after year. The very thought of it in this time and place made her wish she could be sick and expel him, like a stomach full of bile.

"So I guess we start over now," Dahlia said after a moment, taking her mother's hand in hers and giving it a tight squeeze.

Rosalind's smile was tearful, but her grip around Dahlia's hand was strong. "That sounds good, doesn't it?"

Dahlia forced her own smile to her lips and nodded. As she looked down into the glass of the coffee table, she saw her father's eyes staring back at her in place of her own.

CHAPTER 13

It was already 3:00, far past the usual lunchtime rush, but Dahlia was deep in the weeds.

All four tables of her section were full, and the customers were particularly demanding. Five extra bread baskets for a table of two, a kid with gluten allergies whose face swelled purple, a tuna salad sent back because the tuna tasted too much like fish, one burger sent back because it was too "brown" despite the man having ordered it well done, a toddler projectile vomiting all over the table from her high chair, and one lactose intolerant woman who insisted that they had made their macaroni and cheese for her before sans both milk and cheese – all in a five hour shift. Dahlia had brought the last woman plain pasta with margarine that Armando had colored with paprika.

Days like these usually went quickly; Dahlia tended to find that the busier she stayed, the less often she glanced over at POS for the time and therefore the quicker the hours ticked by. If she couldn't stop to check the time, she couldn't stop to think about how much her feet were aching, or how itchy her polyester shirt felt, or how her backside still stung from Steve's occasionally little friendly "love smack."

This shift, however, seemed to drag. Perhaps it was the matching scowls on her customers' faces, or the fact that it had been threatening to rain all day and the skies were grey and depressing. Even the dogs walking by on the sidewalks looked testy.

Tips were shittier than usual too. On most tables Dahlia was making only around 15%, and one four-top of teenagers had thought it would be hilarious if they spelled out "tip" using only French fries and included a fry arrow pointing to two quarters. She had pocketed the quarters bitterly, reassuring herself that she could always use them as ammunition to throw at the folds beneath Steve's fat head if business got too slow.

Somehow everyone in the metro Avington area had decided that diarrhea from Sal's greasy fare was exactly what they needed, and the rush never seemed to end.

During shifts like this, Dahlia was on a mission. The other servers knew better than to stop her for a quick chat, or to even step a foot in front of her as she made a beeline from the slide to the condiments to the drink station. Even Krista stayed back out of her way, lurking morosely at her bar station and casting her appraising looks every so often.

It was her laser-sharp memory and impeccably prioritized list of tasks that made Dahlia the best waiter under pressure. Truth be told, she thrived under stress, despite what it was probably doing to the lining of her arteries. Afterwards she'd unwind with a triple chocolate brownie and wash it down with a huge foaming glass of Alka Seltzer.

And in that manner Dahlia passed from one task to the next until she had whittled her remaining tables down to one. With those earlier roadblocks cleared away, she had managed to settle into a rhythm where all went as planned, like cogs moving harmoniously in the heart of a machine, and each step felt organic. Greeting, drinks, meal order, set up, delivery, check in, removal, and check with an optional allotted dessert step. The rhythm seemed as natural sometimes as the throbbing of her own heart.

The last table of her shift was a very pleasant middle-aged couple who'd both ordered the house burger, both done a painless medium. In the slide, Dahlia dressed the plates with condiments and pickles and garnished each burger with a fancy toothpick wrapped in colorful cellophane. Whistling to herself, she balanced each plate on one arm and soared through the dining room with the grace of a hang glider riding a gust of wind. Bowing lithely at the waist, she carefully set the plates down in front of her customers, who smiled up at her with appreciation, as if they longed to break into polite applause but felt obliged to restrain themselves. She bowed again. All was right in the world.

And then she felt the jab between her shoulder blades.

"Hey Sunshine, do you have a second? You and I need to talk."

That was all it took to deflate the pride that swelled inside her chest.

"Sure," she said flatly, as Steve beckoned her to follow to the kitchen. She could feel the pity of the middle-aged couple nipping at her heels, which by far stung the worst.

The doors flapped shut, and Dahlia did not have to look around to know that other than the line chefs distracted and scurrying behind the slide, they were alone in the room. Even Jose was absent from his dishwashing station.

She took a deep breath.

"Look, Dahlia," Steve began in his usual tone tinged slightly with preemptive defensiveness, "I've been thinking about your performance lately."

"I'm sorry about all those comps today," Dahlia interjected, nervously fiddling with the pens in the pocket of her apron. "I don't know, people were really picky today. It won't happen again."

Steve raised his thick eyebrows. "Oh that? I don't give a shit about that. People are retarded. It happens."

Dahlia exhaled with relief but her shoulders still stood up, stiff with tension.

"No, actually what I wanted to talk to you about was different."

He paced in front of her, slowly turning on each step to look in towards her as he walked. Every hair on her arms was standing upright at attention.

"Look, you've worked for me for a long time now, and I've appreciated your hard work. You're good with people, organized. You don't get your head choked up about shit."

Dahlia tried to smile at his words, but the only thing she could convince her lips to do was wince. Sure she had waited years for some recognition like this, for somebody to acknowledge that unlike the vast majority of the adult population, she was actually good at what she did, as menial a task as it seemed in light of

how she pictured her life. But coming from Steve the words were wet and slippery like the skin of a fish and made her uneasy.

"Thanks Steve," she said in a croak.

"The point I'm trying to make, I guess, is I think you are capable of more," Steve said, coming to a stop directly in front of her. "I want to make you an offer, kiddo. Rudy and I have been talking about bringing on a new manager and well," he reached out to brush a wisp of hair out of her face, "I think it should be you."

Dahlia's instinctual reaction was to keel over and clutch her knees as if she had been shot through the gut with cannon fire. Trembling, she urged her body not to move and prayed her sweat would not betray just how nervous she was. "Wow, Steve," she said finally. "I don't... I don't know what to say."

"It's okay, Sunshine, I know it's a big offer." He smiled, letting his hand settle down on her shoulder and giving it a pinch with his thick fingers, making Dahlia cringe with pain. "We haven't had another manager in almost a year now, and we're getting busy enough that I think it's time."

At the mention of a previous manager, Dahlia's mind immediately returned to Jennifer, a spindly birdlike woman in her early thirties who'd trained Dahlia when she first started. The rumor mill had always buzzed about Jen and Steve. Photographs of their children playing together with party hats on were tacked to the bulletin board in the staff room. In the background, if you squinted you could apparently make out Jen and Steve sitting at a lawn table, margaritas in hand and ankles crossed under the table while their spouses sat smiling at the other side.

After Jen had left suddenly almost a year ago, Steve never once again mentioned her by name.

But the way he stood looking at Dahlia, head slightly cocked and arms cradled in front of him, tongue moistening the corners of his lips, Dahlia remembered that photograph before it had disappeared from the bulletin board one day. It felt like another cannonball to the gut.

"Look, I uh... I..." She had to stare down at the orange tiles to squeeze out the remaining words. "I think I need some time to think about it. Yeah."

She peeked up at him to see that he was smiling, as if assured that she would eventually give in. Dahlia began to wonder if Jen had accepted Steve's offer initially.

"I understand," he said, crossing slowly to the kitchen doors. "Take all the time you need."

She smiled shakily until she felt his hand slowly making its way up the small of her back. "I really hope you'll accept," he said so close to her neck that she could feel the stale heat of his breath clogging her pores.

The next thing she registered was the doors swinging back and forth behind him. For the first time she noticed that they creaked as they moved, probably due to rust building up in the hinges.

She went to the bathroom and threw up until there was nothing left in her stomach.

"Thank you so much for coming in today," Dahlia said with a smile, as she brought the check book back to the table and placed it in front of the woman, who

had made it clear the lunch was her treat. The little white slips fluttered as she set the book down. Across the table, the husband was beaming at his wife with a look that made Dahlia's voice catch a little in the back of her throat.

The wife withdrew the pen and clicked the top of it. "Thank you so much for such great service, Dahlia," she said graciously. "We'll definitely be back."

Dahlia gave a little bow with her shoulders and cleared the remaining water glasses from the table. The dining room had emptied out again and would probably remain just as empty, save for the occasional off-hours straggler who would read the paper with one hand while eating a burger with the other, until the dinner rush picked up around six or seven.

The couple did not linger at the table for long after the wife signed the check and left hand-in-hand, with the little black book propped up in the center of the table for Dahlia to easily snatch up. Last check to close and she was gone for the day. But her relief was short-lived, since every time she closed her eyes she felt Steve's hand sliding clumsily up her lower back.

Sometimes she wished that someone would hurry up and invent mental Lysol.

As she pushed her way into the kitchen to drop the water glasses into Jose's tub, she froze in terror.

"Surprise!"

Standing there in the cramped kitchen were all her coworkers of that shift – Krista, Amanda, Dwayne, Carl, Ellie, Bill, and Mark, plus Steve and Rudy and a line of grinning kitchen staff, some of which looking slightly confused, like they had been more or less coerced into attending. On the metal table was a massive half sheet cake overly decorated with swirls and balloons and flowers and "HAPPY THREE YEAR DAHLIA" scrawled in only slightly broken English.

"Happy three years on the job," Rudy spoke up, and Dahlia rubbed her eyes. He was rarely seen around the restaurant, but unmistakable: nearly seven feet tall with long chicken legs and a thin face pockmarked and ravaged by teenage acne. His tuft of orange hair had yet to grey.

Her fellow servers cheered. Carl winked, and Dwayne looked as loveably clueless and stoned as ever. Ellie and Bill were standing too close to each other as always, and Mark, ever Mr. Pleasant, was scowling.

"Armando made the cake," Krista said.

In the line of chefs, a smile cut through Armando's round face.

"Holy shit, you guys," Dahlia said, clutching the two glasses in her hands so hard she was afraid they would shatter. She dropped them into the plastic bin before she could give Steve a reason to deduct more of her tips. "I... wow. Has it seriously been three years?"

"Three years to the date," Steve said, holding up a cheap wooden frame. "We framed your original application. 'Work experience: way too much babysitting,'" he read. The dizzying sea of faces laughed. "It's a wonder we hired her, right?"

"Wow," Dahlia said, feeling like the ground had become Jell-O beneath her feet. "Wow, wow. Three years. That's... Wow."

"Speech!" Amanda cheered.

Everyone laughed again, and Dahlia was starting to feel like she had been thrust into a sitcom against her will. Before long the whole laugh track had begun to chant, “Speech!” punctuating their jeers by thrusting their fists in the air.

Dahlia’s voice crackled traitorously. “Man, you guys really want a speech, huh? Wow. Uh, I don’t... I don’t know what to say.”

“You could talk about how much fun it is working for this guy,” Amanda teased, jabbing Steve in the ribs. As usual, the other servers shook their heads in awe.

Steve’s face reddened. “Hey there.”

“Here’s to ten more, right?” Krista said, raising an imaginary glass with sarcasm that seemed lost on most of the crowd but to Dahlia stung physically.

“I never thought I’d be here this long, actually,” Dahlia admitted, her own face reddening to compete with Steve’s. “I mean, wow, three years. I... I guess I went to college thinking I would, you know, turn around and go to grad school. And after that, well, I wanted to be a professor and do research and write and publish things that would really *matter*, you know? I wanted to make something of myself.”

The more she rambled, the more her words crashed down onto the next like waves breaking, and the more impossible it seemed to stop the forward momentum she’d built.

“And now, damn. Three years here... You know I thought I was only going to stay here for the summer after I graduated college? Yeah, I moved back to town and thought this was going to be temporary while I took my GRE’s and applied to grad schools and stuff. I don’t know what happened. I got like... well something humiliatingly bad. I don’t know anymore. Probably didn’t even break a thousand the first time. I told myself I’d take it again, but I didn’t.”

Every person was watching her at this point, intently hanging on every word. Even the chefs with their limited grasp of English seemed both moved by and uncomfortable with the candor of her confession. Cesar took his dirty toque off and held it over his heart.

“I don’t know, I guess I got frustrated or something. Maybe this was too easy, just to settle into this rhythm here. I mean shit, three years? Sorry I keep saying that, it’s just so hard to believe I’ve let myself go for that long. I didn’t think I’d be able to hang on for one. Somehow the time just raced by.

“But now, looking at all you guys who are kinda like me in that you’re better than this, and you know it, but you’re too scared to let yourself admit it and you don’t want to take the chance that maybe you could actually be successful, I guess I feel like I fit in here too well. I’m one of you. And that scares me, to be honest.”

Dahlia took a deep breath. She could see, for once, a genuine smile on Krista’s face and envy for the words she had never herself been able to speak. Steve, beginning to catch on, was watching her with eyes bulging so hard she was afraid they would pop out and fall into the cake.

“The more I ramble the more this seems like a good idea, and maybe tomorrow I’ll be kicking my own ass somewhere when I wake up with a bottle in my hand. But I think I’m willing to take that chance.”

Dahlia closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“What I’m trying to say, I guess... is fuck this job.”

She cocked her head, appraising the words. They felt right. She continued.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she said. “Fuck this job. Fuck the entitled customers who come out without enough money to tip, fuck the hours I spend soaking my feet to get the black from my socks off them, fuck being someone’s wage slave for ten hours a day and begging for a treat like a dog, and most of all fuck waiting around for my life to get better when I know that another seven years are just as easily going to pass by if I don’t stop them, and we’re going to be celebrating my tenth fucking anniversary here and you guys are probably going to be exactly the same, except Carl, you’ll probably have a few more restraining orders, and Bill and Ellie, you guys will probably have about three kids, and Dwayne, you’ll probably – well you’ll probably still be the same, I mean how old are you? 30? You look 15 – and Amanda you’ll have racked up about twenty baby daddies by that point and Krista you’ll still be here jaded cause you cheated yourself out of the life you could’ve had. And Mark? I don’t know, maybe you’ll still be trying to deal coke to the high school kids you train.”

She untied her apron and let it drop to the floor, heavy with the weight of the checkbooks and dying ballpoint pens. Instantly she felt fifty pounds lighter. Behold the true Miracle Diet.

“Thanks for the cake, guys, but I quit. Sorry. Those people I love – you know who you are – it’s been a pleasure. Call me sometime, let’s do something. The rest of you have good lives. Adios amigos,” she saluted the line, who raised their torques to her in unison. “And Steve? Since I’m no longer your bitch, if you ever try to touch me again I’ll cut off every one of your fucking fingers one at a time. We clear?”

She did not, or perhaps could not, look backwards to see the looks on their faces. Instead, she chose to imagine the appropriate relief, envy, consternation, and in some cases pure humiliation. It was better that way.

Kicking her apron into the corner, she turned and shoved her way out of the kitchen and out of the empty restaurant, like the lone ranger emerging from the swinging saloon doors.

Behind her, she heard Dwayne pipe up in his unaffected monotone: “So uh, can I still have some cake?”

CHAPTER 14

The Toyota Camry Dahlia had “borrowed” from her mother raced a low sky of pregnant gray clouds all the way out of Avington.

Compact and squat to the ground, the vehicle’s body hugged the slick roads like a second skin as it weaved idly from one open lane to another. It was just past five, in the height of rush hour, but Dahlia hardly passed a single vehicle as she sped west on the state turnpike in a streak of red.

The shifter vibrated hungrily beneath her palm as she urged the car into fifth gear, eliciting a groan from the straining engine. She was pushing 85, but it

still seemed like the car was moving at a crawl. The green exit signs slowly ticked by.

The words she'd said at the diner seemed like they belonged to another person living lifetimes ago. She tried not to roll them around like a ball in her head, over and over again, but when it came to rumination her mind was her greatest saboteur.

She found herself turning and staring over her shoulder every few miles. There was never anything behind her but the winding highway that cut through a blurry landscape of farm pastures. Still, she could not soothe the hackles that stood on the back of her neck.

"The National Weather Service would like to issue a flood advisory," the radio buzzed, and Dahlia gave a little startled jump in her seat. Sure enough, raindrops had begun splattering loudly on the windshield like bursting insects. Dahlia numbly flicked on the wipers.

By this point, the sky had grown nearly as dark as twilight. The cloud cover had stitched itself together into ceiling of charcoal. Dahlia hunched over the steering wheel, gripping its faux leather surface with white knuckles as she attempted to squint through the thickening downpour. A crack of lightning sizzled through the sky, drenching the earth in a momentary burst of light.

That was when she saw him.

On a grassy hill just off the right shoulder sat a young man, curled up in a ball as raindrops assaulted his thin shoulders.

Dahlia stomped on the brake pedal.

She pumped her screaming brakes and yanked the car out of gear as it fishtailed between her lane and the shoulder. By the mercy of the Creator and an antilock braking system, Dahlia finally skidded to a halt only a few hundred yards from where she had initiated the emergency stop.

Half in and half out of the shoulder, she threw the transmission in reverse and sped backwards until she could finally see the teenager out of her passenger side window.

Dahlia watched as the young man stood up gingerly, brushed himself off, and took the handful of steps to her car window. She nearly jumped again when he lightly rapped on the frosted glass. She cranked the handle to roll the window down. Intruding rain quickly saturated the cloth passenger seat.

"N-need a ride?" Dahlia stammered awkwardly, squinting as she attempted to make out his face in the darkness.

What looked like a smile worked its way across the boy's cheeks. "Sure."

Warnings screamed inside her head as the door squeaked open. The sopping teenager settled into the passenger seat, tightly secured his seat belt, and sealed her fate with the slam of the car door.

Dahlia drummed her fingers nervously on the steering wheel. Sweat plastered her bangs to her forehead. The rest of her long hair was a tangled, frizzy mess from the humidity. She was still in her uniform from the diner.

The young man quickly rolled up the passenger side window and cast Dahlia a strange look. "You okay, lady?"

She looked back at him, letting out a nervous sigh. “Yeah, sorry. It’s been a long day.”

The young man nodded. “I feel you.”

In the car’s overhead light, Dahlia was able to better survey her passenger. He couldn’t have been any older than eighteen. Tall and sinewy, he could hardly fit his legs below the glove compartment. Not only was he wet, but he was dirty. He wore a pair of jeans and a ratty gray flannel shirt, whose open collar revealed the corner of a tattoo across his collarbone. Dirt, black like soot, was caked into the creases of his thin hands and permanently wedged beneath his fingernails like a reverse French manicure. The same layer of dirt streaked his cheeks and neck. Dahlia inhaled and detected a slight whiff of motor oil.

He caught her looking him over and met her eyes with a boyish smile that lit up his face. In contrast to his dirty, greasy body, his eyes were a refreshing blue and went nicely with his curly strawberry blonde hair. Dimples creased the edges of a surprisingly handsome grin.

“My name’s Raphael,” he said without extending a hand. “Or Raphy, if you want.”

Dahlia cleared her throat with a tremble. “Dahlia. Nice to meet you, Raphy.”

“Same here.”

“So...” She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, scolding herself internally. “Where you headed?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “Somewhere else, I guess.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Dahlia had never picked up a hitchhiker before and wasn’t sure where to start, but driving, she supposed, had to be the logical place. The lack of traffic made her merge pretty easy, and within seconds the Camry was back on the turnpike cruising westward. Dahlia forced her body to calm down, but the tension in the car remained thick enough to slice with her Vigil dagger.

She urged herself to think of something else, and of course her thoughts immediately went back to Him.

If Dahlia had made a list of pros and cons for leaving town and never coming back, he would have been the only thing on the con list – a million and one pros and only a single con. He would have to understand that the odds were just not in his favor.

Maybe she would send him a postcard one day.

“Pretty crappy weather today,” Raphy remarked from beside her, kicking his feet up onto the dashboard and relaxing back into his chair, hands crossed behind his head like he was at Club Med.

Dahlia cringed. “Yeah. Crappy.”

“Where are you from?”

What was this, 20 questions? “Avington,” she answered after a moment.

“Oh, cool.”

“How about you?”

“Eh... all over, I guess.” He tried to busy himself by picking at the dirt that lined his nail beds.

“So are you a runaway?” Dahlia was never one for beating about the bush. Raphy widened his bulbous eyes with hurt. “Me? No way. I’m just traveling. That’s all.”

She cast him another skeptical glance. “Look, let’s just get one thing straight, okay? You’re not, you know, one of them are you?”

“Oh fuck, no!” Raphy threw up his hands defensively. “No way. I swear. Look.” He rolled up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, revealing his unblemished wrists. “See?”

Dahlia stared at his skinny white wrists for another second before she was satisfied. Deflecting her eyes back to the road, she bit her lip guiltily at his earnestness. “Sorry. Just making sure.”

Raphy did not ask to see her wrists.

Dahlia attempted to absorb herself in driving to shrug off the mounting awkwardness. By this point, the rain had tempered its onslaught to a lighter drizzle. Lightning still flashed off in the distance beyond the horizon of bridges and highway dividers, but it seemed that the storm was finally clearing. Something in Dahlia felt lighter too.

Silence persisted until they passed the next exit.

Raphy turned to look at her again, wearing that grin that aroused a strange mélange of feelings in her.

“You’re running away, aren’t you?”

His comment took her so completely by surprise that she almost doubted having heard it in the first place.

“Wait, what?”

“Sorry,” he said softly, running a hand through his tangled blonde curls. “I just got that feeling from you.”

He shifted in his seat and when she glanced back at him, he was batting his enviously long eyelashes at her. “But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You’re nosy.”

“And right.”

She exhaled defeat through her nostrils. “Oh what the hell... Yeah, whatever, I guess I am. I just had to get out of there, you know?”

“Yeah.”

He was just a kid – what did he know? She shook her head and urged herself to keep her eyes on the road.

“You left someone behind, didn’t you?”

Dahlia nearly swerved out of her lane.

“What did you say?”

“What was his name?”

By this point, she was chewing so vigorously on her lower lip that she started to taste tangy traces of blood. The pressure of withholding tears began to build in her brow as the world in front of her grew blurry, not by fault of the windshield wipers.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Sorry.”

Dahlia slammed her fist down on the horn and relished the pain that lingered in her knuckles. The driver in front of her flicked her off and changed lanes.

“Seth,” she spat finally in a burst of agitation. “Seth! His fucking name is Seth, okay?”

Raphy threw up his hands again. “Geeze! I’m sorry! Didn’t mean to hit a nerve.”

Dahlia was overcome with the urge to drive head first into the concrete divider, but she calmed herself with a few deep, labored breaths. Self-loathing sank like a pit in her gut. Behold! Her mind berated her. Dahlia Ellis’ all time personal low.

If Raphael hadn’t been in the car, she might have actually driven into the wall.

“Look,” she said finally after sufficient self-harassment. “I’m sorry to take this out on you. I shouldn’t have snapped like that. It was wrong.”

He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, but she refused to look at him. His sympathy would have killed her.

Seth. The last image she had of him wove its way into her consciousness. He was standing at her doorstep watching her watching him, knowing that for the first time she knew what he was, and lamenting that fact. His dark eyes were heavy and sullen.

“I had to leave him behind,” Dahlia said, unsure of whom she was trying to convince. “What kind of life was there for us?”

“What do you mean?” Raphy asked gently.

“I-I’d rather not say,” Dahlia stammered. She couldn’t have found the words even if she’d wanted to. “He’s, well, he’s different. Believe me, it just wouldn’t have worked out.”

“I see.”

When she glanced again at Raphy, he was leaning back against the door suavely, wearing a mischievous grin. “So that means you’re single now, right?” He winked, and she felt a tingle working its way down her spine. Disgust quickly followed.

“Excuse me?”

“Just kidding!” He laughed, and she could detect something new in his face, something that made her slightly uncomfortable.

She frowned, turning back to the road. “Yeah. Whatever.”

As she drove on, she stole quick curious peeks at him. He had assumed his Club Med posture again, and she noticed with disdain that her glove compartment door was now caked with mud from his filthy sneakers. At some point, he began to whistle carelessly, as if he were aboard a luxury liner making passage to the Bahamas. Dahlia was surprised to find herself compelled by the resonant notes of his whistling. She realized after a few minutes that she recognized the melody, but she had no idea when or where she’d last heard it.

The more time she spent in the car, the more difficulty she had making heads or tails of her passenger, this creature of contradictions. He was obviously young, but had the air of someone much older. Despite his dirtiness, there was an

undeniable beauty to his features that comforted her in an unsettling way. She knew what he wasn't – his wrists had been unmarked after all – but as for what he was, she hadn't the slightest.

"You're running out of gas," Raphy said, pointing to the needle on the display, which had surpassed the E.

Dahlia blinked herself back to reality. "Oh shit, you're right."

The next sign they passed announced the next exit in half a mile. Late afternoon had quickly fled, and the highway was draped in pitch-blackness at only 6:30 P.M. Out of habit, Dahlia pressed down on the lock button. The Camry peeled off of the highway, and after scrapping for the coins to pay the toll, Dahlia was headed down the unlit streets at a much slower speed than she would have liked. A highway sign had advertised a Shell station only a quarter of a mile from the exit, but the drive felt like it took hours. They passed no oncoming traffic.

When the Camry finally pulled up to a pump, relief washed through Dahlia's veins. Gas was cheaper here at only \$4.39 a gallon, but she could not vouch for how much was left on her MasterCard. She regretted not having fished her last day's tips out of her apron pocket first.

"Some act of defiance," she muttered to herself as she fumbled through her wallet for her debit card. The centerfold of the leather wallet boasted only three twenties.

A flutter of motion stirred in her periphery, and she turned her head to watch a disheveled young woman stumbling over from the other end of the parking lot. The woman wore a ragged white dress with an overcoat of burlap sacks. Her filthy auburn hair was long and loose and hung to her hips. At first glance she looked like she was scowling, but the blankness in her eyes nullified the expression. The woman raised her arms, and Dahlia could make out the mark of a horned hydra winding its way down her forearms.

Beside her, Raphael was glaring at the woman.

Dahlia rummaged around in her center console, searching for her dagger. "I can take care of this," she said to Raphy.

"Don't bother," he replied simply, but with authority that took her aback. Dahlia stopped rummaging and looked up at him to find his lips moving as he mouthed a sequence of strange syllables.

"Raphy, what are you?"

All of a sudden, the woman fell forward onto the pavement as if she had been struck. She let out a shrill howl of terror, scrambled to her feet, and tore back off into the shadows.

Raphy turned to Dahlia and shrugged, grinning lopsidedly. "See? All better."

"Wait, did you do that?"

He shrugged again.

The words Dahlia wanted to say disintegrated between her lips.

Raphy fidgeted in his seat. "So... uh, you gonna get gas now?"

Ten minutes later, the Camry pulled into the parking lot of the Key West Inn. The incident at the gas station had triggered Dahlia's pent up exhaustion, and

at that point a night's lodging had become inevitable. Raphy had revealed in no uncertain terms that he was, "flat broke, man," so Dahlia would be the one to foot the motel bill. Unfortunately, one room was looking like a financial stretch, much less two...

The Key West Inn had the distinction of being the least threatening-looking efficiency motel on the strip. That was not to say that the motel had much in the way of curb appeal, however. The building was L-shaped and plastered in nauseating sea foam stucco, with a faux Spanish tiled roof the color of Pepto Bismol. A tall neon sign advertised vacancy in curly script. The exterior of the building was lined with fake palm trees strung around with Yule lights.

But the parking lot was well lit, and there weren't too many cars parked, so Dahlia figured it was worth a shot.

Another ten minutes later, Dahlia swiped the keycard and nudged open the door to their room, which was a questionable value at \$30 a night or \$10 an hour.

The inside was not a far cry from the exterior, decorated in a similarly nauseating mixture of aquas and pinks. The bedroom was one step above closet status, with hardly enough room around the queen-sized bed to walk to the bathroom, which was about the size of a handicapped toilet stall. The bed was draped with a cheesy tropical bedspread, and the furniture was all Formica, dented and scratched by a long history of indecency. On the far side of the room directly across from the bed, stood a decrepit-looking television on a wooden TV stand.

Home sweet home.

"Sucks they didn't have any rooms with twins," Dahlia remarked as she closed and double bolted the door behind them.

Raphael did not waste any time falling into the bed, which squealed in agony beneath him. He rolled over onto his back, fanning his matchstick arms from side to side as if he were making a snow angel. "It's comfy. You should try it out."

Dahlia crossed her arms over her chest and peeked nervously out at the parking lot through the slit in the curtains. "Nah, I'm okay."

"Are you sure? Come on."

"No. Really. I'm okay." It was going to be a long night.

Raphy smiled widely at her, revealing a set of perfectly aligned white teeth. Dahlia was struck again by the boyish energy of his grin. She felt herself taking a few steps forward, but wasn't aware that she had willed her feet to move.

The unseen force pulled her to the bedside where she stood for a moment, watching as Raphy extended a hand to her. His lips were curled up in a smile that should have been reassuring.

Before Dahlia knew what she was doing, she had jumped onto the bed beside him and was bouncing on the coils. The two wrestled on the mattress, roughhousing like siblings. Occasionally, Raphy's hands would brush against her thighs, and her body would shiver at the light contact. When she would tickle him, her fingers would beg to explore his lean torso.

At some point, Raphy had picked up an overstuffed pillow. Dahlia had similarly armed herself, and in no time, the floor was covered in bits of polyester fiberfill.

“That was ridiculous,” Dahlia laughed, as she finally collapsed on the bed and stared up at the water-stained popcorn ceiling. “How old are we again?”

He chuckled. “Well, of course I’d never ask a lady her age. But I-”

Raphy was interrupted as he lost his footing and fell forward on top of her.

He had managed to catch himself on his hands, which were planted at either side of Dahlia’s head, but most of his body was resting on top of hers, flesh on flesh. She quivered in sensory overload from the prolonged contact as she looked up into his face. He was looming only a few inches above her, his chest expanding to touch hers with each deep inhalation.

“Dahlia, I was just thinking,” he began, looking down at her over his nose. Beads of sweat bubbled up at her hairline and dripped down her face.

“Y-yes, Raphy?”

Dahlia held her breath as he stared at her. Her flesh tingled hotly.

He rolled away from her and sat up.

“Never mind. Hey, so you ready for bed?”

The breath she’d been holding burst from her lips.

“So uh, I can sleep in the tub or something if you want,” Raphy offered. “I don’t mind.”

“No,” Dahlia said before she could stop herself. “Stay with me.”

“You sure?”

She nodded.

Raphy burrowed beneath the covers beside her, gesturing for her to join him. After a moment’s hesitation, she followed suit, positioning herself as far as possible towards the edge of the bed. He watched her with a frown but said nothing.

As Raphael leaned over to switch off the bedside lamp, his shirt collar slipped and Dahlia got a better view of the tattoo on his shoulder. She realized it was Aramaic. Sleep overtook her before she could ask what it meant.

Dahlia awoke from a dreamless sleep sometime in the middle of the night to find the television on, but muted, silently advertising some plastic pasta strainer thing for the low, low price of something-ninety nine. Other than the blinking bluish light from the television, the room was dark; beyond the curtains, black oblivion still consumed the world outside.

Raphael was still sleeping next to her, snoring ever so softly, stripped down to a pair of faded grey boxers. In the dim light of the television, she could make out the full script of the tattoo on his right shoulder, as well as another tattoo above his pelvis, this one a long graceful flourish. The more she stared at it, the more she could have sworn it reminded her of a snake.

He was worse than thin, she realized as she watched him. She could count his ribs and then some.

At some point during the night, the comforter had fallen onto the ground below the bed, yet Raphael was cradled by some sort of white downy throw. He twitched in his sleep, and she heard a ruffling of feathers.

Dahlia did a double take.

What cradled Raphael was not a down comforter at all, but a pair of massive white wings.

Looking closer, Dahlia realized that many of the feathers had slices taken out of them. Some were downright ragged, others caked in dirt as black as that on his hands.

When Raphael's eyes snapped open, she almost cried out.

"Dahlia." He rubbed his temples wearily. "What is it?"

"What are you?"

His eyes narrowed like a cat's. "I think you know."

"This is crazy!" Dahlia rolled away from him and clapped her hands over her ears.

When she opened her eyes again, she found him hovering in front of her. She let out a shriek. "Go away! What do you want from me?"

He grabbed her by the wrists with terrifying strength and stared at her. She watched his irises darken. "There are some things you have to understand, Dahlia." His grip tightened around her arms, but she felt no pain. Behind him his wings swatted the air with agitation, like a cat's tail.

"Please," Dahlia said, as she felt his hands leeching the strength from her bones.

"For fuck's sake, listen to me," he said. "I came here to show you something important."

"What do you mean?"

"Damn it, just come here."

"Hey--"

Her protest was cut off when Raphael grabbed ahold of her neck and kissed her hard on the lips.

The second their mouths made contact, Dahlia was done for. He was on top of her and she was winding her fingers desperately through his blonde curls, and he was working his hands up and down the curve of her back, making her quiver in his thin arms. She didn't remember losing her clothes, but only a moment later she was as naked as he, fading in and out of consciousness as she succumbed to his dizzying embrace.

A burst of light flashed in front of her eyes, and in that moment Dahlia saw herself sprawled out and bleeding on the stone steps of an altar. Her exposed skin was crosshatched with cuts and lacerations, but her face was unblemished, her eyes closed gently in peaceful sleep. Blood seeped down the grout seams of the marble steps.

The vision flickered, and then she saw Seth bound to a marble beam. There was blood matted in his wavy black hair. His left eye was swollen shut.

"Seth," Dahlia choked.

Feeling her grow rigid, the angel stopped his assault on her mouth. "Dahlia?"

“No, this is wrong. I’m— oh shit. I’m in love with him.”

Frowning, Raphael reached down and tucked a piece of hair behind Dahila’s ear. “Seth?”

“He’s a naphil!” The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Raphael sighed. “I see.”

“He’s just like that bag lady at the gas station, wandering alone forever. And for nothing! He can’t even feel a fucking thing when I touch him.”

Tears leaked down her cheeks, and Dahlia trembled when she felt Raphael wipe them away with his thumbs.

“Shh. It’s okay. Calm down.”

At his command, every muscle in Dahila’s body immediately relaxed.

Raphael’s expression was obscured through her teary gaze; she could not make out the smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Let it go. Let everything go.”

She attempted a weak nod.

“Don’t fight it,” Raphael whispered, closing the gap between them again. As he claimed her lips, his voice echoed in her head as clearly as if he had spoken.

“You’re mine.”

The rays of dawn penetrated the room’s flimsy curtains and prodded Dahlia’s eyes open. Picking the crusts of sleep from her face, she glanced over at the clock on the nightstand, which read 7:32. She sat up in bed and kneaded the imminent headache out of her forehead.

She realized then that she was alone in the room.

The spot beside her was undisturbed and made up, as if no one had slept there. She was wearing her clothing from the day before, even down to her socks. Her black sneakers were arranged neatly next to the door.

“Raphy?”

She called his name in vain, knowing fully well that he was not there. She could not feel anything of him left in the room.

“Great,” Dahlia muttered to herself. “Can’t even make an angel stay ‘til the next morning.”

With a bitterness that surprised even her, Dahlia took a quick shower to wash off the night before, gathered up her few belongings, and returned her keycard to the motel office, snagging a stale cookie from a tray for breakfast.

The image of her broken body on the altar steps haunted her through the morning.

It wasn’t until she was in the toll line at the New York border that she found it. It was tucked into her cup holder, a scrap of printer paper folded into a lopsided origami crane. Steering with her wrists, she unfolded the paper over the wheel and turned it around so that the letters were right side up. A feather, tattered and darkened by soot, floated down out of the creases of the folds.

Across the page, written in big, messy scrawl were the words: *it is written.*

Something clicked in Dahlia's head, like a puzzle piece sliding into a slot. What bothered her most about the vision from last night was not the sight of her blood pooling on the marble steps or the gashes and bruises covering her body. What Dahlia simply could not shake was the inexplicable look of peace that she saw on her own lifeless face, before her body went up in flames. The dead Dahlia had accepted her destiny, the same destiny she was currently trying so pathetically to outrun.

The little traffic light in the toll lane turned green, and the car in front of her sped away from the booth in a squeal of burning rubber.

Dahlia stared out at the hazy indigo silhouette of the mountains. She could continue on through the mid west – hell, she could make it all the way to California if she wanted to – but it wouldn't make a difference. It was only a matter of time before she would end up back in Avington on a cathedral floor.

Much to the dismay of the toll workers, Dahlia swung the Camry into a wide k-turn and swerved into the eastbound lane. A large blue sign announced 128 miles to Avington.

The feather in her lap stood out in stark contrast to her black pants, and when she snuck a glimpse down at it, a guilty ache spread through her chest. She wondered just how much of last night had been part of Raphael's duty.

Regardless, there were some things better kept to herself.

Dahlia cranked up the radio and pushed 90 the whole way home.

CHAPTER 15

After dropping off the Camry at her mother's house with an unceremonious "Hey mom, thanks for the car – call you soon" scrawled on the back of a receipt, Dahlia took to listlessly wandering the uptown streets. Not that it had been a big imposition; it seemed like nobody drove anymore in the city, despite the constant monsoon of traffic, and the thing might as well have been on cinderblocks for all her mother used it.

Hands jammed in the pocket of her threadbare black sweater, Dahlia wandered streets cluttered with those big folding signs she always almost ran into and fancy wrought iron furniture outside each café so the ladies who lunched could enjoy their overpriced egg whites "al fresco." With the taxicabs choking the city streets, it seemed more like "al exhaust," but Dahlia was pretty sure the Italians didn't have a word for smog.

Pretentious, trendy little cafés were hardly Dahlia's area of expertise. The only time she'd stepped inside any of them was to drop off her resumes, and even then she was surprised they didn't charge her for taking up their time. As she passed by now, she noticed that the wait staff that scurried through mazes of fancy tables, clad universally in black like proper minions, looked like they hated their lives just as much as Dahlia had hated hers working at the diner, though she was pretty sure they made more than five bucks a table. Apparently all shit, even the perfume-doused excrement of the lurching ladies, rolled downhill.

Dahlia felt for those faces in black, permanently screwed up in plaster smiles – she really did. The legion of poor fools in customer service seemed like a

tribute to the age-old maternal warning: “Don’t make that silly face too long or it will stick!”

She bowed her head reverently as she went by.

As she passed the huge glass front of the Federal Credit Union building, she couldn’t help but catch a glimpse of herself in one of the massive windowpanes. She had nearly forgotten that she still wore remnants of her former indentured servitude: black denim pants dirtied with three years of mustard and self-loathing, and a burgundy collared shirt whose collar had begun to fray with wear, which the holes in her pitiful sweater did little to hide.

Her skin underneath began to itch, as if she were allergic to the memories woven into the cheap fabric. She urgently made a beeline for the next block and turned into the first boutique she came across.

The girls at the register hardly looked up at her when she came inside, but that was fine with her. She wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible, to bury her shame once and for all in privacy and solemnity. She hadn’t bought clothing in forever, but she was pretty sure she was a small. Teeth clenched she swept quickly through the racks, snatching up things that didn’t remind her too much of the hideous clothes her mother wore in the 90’s.

In a couple visits to the dressing room, she discovered that not only was she in fact a medium in boutique sizes, but under the pale yellow light overhead she looked more sallow and flabby than she’d ever seen herself. She stood up on her toes, checking the mirror up and down to make sure it didn’t have any hidden funhouse effects or curvature to the glass. Her stomach, as if mocking her, decided to churn loudly with hunger.

After covertly tucking the rejected articles onto the return rack and hoping the shop girls wouldn’t scoff at her delusion thinking herself a small, Dahlia brought her new outfit and shoes to the register.

“Two hundred fifty seven is your total,” the girl announced after doing a quick calculation on a white sales pad. Dahlia hadn’t been in a store before where they didn’t use a computerized register, and for a moment was taken aback by the verbal announcement. She decided it had to be another trendy thing.

“Oh, yeah,” Dahlia said, numbly fishing out her debit card from her wallet and praying she had the amount to cover it. The girl, blonde with a young, soft face, swiped her card and handed it back to Dahlia, who had held her breath while the machine processed the charge.

After an agonizing minute, the word “ACCEPTED” flashed across the little screen, and Dahlia exhaled a puff of relief. She looked up to find the shop girl watching her with, of all things, understanding in her eyes.

“I know how that feels,” she said with a grin. “I mean isn’t it the worst when you have to put everything back? Happens to me like once a week.”

Dahlia smiled, feeling her cheeks redden in both embarrassment and guilt. The ladies who lunched had to come somewhere after their meal, right? The humility in the girl’s smile made Dahlia realize immediately that she too was a repository for their perfumed shit.

“Thanks,” Dahlia said with a nervous chuckle. “Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve checked my balance.”

The girl nodded and passed the slip across for Dahlia to sign in a shaky hand.

“Have a nice day, okay?”

“You too,” Dahlia said, wishing she could offer her more than a smile. She couldn’t help silently adding, “You’ll need it more than me.”

Her next stop was the Starbucks down the block, where she felt comfortable enough invading their bathroom without having to purchase whatever was cheapest on the menu. Still, as she walked by she dropped a buck into the tip jar to the raised eyebrows of the barista.

Inside the bathroom she locked the door and scrambled to shed the clothes that she quickly realized still reeked of grease from the deep fryer. Screwing her face up in disgust, she flung the dregs of her former life away from her and began to unwrap the pieces of polka dotted tissue paper that carefully packaged her purchases.

Once the transformation was complete, she stepped back as far as she could to look at her entire self in the mirror. Instantly she saw someone else.

The woman in the mirror was wearing a black short sleeve dress with a lace overlay that came to her knees. Her hair was tied up in a bun and secured with a black beaded clip; around one wrist was a silver cuff engraved with Victorian-looking swirls. She was wearing stockings, which was a first for her, and on her feet were a pair of black satin pumps with five inch heels that made her over six feet tall. A grey wool pea coat and a black leather handbag completed the ensemble.

“Well, hello there.”

Winking and blowing a quick kiss at the mirror, she gathered her clothes from the diner and shoved them into the shopping bag. As she stepped out into the Starbucks, she could feel the weight of the stares on her from every corner of the room. With a satisfied smirk, she flung the doors open and made her grand entrance to the world outside.

She dumped the work clothes in the first trash can she saw.

With her chest and shoulders raised, she stomped her way down the city runway, sashaying the blocks she’d slouched her way through earlier that morning. Her heart pounded harder with every stare she drew, particularly from the eyes of the businessmen who watched her like a Ferrari they desired on a showroom floor. Sometimes she found herself reciprocating with a playful smile.

But there were only so many blocks and so many businessmen, and before long the balls of her feet were beginning to throb with pain, just like they did after hours on her feet in the diner. She could feel blisters forming at her pinky toes where the insides of the shoe rubbed, and started to wish she’d chosen hiking boots to wear instead.

Fighting the urge to kick them off and walk in her stockings, she limped her way to the place she always seemed to find herself when she wasn’t ready or willing to go home. Above her head, the iron arch announcing the AVINGTON CITY PARK in big block letters gleamed blindingly in the noon sun.

Once she’d crossed onto the soft carpet of grass, she pulled off her pumps with relief and savored the walk across the lawn to her favorite bench.

From this spot, she had a panorama of green sloping hills and stony ponds. She watched as joggers and bicyclists wound their way down the trails, stopping occasionally to lap up the shade of sprawling oaks. Dogs trotted on leashes, obediently keeping step with their human partners. On a nearby patch of grass, a circle of teenagers idly passed around a Frisbee, shirtless in spite of what should have been a brisk November. On days like these, Dahlia supposed global warming did have its perks.

Setting her pumps and her purse on the bench beside her, she shrugged off her jacket and folded it carefully in her lap. Another reason this was her favorite bench was due to the thick canopy of trees overhead whose leaves did well to shield the bench from any “presents” from birds.

Her little shopping spree that morning had managed to distract her from reoccurring visions of her own corpse, but as she stared out at the cloudless horizon, the pale blue sky became a screen for her mind to project its terrors.

Perhaps the worst part was having a beginning and an end with no hint as to how she would get there and therefore no way to try to divert her fate. If she couldn't run, at the very least she wanted to go down kicking and swinging.

She shuddered and hunched over, covering her face with her hands and pressing on her closed eyes until all she could see were strange fractal patterns and lights whooshing by. “Today I screwed an archangel to find out I'm going to die horribly sometime soon. FML,” she said into her hands.

“Screwed a what now?”

She peeked over her fingers and felt the blood drain from her face when her eyes met scuffed leather boots over black jeans and a long, heavy trench coat.

“Hey,” she murmured, wiping away the sweat that had begun to leak down her forehead.

“Mind if I join you?”

She shrugged, setting the shoes on the ground beside her and tucking the purse into her lap. She felt the bench droop as he sat down.

“How've you been,” he asked coolly, leaning back and draping his arms up over the top of the bench.

“Okay I guess,” she said, sitting up straighter until she felt his arm behind her bare neck. She began nervously popping the joints of her knuckles in her lap.

“You don't look that okay.”

“I'm fine,” she said, continuing to avert his eyes. “It's not worth talking about.”

“Okay,” he said with a little shrug of his splayed shoulders.

She didn't bother asking him how he was, but he didn't seem to mind. He sat silently next to her, scraping the gravel around with the toe of his boots. Perhaps it was the shade over the bench, but he seemed entirely at ease, which somehow only made her feel worse. With the sun directly overhead, he cast no shadow.

“My dad left,” she said finally, unable to take his quiet patience. She wasn't sure why it had been the first thing to come to her lips, but she could feel Seth's sympathy without even having to look at him.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and she knew he meant it.

“It’s fine. It had to happen.”

“I never met my father,” Seth said quietly.

Surprised, she looked up at him to find that he was staring blankly out at the landscape of dogs and kids racing across the fields with an expression she could not read. His pupils were nearly entirely dilated.

Dahlia had no idea what to say.

“I was born a bastard,” Seth said in a more distant voice, in a tone that made her think that maybe he was talking to someone other than her, someone farther away. “In 1945. Bet that makes me older than your parents, doesn’t it?”

“Uh, I guess so,” Dahlia admitted, frowning.

“All I know about my dad was that his name was Bo and he lived on a rez on the Georgia-Tennessee border. According to my mom he was a carpenter and liked to pick bar fights. And he was tall, really tall – 6’6” or something.”

“How’d your parents meet?” she asked gently, curiosity getting the best of her.

“My mom was a social worker, first generation – her parents came over from Greece. She used to do alcohol and drug counseling for the reservations up north from where she lived in Atlanta.”

“Oh, so they met on the reservation?”

Seth cocked his head, a faint smile crossing his lips. “Well, sort of. According to her, Bo used to hitchhike to town every evening to go have a drink, because he didn’t have the best reputation at the bars in the rez – I guess he’d been kicked out too many times. One evening he was trying to hitchhike out, and Mom saw him standing in the pouring rain like a wet grizzly bear, and she felt sorry for him so she pulled over and gave him a ride all the way to Chattanooga.

“And apparently this became a weekly thing – her giving him a ride into town – and then a daily thing, and then they started stopping at campgrounds or cheap motels if it was raining.”

Dahlia found herself hanging on every word, so entranced by his slow, brooding tone that she’d almost forgotten to breathe. “So what happened then?”

“Well a couple months after she started seeing him, she found out she was pregnant with me. She went back up to the rez one day to tell him, but they said that Bo was dead. They said he’d been stabbed when some guys from out of town showed up to collect on a debt. They showed her where he’d been buried. With the war going on, she’d been transferred to counseling soldiers coming back over from across the Atlantic, so she didn’t go to the rez much those days, other than to see Bo. I don’t think she ever went back again after that.

“So yeah, that was it. She had me and the day I was born, my stepdad Rom knew I wasn’t his. I guess my skin sort of gave it away. He didn’t really make it easy for me.”

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia said.

“It’s fine, seriously, fuck him,” Seth said with a bitterness that caught her off guard. When she looked back at him, his eyes were like black pits. “When I was eighteen I walked away and never came back. Last I heard of Rom he had a massive heart attack in ’84 from being too fat.”

All that anger, all at once, made Dahlia shift uncomfortably beside him. She'd never seen him like that.

When Seth looked over and saw the way she was fidgeting, the anger drained from him. "I'm sorry, Dahlia," he said. "I shouldn't have unloaded that all on you."

"No," she said, "I'm glad you told me. I think I understand now."

He brushed the curtain of black hair out of his eyes, tucking one leg under the other and turning his whole body towards her. "Understand what?"

"Why you feel the way you do," she said. "Why you don't feel right."

"Because I'm the bastard child of Indians and the white people that raped them out of their land?" he asked casually, too casually – like he was asking about the weather or what they were having for lunch.

"I didn't mean it like that," Dahlia stammered.

"No, it's okay, honestly. I've had a long time to come to grips with feeling out of place." He scoffed. "Hell, want to know something really sad?"

Dahlia neither nodded nor shook her head, but watched him through helpless eyes.

"When I was a kid I used to have dreams of hitchhiking my way back to the rez and joining my 'real people,' who you know wouldn't make me scrape the mold out of the basement or sleep on a cot in my brother's closet or beat the living crap out of me for no good reason. Well, when I was sixteen I finally put together the cash to ride the bus most of the way. When I got back there, I tried to tell everyone I was Bo's son, but to them I was just another white kid. Most people wouldn't even talk to me. They asked me if I had lost my tour group."

The wind rustled the leaves overhead and in the penetrating rays of the sun Dahlia could see something glistening in Seth's eyes, which he quickly blinked away.

"So what did it matter when I died and came back like this?" he said, his voice beginning to tremble noticeably. "I've never been right, not once in my entire life. And Mom wondered why I liked heroin..."

"Heroin?"

"Yeah, it was the seventies. I thought everyone was doing it."

"Oh."

"Yeah, well I finally OD'ed with a friend who convinced me to try speedball with him. He drew up the syringe, shot me up, said I'd pay him for it later. I owed the guy a lot of money." He let out a little pained laugh. "Guess he figured he wasn't going to collect on those debts, if you know what I'm saying. Best he could do was prevent new ones."

"So that's what he meant," Dahlia mused aloud.

"What who meant?"

"Oh," Dahlia said, sitting up with a startle. "Sorry, just thinking about what Nik said in the Underground. He said to ask you about the way you died, something about playing with fire."

Seth snorted, flicking his eyes upward. "Maybe liquid fire, I guess. I don't know, just ignore most shit Nik says. He's full of it."

“Well not like I’m planning on having a lot of conversations with him, unless they involve a dagger.”

Dahlia knew she’d made a mistake mentioning her dagger the moment Seth’s face darkened and he turned away, retracting his arm from the bench behind her.

“Seth, shit. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he said, with the same convincingness that Dahlia had exhibited earlier when she declared her father leaving as fine.

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... it’s just. It’s been a part of my life for so long. I don’t know how to separate it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” he said, bracing against the bench with either hand. “I should go.”

“No,” she said desperately. “Please. I want you to stay... I mean, if you want to.”

His chest rose with a slow breath, which he finally released after looking her up and down for a good minute. “I’m an idiot,” he said.

Before she quite knew what she was doing, she had scooted over to him and had his face between her hands, tracing the smooth skin of his jaw with her thumbs. Occasionally her fingertips would tingle as they made their way over hardened slivers of scar tissue, which she could imagine once bled at the taped fists of another fighter.

She felt him wrap his arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, staring down at his lips. They looked soft, almost like two slices of peach.

He drew her chin up with one hand. “For what?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Everything?”

“I see.”

“Yeah, I just figured I’d apologize.”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing anyway,” he said.

“For what?”

“Because I can’t seem to leave you the hell alone,” he said, leaning in.

He kissed her softly, tentatively at first, with a lightness that shot tingles through her body and made her stifle a moan. She kissed him back deeply and impatiently, and he pulled her tighter against him, and she was sure he could feel her heart hammering next to his chest. Fingers tangled in his soft hair, she quickly lost herself in him, in the faint spice of his breath and the heat generated by their slow, urgent movements.

“Ew! What are they doing with their tongues?”

They turned together to watch a boy of about six staring at them, balloon in one hand and dripping ice cream cone in the other, face flushed and red.

“That’s gross!” He said loudly to his mother, who was sitting on a picnic blanket and waving him away with a bored sigh.

“Leave them alone, Chad, and go play on the swings with your sister.” She took a long sip from her thermos.

The kid shot Seth and Dahlia one last mixed look of curiosity and disgust and skipped off towards the playground a few yards away.

“So shouldn’t you be at work?” Seth asked.

“Work? Yeah, uh, about that. I sort of quit yesterday.”

“Congratulations.”

“Yeah, seriously.”

“Well, that’s too bad for your manager,” he said. “I think you referred to him as a ‘fat fuck’ when we first met?”

“Oh,” she said, her smile fading. “Steve, yeah. Well I told him in no uncertain terms to go fuck himself. I don’t think he’ll be calling me anytime soon.”

Seth shook his head. “Wow. You’ve, uh, got some balls.”

“I don’t know. That or a big mouth.”

“Well, maybe that too.”

“Hey there-”

He muffled her protest with his lips.

CHAPTER 16

“I told you, I don’t mind that you spent the night at your mum’s. That’s fine. I just wish you would’ve you would’ve bothered to call and tell me,” Law said, drawing his leather jacket around him with agitation as chilly wind rippled past them.

“Seriously? Do we have to do this right now?”

Dahlia looked long over her shoulder, watching the dark shape of Pierre that lingered half a block behind, carefully surveying the path they’d already tread.

The nephilim had a bit of a habit of sneaking up on the unsuspecting, which Dahlia considered yet another testament to their charm.

“It’s not like we get many other chances to talk,” Law said.

“Well, I’m not the one who brings work home with me every night.”

Dahlia cringed, crossing her arms in front of her.

She knew those words had been too harsh the moment they slipped through her lips, but her attempts at nonchalance with Law only seemed to come out as bitterness lately, like she was tapping a hidden well of irritation that had started accumulating the day she met him. Every single thing about him suddenly stung her like a mosquito bite.

Unable to meet his eyes, she fingered the slip of paper in the pocket of her pea coat. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t thrown it out yet; she committed the address securely to memory the moment after he’d given it to her.

Law heaved a loud sigh. “You’ve been insufferable lately.”

Dahlia bit her lip, unable to resist throwing one last glance back at Pierre. This time he met her eyes, and she could see the concern heavy on his face.

“Friend of hers?” Nate spoke up next to Law, whose strides he matched like a faithful hound.

Law nodded subtly.

“I don’t like him,” Nate said. “He’s nosy.”

Law shot a look sideways at Dahlia, who seemed preoccupied with staring at the shadows that ebbed and flowed from the pavement, black and abyssal in the darkness.

"I'm not a huge fan either," Law whispered to Nate, keeping his peripheral vision fixed on Dahlia's bowed head. "But Dahlia and he go way back. He was her initiate when she first joined the Order."

"Initiate?"

"Mentor, I suppose you could say. Only priests can conduct the rites. It doesn't help he's her confessor, either."

Nate let out a little amused cackle. "Oh, I see what's going on! Jealousy is not a color you wear well, my dear."

"I'm not jealous," Law snapped, which only made his cheeks hotter and redder. He rolled his eyes as if attempting to banish the flush from his face. "He probably knows more about her than I do, and good for him."

He froze as Dahlia whipped her head around toward him. "Did you say something to me?"

"No, just uh, talking to myself," Law muttered.

"You do that a lot lately."

"Yeah? You have a problem with it?" Irritation seeped through despite his best efforts, raising the pitch of each word.

"Geeze, Law. Why are you so snippy?"

"Why are you so snippy?"

"I'm not," Dahlia said, rubbing her arm and pouting like a sullen teenager caught in a lie. "I mean, I don't know. It's not even important."

"Well clearly it must be, since I don't think you've said a thing to me tonight that wasn't sarcastic. Anything happen while you were at your mum's you wanna tell me about?"

"Look, I said I'm sorry. Seriously, Law, can we not do this now?"

"Whatever." He turned away from her to Nate, who was staring up at him with a cheeky grin on his face that he had the urge to slap away. The thin scab on the back of his left hand was all that was keeping him from punting the tiny man into a dumpster.

"I don't even know why we bother coming out here anymore," Dahlia muttered, rolling the worn handle of her dagger between her palms. Law smacked her arm for the irreverence.

"You weren't there on Wednesday," he said gravely. "You can't even imagine the horror of what we saw. You would never begin to believe it."

"I can believe it."

"It's getting worse, Dahlia," Law said, clutching his own dagger tightly to his chest. "I can feel it in every bone in my body. And this is why we fight."

"Is it now?"

"This is why we have no choice. You think you call the shots? How many times do I have to tell you that you have a destiny, Dahlia?"

"For fuck's sake, will everyone please just shut up about my destiny?" she snapped. "You know what? I've seen this destiny you've got such a hard on for, Law, and you wouldn't even believe what it was if I told you."

He cocked his head at her curiously, setting a hand on his hip. “You didn’t tell me you saw something.”

“A vision, something. I don’t know, call it whatever you want.”

“So that’s what you’ve been on about.”

“Sort of. Look, long story short it wasn’t pretty.” A shudder racked its way from her feet all the way to the ends of her hair. “In fact, it was probably the worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

Law could hear Nate pacing beside him, but for once the apostate angel was quiet.

“But the thing is, Law, I know I can’t fight this one. I-I don’t even want to. It has to happen; I need it to happen. But it’s more important than me.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Law said.

“I don’t really either, that’s what pisses me off so much about it. I know basically next to nothing. But I feel it, Law! I can feel something in a way I’ve never felt anything before, like a voice calling to me, and the voice is speaking a language I know but haven’t heard before. Do you know what I mean?”

Law paused, letting his eyes wander over to where Nate stood looking pensively at Dahlia. He sighed. “Yes, I think I do.”

“I can’t run from this, Law.”

“Nothing can be outrun, Dahlia.”

“Well, damned if I don’t try.”

Father Pierre emerged from the shadows, which retreated from around his black cloak in graceful coils like serpents at his command. His face was grim, his jaw slack as he nervously chewed on his lips. “We’ve got company,” he said.

Law could not help a grin from creeping onto his face. “Finally.”

No sooner had Dahlia turned around when the sound of slow, dragging footsteps began to close in on them. They heard one pair of feet at first, and then another and another, until the sounds bled together into one long sustained shuffle that reminded Dahlia of a snail smearing its way across the pavement. There could have been as many as twenty; she could not tell.

Law stood at attention, the hackles on his neck raising his stiff white collar. She could smell his excitement. He was like a beagle about to be unleashed. His muscles were tense and trembling.

“Turn away,” Pierre commanded to the approaching figures in his slow, steady voice. The authority he commanded was quiet but ever present.

“Why?” the shadows rasped as they drew closer. “The night is our domain.”

“Show yourself, then,” Pierre said.

The shuffling picked up again, but Dahlia could sense a hesitance in the way the feet moved now, slower than before. It was as if they were afraid in spite of their defiance. Something flipped in Dahlia’s stomach.

There were only three of them, Dahlia realized once they’d stepped into the lamplight, but by the way they dragged their feet behind them they had sounded like many more.

Despite the dim lamplight, they kept their faces tucked tightly down into their shoulders. They were men and a woman – or at least they had been – so

smeared with dust and mud that Dahlia could hardly make out their races or ages. All was grey about them; their matted, tangled hair was grey, as were the rags they wore, which were draped and knotted in crude imitations of clothing.

Dahlia looked back at Law. His eyes were the darkest she'd seen them, nearly black, and glimmering with cold hatred.

"Under the Authority of the Order of the Vigil-" Father Pierre began reciting the standard decree, but stopped mid phrase when Law sprung forward, finally unrestrained.

"You see this, you murderous fiends?" He thrust his dagger in front of them, waving it only inches from their downturned faces. Dahlia watched the whites of their eyes, which themselves were even more grey than white, as they followed the path of the well-polished weapon. "You know what it can do."

Dahlia could smell their discomfort, stale like moth-eaten linens but without the sour stench of sweat.

"Law, calm down," Dahlia sighed.

He whipped around to her, keeping the dagger level at the fiends' throats. "Calm down? I'm just getting started, Dahlia. What's the use of all these archaic formalities anyway? We serve a calling to get rid of these creatures, not recite Shakespeare to them."

"I only use force when it is necessary, Lawrence," Pierre cut in coolly.

"Well that's your prerogative."

Pierre turned back towards the nephilim, removing his own dagger from the sheath secured by cords around his waist. "Will you return to the Underground?"

Dust rose like a halo as the three heads slowly nodded.

Pierre stepped aside, tucking his dagger back into its sheath. "Then there will be no force necessary."

As the nephilim turned away in a rustle of burlap rags, something struck Dahlia like a hot bullet to the brain.

"Mrs. Fisher?" she said with disbelief.

The woman stopped and cast Dahlia a long, forlorn glance back over her shoulder. A sad smile creased the corners of her mud-smeared face. "Hello, dear. I thought I recognized you."

Dahlia's gut began to churn again as she looked into the face of the woman she had known since preschool.

"You died in 2001."

"I did," Valerie Fisher remarked slowly, as if only just remembering. "My husband murdered me in a drunken rage."

"What about Carrie?" Dahlia said.

Her pulse quickened as she pictured her childhood friend, the spritely redhead covered in freckles who was never quite the same again after she lost her mother. Valerie's death had intersected with the popularization of goth culture, and Carrie had quickly latched onto the new scene. Within months her hair was dyed a mixture of fuchsia and black, and she spent most of her time reading from a leather-bound volume of Silvia Plath and candidly discussing the terms of her own eventual suicide.

Shortly thereafter she had become distant to the point where Dahlia only received an occasional email from her, always written in a font called “danse macabre.”

“Carrie,” Valerie said, bowing her head sadly. “I can’t let her see me this way.”

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia said.

“It’s okay. She’s happy. She’s married.”

Dahlia smiled at the thought of Carrie settled into a new life, hopefully wearing her hair red and in soft ringlets, like Dahlia had always envied. Happy, but unaware that her mother was watching her longingly from the shadows she was confined to.

And the worst part was that what Carrie wanted the most was just an arm’s reach away, and yet eternally partitioned from her because the world was cruel and unforgiving and had no sympathy for the dead.

“I am just a ghost,” Valerie said, as if reading Dahlia’s thoughts.

Dahlia wiped the corners of her eyes and swallowed hard. The two nephilim men were no longer anywhere to be found; only the hunched husk of what had once been nurse Valerie Fisher stood in the jaundiced spotlight.

“Isn’t that precious?” Nate chimed in.

Law pushed forward, dagger clutched tightly in his fist. “Enough idling. You were told to get back to the Underground.”

Dahlia recoiled, staring at Law in furious disbelief. “Are you kidding me? She’s my friend for fuck’s sake!”

“She might have been, but these creatures are not our friends,” Law said through clenched teeth. “These *things* are not people anymore.”

Dahlia stepped between Law and Valerie, who was staring blankly at Law as if she had no comprehension of the danger he presented.

“Stop it, Law. Seriously. Let me handle this.”

“Last I checked making small talk wasn’t in our orders, Dahlia.”

“Lawrence,” Father Pierre began, “perhaps you should-”

“Why don’t you stay out of this, Uncle Tom?”

Dahlia let out a horrified gasp. “Law!”

“No, seriously! How’s about you tell your friend not to stick his nose where it’s not wanted?”

“How’s about you stop being such a monster?”

“No, dearest, I think you just forget who the real monsters are. Or is it because you’ve been making googly eyes at one of these naphil freaks? What’s his name – starts with an S, right?”

Dahlia froze. “What did you say?”

Law scoffed. The more riled up he got, the wider the smile on his face grew, and Dahlia felt her body begging to cower unconsciously. “Oh you think I didn’t know your little boy toy doesn’t have a heartbeat? Please, darling. I thought you knew me better than to take me for a dumb fuck.”

“He’s not my boy toy.”

“Frankly I don’t give a shit what he is. I know you’re in love with him. It’s so obvious it might as well be written on you,” Law said with disgust, recalling

the vision. Her affection had been as out of place as the heat flickering from Seth's flesh.

"I don't," she tried to argue, but the words became jumbled and meaningless on her tongue.

"Fuck it," Law said. "They're all trash anyway. Every last one of them."

Before Dahlia could react, he lunged forward and thrust the dagger into the pulp of Valerie Fisher's chest. Law yanked the handle upward, and the holy blade sliced through her with the ease as if she had been made of butter instead of bone.

There was no fear in her face, no wide-eyed fright that so many wore when they were banished. Valerie only shook her head again, slower and sadder than before, and her head had barely had enough time to make a full rotation before her body burst into black flames. In only seconds, there was not even any ash left.

"What have you done?" Dahlia said, her throat too tight to cry.

"What you should've done ten minutes ago," Law said simply.

He wiped his dagger off carefully with a silk handkerchief until it shone again, and then returned both the dagger and the cloth to the inside pocket of his jacket.

Dahlia looked at Pierre, silently pleading, but he only shook his head.

"I can't do this anymore," she said numbly. "I quit."

"You don't mean it," Law said. "Go take a hot bath. Fuck your boyfriend – you know, the one who isn't me. You'll get over it."

Dahlia pulled her dagger out of her coat pocket and hurled it as far as she could down the street. She heard it clatter somewhere in the shadows a block down, maybe against a dumpster or a mailbox, but the blade would take hours to find at night. She brushed her hands off on her jeans.

"I said I quit," she said again. She looked apologetically back at Father Pierre who gave her a meek smile. Her hand immediately found its way back to the pocket with the slip of paper.

"Fine! Quit!" Law barked after her. "Throw everything away, Dahlia. Keep running, that's fine. You fucking coward!"

She flipped her finger up at him as she skulked off by herself.

"Well now," Nate said, leaning up against the single rusting lamppost with his arms crossed in front of him. "That went well."

"Shut the fuck up," Law said, turning away.

Father Pierre wordlessly scratched his chin.

CHAPTER 17

"330 Elysium Ave, Apartment 405," read the scrap of paper between Dahlia's fingertips. She stood looking at it for a moment, alternating her glance between the paper and the oversized brass numbers beside the door. This had to be the right place.

She wasn't expecting the apartment building to be so large or so brick, with huge black industrial windows on each level that probably went from floor to

ceiling. The main tower stretched so far up into the fog that she could not see the roof to tell how tall it was. All she knew was that she felt small as she stared up its face, like a child first discovering her insignificance in the big, bustling world.

She could not see a single light illuminated in the frosty windows. Some were broken or scarred with graffiti; all of them were empty. A cold shiver ran down her back.

On the other side of the door was a rusted metal box with a huge grid of dim little orange buttons. Beside each button, a number was scrawled roughly in sharpie. She traced the grid with her finger until it hovered over the button for 405. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and shoved her fingertip down onto the plastic dot.

A hideous buzz startled her, and she let out a little yelp.

Then she heard the voice, muffled by static but unmistakable: “Dahlia?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” she said timidly, straightening her coat.

“Are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah. Can I come up?”

There was another buzz, this one a bit less jarring than the first. Then she heard a click as the front door unlocked.

She lingered on the stoop for a few seconds, straining to listen for his voice, but the static had died away. Her heart began to race as she pulled the heavy steel door open.

She was met first by a gust of stale, cold air. The hallway was narrow and lit by a dirty bulb that blinked every so often, and as she took a deep breath she could swear she smelled the formaldehyde they used in hospitals.

The linoleum was chipped but still squeaked underfoot, as if protesting every step she took inside. Behind her the door slammed shut, and she heard the latch click.

“Charming residence,” she said to herself with a nervous giggle. Her voice bounced from wall to wall with a lively energy that seemed all the more out of place in the empty hallway and reinforced her notion that she might be the only living thing inside. She swallowed hard.

A few doors down, a plate on another surgical steel door read “STAIRWELL A,” and Dahlia hesitantly pulled the behemoth open. This door was even heavier than the first and took a good yank to open, and Dahlia almost elbowed herself in the ribs. The plastic plant beside the door seemed to mock her as it swayed in the air conditioning.

She bit her lip and let herself into the stairwell, checking to make sure the latch did not lock behind her before letting the door swing shut. The stairs were as equally poorly lit as the hallway, and perhaps eerier with blinking fluorescent panels at every landing.

“Only three flights to go, only three flights to go,” she whispered to herself, gripping the cold railing as she scaled the water stained steps.

The only sounds echoing through the chamber were her footsteps, but she was still entirely on edge. Reflexively she felt inside her jacket for her dagger, but withdrew her hand with shame when she realized what she was doing. “Come on, Dahlia. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Come on, Dahlia. Don’t be ridiculous,” a high-pitched voice parroted from the landing above.

Dahlia let out her second frightened yelp of the night.

“Oh I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you,” the voice said.

The rail grew slicker under her sweaty palm as Dahlia hesitantly climbed up the staircase to face whatever stood above her.

Dahlia immediately shuddered when she saw the old woman, withered and stooped with skin that was thickened and pitted in places and looked like baked Asiago cheese. She smelled something like how Dahlia imagined rotting cheese would smell. Her remaining wisps of white hair were pulled back across her freckled skull, secured with a faded pink bow that matched the checkered housecoat she wore.

“Hello?” Dahlia greeted hesitantly.

“Good evening,” the old woman said. “Are you the one who’s come to take me?”

“Take you where?”

She let out a dry, raspy giggle that Dahlia thought would put even the most gung-ho three-packs-a-day smokers to shame. “Take me down there,” she said, jamming a pointy finger towards the ground.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Dahlia said, trying to keep herself from shuddering by squeezing the rail as tightly as she could.

“What’s not to understand? I’m going to be a naphil!” The woman clapped her twisted hands together as if in celebration.

Dahlia cocked her head. “Naphil? How do you know?”

“My friends have come back to me, my friends Edith and Rose. They found each other down there, and then they came to find me. They say a beautiful young woman took them, and she woke them up. I was wondering if that was you.”

“Oh no,” Dahlia said quickly. “No, no. Not me. I swear, I’m just here to visit a friend.”

“I have friends,” the woman said. “Rose and Edith. They’re waiting for me to come to stay.”

“I know,” Dahlia said, stepping forward to push past the woman. “I’m sorry, he’s expecting me. I have to go.”

“Take me!” the old woman cried, grabbing the hem of Dahlia’s coat with surprising strength. “Please take me away!”

Dahlia tried to swat her away, but the woman would not budge. “Please, I’m sorry! I have to go!”

“Don’t leave!” she cried, eyes wild in her pitted face.

“Let me go!”

Dahlia shoved her with more force than she intended, and the old woman stumbled backwards, collapsing to the ground on the landing. She let out a low moan and did not get up.

“Oh shit,” Dahlia said, rushing forward to where the woman had fallen. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“You are not the beautiful young woman,” the woman said, her pale eyes scrunched up in cold accusation. “You are a heathen bitch!”

The old lady clamped onto Dahlia’s wrist, digging her sharp fingernails so hard into the flesh that blood began to well.

“Let me go!” Dahlia cried, wincing.

“Bitch!” she began to chant louder and louder. “Bitch! Bitch! I’ll see you die soonest of all!”

Dahlia wrenched her arm out of the woman’s grasp and clambered to her feet, stumbling so quickly up the staircase she nearly tripped and fell forward onto the stairs. She could feel the woman’s accusations jabbing her in the back like little needles as she climbed, higher and higher up the endless tower, so quickly she did not stop to think of where she was going or what level she had reached. Faster and faster until...

“Dahlia?”

The breath was knocked out of her chest as she collided with something solid. She nearly fell backwards with the force of the collision, but just as quickly thick arms darted around her shoulders, steadying her carefully.

One whiff of cigarettes and leather, and she knew who he was.

“Bitch!” the raspy shrieks echoed behind her.

“Don’t listen to any of that,” Seth said, helping Dahlia back up to her feet. “That’s Lydia Cooper. She’s bat shit insane and likes to hassle people.”

“She said she wanted to be a naphil,” Dahlia said, glancing pensively behind her even though Lydia was floors below.

“See? I told you. Bat shit insane. Besides, nobody would want to be a naphil if they knew what it was really like,” he added.

Dahlia gave him a tight squeeze across the chest before letting go.

He took her by the hand and led her out of the stairwell and into the fourth floor hallway. Despite his words, she had trouble banishing the disdain on Lydia Cooper’s weathered face, or the certainty with which she prognosticated Dahlia’s death as “soonest of all.”

The fourth floor hallway was not much different than the first, other than that it was carpeted in a grey Berber that looked surprisingly clean, like it had been recently vacuumed. The tension began to drain from Dahlia’s shoulders as Seth escorted her to his door, a much less intimidating wooden door with “405” marked neatly in gold numbers.

“This is me,” Seth said, pulling open the unlocked door.

Calling the space Spartan would be an understatement. Dahlia stepped inside a studio apartment of about five hundred square feet with naked white walls and clean wood floors finished in a light stain. For furniture Seth had a frameless queen sized bed with a simple comforter and a white sofa with a white matching armchair and a wicker coffee table covered in peeling white paint. On a shelf across from the sofa was a small television and a framed photograph that was so faded Dahlia would have to come much closer to figure out what it was even of. In the kitchen was a yellowing refrigerator but no kitchen appliances, not even a toaster, and a set of white plastic chairs around a high table, which was stacked with old newspapers.

"I'm not here much," he said, clasping his hands in front of him with what Dahlia realized was bashfulness. "Sorry I didn't clean up."

"Oh don't worry. You don't have to clean for me," she said. "Mind if I take off my jacket?"

He nodded and extended an arm. She shrugged off the pea coat and handed it to him, and he carried the coat with great gentleness, as if he were afraid he would rip the fabric. He carefully hung it up on a hook behind the door.

As Dahlia watched him, she realized that he was probably the most unclothed she had ever seen him. His trademark black trench coat hung on a hook beside her coat, and his few pairs of leather boots were arranged on a mat next to the door. He was currently barefoot wearing black jeans and a tank top that hugged the hard muscles underneath. Dahlia hadn't realized how massive the deltoids in his shoulders were, or how his lats bulged so far out that he could barely touch his arms flat against his sides. All that time he could have crushed her without a second thought.

"I used to juice," he said, catching her eyes on his chest.

"Sorry," she said, her face reddening.

"It's okay. I know I'm sort of a freak show. Juicing wasn't as widespread then as it is now, but it sort of caught on in the underground circles. Fighters had to do that shit just to keep up."

She nodded, unsure of what to say.

"And there weren't really any rules either. UFC was twenty years out, it was sort of just get in there and beat the other guy to a pulp before they pulled you off him. Some of those guys were fucking beasts."

Seth shook his head.

"Sorry, I'm boring you. I'll stop. Want something to drink? I think I have soda or something in here."

"Oh, uh," Dahlia stammered as she watched him stalk over to the kitchen. He moved swiftly but each step was heavy and commanded her respect. She felt like she was standing next to the massive apartment building again. "Yeah, that's fine."

Seth rustled through the fridge, which was noticeably bare. From out of one of the crisper drawers he pulled a diet Coke and set it on the counter. "Need a glass?"

"I can drink from the can," she said as he stepped forward and handed it to her. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Seth crossed his arms, looking her over as she sipped the soda. She savored the way the carbonation burned the back of her throat when it went down.

"So," he said, "what brings you here tonight?"

"Oh," she said between sips, flustered. She let out a loud belch. "Shit, sorry."

He muffled a snicker. "Always a lady. But go on."

"Oh, uh, something sort of happened tonight. I didn't know where else to go."

His expression softened, as he tucked his loose hair back behind his ears. “Wanna sit down?”

She nodded and took a seat at the end of the couch. He sunk down into the chair, pivoting so his body faced her. “So what happened?”

Between sips of soda and stifled burps, Dahlia recounted her evening to Seth, from her increasing fights with Law to the emergence of the three nephilim and her encounter with Valerie Fisher. The only thing she left out was Law’s assertion that Dahlia was in love with Seth, a revelation she was far from ready to reveal to him.

Seth listened with his usual intensity, staring blankly at the wall as if he were picturing every event while she spoke.

“So Law knows I’m a naphil?” he asked once Dahlia had finished speaking.

She nodded.

“No wonder he wasn’t so hot about me when we met. I don’t think I’d want my girlfriend hanging out with a fiend either.”

“Seth.”

“No, it’s cool. He was bound to find out. I mean you guys are in the Vigil, after all.”

“*Were* in the Vigil.”

“Well he still is, right?”

Dahlia nodded slowly. “Probably will be until the day he dies.”

Seth offered her a cigarette from the pack on the coffee table, and they lit up in silence, taking long simultaneous drags and settling back into the cushions.

“Man this shit is going to kill me one day,” she said finally.

“I used to say that,” Seth mused with a smirk. “Turns out speedball beat it to the punch.”

“Sorry,” she said with a smoke-filled sigh.

“Don’t worry about it, honestly. It doesn’t bother me.”

“I guess my sense of humor is more macabre than I thought it was.”

“Hey, it’s not like you spent a lot of time hanging with the living dead before me. You know, in a non-stabbing context.”

Dahlia laughed dryly, reaching for another cigarette and lighting it with her old one before smothering it in the ashtray.

“Man, I’ve driven you to chain smoke, huh?”

“It’s a nervous thing,” she said.

“Yeah, I understand.”

He blew out a long stream of smoke, sitting back in the chair with his legs spread slightly and an arm nonchalantly draped over its back. To Dahlia he seemed the picture of cool sitting there, something out of a fashion editorial, with his long black hair in loose waves about his shoulders, damp from a recent shower, and his brown skin smooth with tattoos as effortless as if he had always had them, as if he had been born with them up and down his arms.

She set her smoldering cigarette down in the groove of the ashtray and nudged her way into his lap.

“Dahlia,” he said, taken off guard. She pulled his cigarette from his fingertips and put it back on the table behind her. She hushed him with a finger over his lips, licking her own mouth and flicking her bottom lip over her teeth.

That was all it took before for him to take her face in his hands and kiss her hungrily.

She let out a little gasp of pleasure as they struggled for dominance, him with his rough hands still cradling her face, her with her fingers buried in the thick muscles of his back. He bit her lower lip gently and swept her hair aside, kissing his way down her pulsating jugular, while Dahlia fought the urge to scream with ecstasy lest Law hear her all the way across town.

Seth nipped at the crook of her shoulder, biting the skin until it was red and tender, and Dahlia began to feel a sudden rush of dizzy heat at the thought of him consuming her, and she wasn't sure whether that was terrifying or exhilarating but she didn't have time to care.

Somewhere in the midst of her guilty rapture, Seth lifted her up and over to the couch, draping her body carefully across the pillows.

He knelt above her, staring intensely into her face as she trembled beneath him. Sweat dripped down her neck and pooled between her breasts as the tension between them mounted. The more he stared at her, the more she thought he looked like a raptor with his narrow black eyes and severe brow, and she the rabbit who was foolish enough to lay down his open talons.

And then he was kissing her again, and she found her hands working quickly at the buttons of her blouse and letting it drop carelessly on the floor beside the couch. He kneaded her breasts, nipping lightly at the flesh beneath her collarbone and drawing another series of moans from her parted lips. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, as the tiny gasps snaked up from her like wisps of smoke.

As he returned to her lips, she let her hands wander inside his shirt and over the warm skin of his chest. The muscles were ridged with striations and hard as marble beneath her fingertips, and she could feel them twitching gently as her hands wandered farther down his body. Eventually her fingertips hit the stiff fabric of the waistband of his jeans, and she slipped her hand inside, stroking her way down past his hips.

Seth sprang up from the couch, eyes wide and panic-stricken, chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath.

Dahlia looked up at him in confusion. The disappointment she felt was crushing on both a physical and emotional level, as if a fundamental need had been interrupted just as it was about to be fulfilled. She could hardly string together a coherent jumble of syllables and instead sat gaping.

“I’m sorry,” Seth said breathlessly, picking his shirt back off the ground and pulling it on over his head. “I didn’t mean to let things get out of hand.”

“Out of hand?” Dahlia finally managed to gasp. “Are you kidding?”

“I can’t – I mean, I want to – but I shouldn’t rush things,” he said quickly, fumbling for words without a bit of his usual charisma. He was the most flustered Dahlia had ever seen him, red faced and humiliated like a child caught touching himself for the first time.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked, feeling her own face growing hot and flushed. She rummaged around for her shirt and began to button it before realizing she had it on inside out.

“No,” he said, sinking back down into the chair. “I just shouldn’t. I mean, you’ve still got Law and all.”

“I don’t even know if Law and I are still a thing,” she said, buttoning her readjusted shirt. “When I quit the Vigil I don’t know if that meant I quit him. But this isn’t about Law, is it?”

“No,” Seth admitted, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his forehead in his palms. “Not really. I just- I don’t know. I just panicked. I’m sorry.”

She straightened her shirt and sat up, wiping the sweat that had caked onto her face with the back of her hand. “It’s okay, Seth.”

“I can sleep on the couch if you want to stay the night,” he said, “considering you probably don’t have much of a place to stay.”

“No,” she said, standing up and crossing over to him. She let her fingers wander through his tangled hair. “Sleep with me. Please?”

He looked up at her through his hair, surprise registering on his face. After a moment, she saw a hint of the smile emerge that always made it harder for her to breathe.

“Okay,” he said, standing up and draping his arms around her waist.

She nestled her head into his shoulder. “Look, I don’t care about whatever just happened. I just... I really like you, Seth. Like you said, I don’t really like a lot of people.”

“I understand,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

They stood there holding onto each other until the weight of her fatigue began to force Dahlia’s eyelids closed.

Without a word, Seth took her by the hand and led her to his bedside. They both lay down on top of the comforter, and Dahlia cuddled up into the crook of Seth’s chest as he held her from behind.

It only took a few minutes for a deep, untroubled sleep to claim her.

CHAPTER 18

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back?” Seth said.

Dahlia nodded, but she imagined that her blood pressure was elevating exponentially with every block they passed. Her heart felt like it was tightening in her chest, and every so often it seemed to palpitate and skip a beat.

Seth walked patiently beside her, hands buried in the pockets of his coat. It was early morning, but beams of daylight already intruded the streets, spilling patches of light over the sidewalks and planters. Dahlia could feel his discomfort every time they crossed through one of these patches, which only heightened with every person they passed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him duck his face below the collar of his trench coat, which he had unfolded so it stood straight up like a little battlement.

“Thanks for coming with me,” she said.

“Sure.”

“I wish I had a clue what to expect. Law’s been acting so weird lately, it’s like he’s hardly the same person.”

Seth gave her a sympathetic look from the corner of his eyes. She tried to smile back at him, but the gesture felt foreign and clumsy.

As they turned the corner, Dahlia found herself watching the other people gathered on the streets. They were mostly business people clutching briefcases, eager to begin another lucrative day at the office.

It wasn’t only businessmen though. Children milled about on stoops, backpacks in hand, waiting for their red-eyed parents to walk them to school. They were mostly younger kids who hadn’t discovered the teenage art of sleeping in, though there were some high schoolers loitering as only high schoolers could loiter, doing their best to pretend they had nowhere to go at half past six.

Beside her Seth was brooding as intensely as she’d ever seen him. The overwhelming normalcy all around him was an anathema. She could feel him shudder as if he felt that every eye was fixed on him.

Dahlia considered reaching out to touch him gently, but she couldn’t bring herself to move her hands from her own pockets. She was hard pressed to try to comfort him when she herself was running on empty.

The people on the street began to turn into faceless blurs as they walked suspended in their own dimension. Everything seemed to rush by whenever she kept pace with Seth, who was slow but never deliberate, always wandering rather than moving forward. She couldn’t walk with him for too long before she felt like she was going mad.

She found herself keeping her head tucked down too, even though she had no reason to hide her face. Somewhere in the alleys a few blocks away, she pictured her dagger lying wedged between overflowing trashcans.

“Hey!” a voice beside her said.

Dahlia heard the call through the clamor of the world rushing by, as if it had come to her through another sense altogether. She knew at once that she was the one being hailed.

She stopped walking, and the world skidded to a halt on either side of her.

“Hey! I thought it was you!”

Dahlia’s eyes were immediately drawn to a stoop where three older teenage boys sat throwing rocks into the street and making crude gestures with their filthy hands. The one in the middle whispered something, and they all broke out in laughter.

Cold dread settled in her gut when she recognized the middle boy.

“Raphy?”

“Yo! What’s up, Dahlia?” He smiled his same cherubic grin, his messy blonde hair spilling over his eyes.

She heard Seth walking back towards her and tried not to meet Raphy’s eyes. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Oh, I live here. You know, sometimes.” He laughed, gesturing to the two teenage boys behind him. Both were dressed like Raphy in similar ripped jeans and oil-stained t-shirts, but one had short spiky black hair that dripped with hair

gel and the other wore his wavy brown hair in a mullet, with a flowered bandana tied around his forehead. "This is Gabe by the way," Raphy said, gesturing to the kid with the spiked hair. "And this is Mike."

The other two nodded politely at Dahlia, though she could feel Raphael leering at her through his smile.

"Sup," Gabe said.

"So this must be Seth," Raphy said, looking over at Seth who stood behind Dahlia, scowling and staring down into the pavement.

"Yeah," Dahlia said hesitantly. She had no idea what Raphy had told his friends about her, or if he'd mentioned her at all. The thought that he might not have surprisingly irritated her.

"Nice," he said, batting his long eyelashes. "I can see why you like him so much. You're a good looking dude."

"Thanks," Seth muttered uncomfortably.

"Oh," Dahlia said, nervously glancing from Seth to Raphy. "Seth, this is Raphy. He's, uh, a friend of mine."

Raphy saluted with a grin. Seth hardly nodded.

"Right," she said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "We should probably get going."

"That's cool," Raphy said, skipping another stone across the pavement.

"Nice to run into you, y'know? These guys were dying to meet you."

Dahlia couldn't force herself to say anything, so she just nodded. She realized with horror that her cheeks were growing redder by the second.

Luckily Seth was barely looking at her.

"Look, Dahlia," Raphy said, suddenly serious and frowning. "If you ever need anything, I just want you to know we're here. Okay? I mean it."

"Thanks," she said, jarred by his dramatic shift in tone.

"Yeah. You know, just in case things get..." Raphy paused, collecting himself. Mike and Gabe eyed him shiftily. "Nah," he said with a smile after a moment. "Never mind. You take care of yourself, okay?"

"Yeah," she said, slowly retreating backwards. "You too."

Once Dahlia and Seth had cleared the next block, which was fortunately less densely populated than the last, he finally spoke up. "What was that about?"

She wrung her hands in front of her, popping the knuckle joints. "Oh, uh, he and I sort of had a thing. It was a one-time thing. Really weird."

"So that's what you were talking about when you mentioned fucking an angel," he said.

Dahlia froze. "What?"

"The three of them ooze light energy," he said with a shrug. "Didn't really take me long to put the pieces together. And besides, you're blushing."

Dahlia reached up and pinched her traitorous cheeks. "Shit, Seth, I should've told you."

"Look, it's none of my business. I'm not your boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

He shrugged again. "It's not like I have the right to tell you what to do."

Dahlia couldn't help herself. "But aren't you, I mean, at least the slightest bit--"

"Jealous?" he interrupted, his tone sharpening slightly. "Well I'd be lying if I said no. But that's not really my call."

"What if it was?"

"Look, are you trying to start a fight?"

She heaved a sigh, pinching her cheeks even harder with both hands. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

"I think you need a little room to breathe," Seth said darkly. "I shouldn't be caught in this thing with you and Law anyway. It's not my place."

"No, Seth--" she began to argue but he was already gone, making his way back downtown with the retreating shadows.

"Well shit," Dahlia said, kicking a tin can as hard she could and sending it hurtling into a wall. A crash resounded through the streets, and she could feel the alerted heads turning towards her. "Nothing to see here," she wanted to say. "Just another dumb bitch screwing things up royally."

She shoved her hands back into her pockets and sulked the rest of the way home.

As she climbed the staircase up to their third floor walkup, she realized that she had no idea what she would say to Law.

Part of her, the part that craved familiarity and comfort in lieu of more dangerous ideals like passion, urged her to grovel for his forgiveness and swear off Seth entirely. He'd said it himself, after all: he had no place between Law and her.

On the other hand, the part that longed constantly for the heat of Seth's touch and savored the way she felt when he looked at her hungrily as if he wanted to consume every inch of her – that part was quickly overcoming her senses and begging her to destroy everything that stood in the way of her desires. Everything and everyone.

She crossed herself, maybe out of habit, as she slid her key into the lock and gently nudged the front door open.

"Law," she called to an empty kitchen. The table was empty for once, cleared of all briefs and papers, and she did not see his shoes in the hallway where he usually left them.

She closed the door behind her, feeling her pulse begin to quicken. Law was not due in the office for another two hours.

"Law?"

Dahlia switched on the kitchen light, but it did little to banish the shadows haunting the apartment. She pulled her wallet and cell phone from her pocket and set them down on the kitchen counter. "Are you here?"

She heard a rustle of movement in the dark living room and slowly crept forward without bothering to kick off her boots first. "Law?" As she passed by the knife block she had the sudden urge to grab one of the handles, but her hands were trembling too much. She clasped them in front of her.

She stepped into the living room, urging her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Only a few dusty streams of light penetrated the dirty windows. She heard the

rustling again, this time louder, and that was when she realized that there was someone sitting on the sofa directly in front of the door. From the back she could only make out a head of short, light hair.

A little sigh of relief caught in the back of her throat. “Oh shit, Law. You scared the crap out of me. Did you fall asleep sitting up again?”

The head turned, and she gasped.

Dahlia stared into the harsh, wrinkled face of Monsignor Gregory. “Hello, Dahlia,” he said calmly with hints of a smile.

“Monsignor. What are you doing here?”

“Well, my child, it seems we are due for a little chat.”

Before she could cry out, arms reached out from behind her and seized her roughly. She thrashed and fought, but the pale forearms held her firmly.

Another pale arm shot out, forcing a rag over her face. She watched as Monsignor Gregory stood up and shook hands with Law, who stepped out of the bedroom, eying her coldly.

The sight in front of her grew hazy. The monsignor had his hand on Law’s head and was murmuring something, and Law crossed himself, and they faded to white.

The sharp scent of incense beckoned Dahlia into consciousness.

The first thing she noticed when she awoke was the searing pain in her arms and chest, as if she had been forced to carry a terrible weight. Her wrists were blistered and chaffed, and she looked sideways to realize that they were bound by leather straps to each arm of a wooden T-shaped cross. She recognized it as the one the Vigil kept behind the altar.

Fortunately the arms were low enough that she could push herself up with her feet to draw breath into her aching lungs. But they weren’t going to kill her, she remembered with a groan; that was never the point.

“Ah,” Monsignor Gregory’s voice boomed from the doors of the cathedral. “Look who’s awake.”

At his heels trailed two huge albino men she had never seen before, but whose forearms looked painfully familiar, and Law who would not look at her as he approached. Another couple priests and altar boys bearing swinging lamps of incense completed the procession. Father Pierre was notably absent.

Gregory motioned for the others to sit down in the first row of pews and crept up to where Dahlia stood bound in front of the altar. The altar boys hung the censers on hooks beside the altar.

“So glad you have joined us, Miss Ellis,” Gregory said, stepping in close to her. She had never seen him at this proximity; his great folds of flesh and sharp, prominent nose made him look just like a turkey vulture, and his eyes were so dark that they looked like two huge pupils. His breath was cold and stale on her face.

“My child,” he said, placing his hand tenderly on her forehead. “May the Creator absolve you of your sins today.”

He kissed each of her cheeks gently, allowing his lips to linger a little too long. He brought his mouth close to her ear, so close she could feel the perspiration gathering in her ear canal. "Because I certainly won't," he whispered.

And then he slapped her so hard across the face she heard her nose crunch under the force. The back of her throat burned, wet and tangy with blood. She felt blood leaking from her nostrils, trailing down her lips and dripping onto the marble floor.

"Do you know why you are here, Miss Ellis? Certainly you do."

Dahlia shook her head so hard that she sent drops of blood splattering across the white roman collar Gregory wore. He did not even blink.

"I suppose we ought to refresh your memory then."

Law stood up quickly. Dahlia could see him muttering something out of the corner of his mouth to an unseen other, arguing for a moment before he interrupted loudly. "I told you that you can't outrun this, Dahlia! You cowardly whore!" He hocked a fat wad of spit onto the marble floor.

Gregory held up a hand. "Calm yourself, Lawrence. You speak out of turn."

Law huffed but heeded the monsignor and reluctantly sat down. Occasionally he exchanged haughty looks with the empty space to his side.

The monsignor fished around in the pocket of his robes and withdrew a Vigil dagger, whose blade was scratched and bent. Dahlia immediately recognized its energy and could not help staring at it mournfully as Gregory drew it back and forth in front of her, like Law had done the previous night before the three nephilim.

"Recognize this?" he said.

She nodded, feeling her wrists sting as she struggled against her restraints. Gregory shook his head and took a step back, bringing the dagger in close to his chest. "Now, now. You were the one who rejected the Order. As you know, the decision is irreversible."

"Give me my dagger," she muttered.

"What was that?"

"Give me my fucking dagger."

He slapped her hard across the face again and again. She could feel her lips beginning to bruise and swell. The blood still flowed easily from her nostrils, dotting the crude burlap dress she wore.

"Heathen bitch. You dare curse at me in the house of the Creator?"

Gregory slipped the dagger back into his pocket and patted the bulge in his robes. "We'll find a new home for this."

He beckoned behind him, and the two albino men rose in unison. Wordlessly they stepped to either side of Dahlia, just beyond her peripheral vision.

"Now, Miss Ellis, let's get down to business," Gregory said, folding his arms behind him and beginning to pace back and forth. "I do not like to waste time."

She said nothing, but glared furiously out at Law who still would not look at her.

“We know all about your relationship with the naphil you call Seth, so let’s not play games denying it, okay?”

Dahlia growled low in her throat, which was the best response she could muster with her lips nearly swollen shut.

“When Lawrence came to me and told me you were spending time with the nephilim, I must say I wasn’t entirely surprised.” He paused, stroking her bruised cheek with false tenderness. “I mean you’ve always been a bit of a thorn in the Vigil’s side, but I suppose I’ve always given you a pass. There’s a reason the Pope wasn’t keen on allowing admission to the weaker sex.”

Dahlia spat a sticky stream of blood and saliva at him, which missed his face and bounced its way down his long black robes. Gregory nodded to the bald man at her right who grabbed a huge chunk of her hair and pulled her head back so far that she had to strain her eyes downward to look at Gregory. The captive hairs screamed pain through her scalp, and she could feel some strands giving away, yanked like wires from a motherboard.

“As I was saying,” Gregory said, drawing his face in closer to hers, “Days ago there was an incredible spike of death energy, which my men have given me great reason to believe came from a single undead entity.”

She could hear the bald man snickering in her ear.

“Fuck off baldy,” she muttered, which made him yank even harder back on her hair. She whimpered as another few chunks of hair dislodged painfully.

Gregory rolled his eyes. “Come now, Herbert. Let’s not be gratuitous.”

Herbert sighed and let her go. She felt her head slump forward on her weakened neck.

“Whatever naphil expelled this death energy is a grave threat to us,” Gregory said. “And naturally must be destroyed.”

“You can’t,” Dahlia sputtered, straining against her binds. “The nephilim can’t be destroyed!”

Gregory let out a lifeless, hollow chuckle that Dahlia could never have imagined coming from a living man. “You see, that’s what we thought too. But apparently we were wrong.”

“You’re lying.”

“Stupid girl.” He snapped his fingers and an altar boy stepped forward, handing him a thin, battered-looking volume. The title had entirely peeled from the spine.

“The gospel of Nathaniel, the fire bearer,” Gregory said, leafing through the pages. “It unfortunately never made the canon because no one at the early synods realized its significance.”

“Where did you get that?” she said.

He cleared his throat, drawing a finger down the yellowed page. “Here we are. My personal favorite verse: ‘The Holy Flame shall cleanse the nephilim of their sins and cast the beast irrevocably into the infernal prison.’”

Gregory slammed the book shut, setting it down on the edge of the lectern. “Look, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to cozy up to your little boyfriend Seth and pump him for all the information you can, most importantly

where exactly the Underground is located. Chances are that's where we'll find the naphil who made that spike of death energy."

"And what if I refuse?"

A sickening smile stretched across Gregory's wrinkled face. He nodded to the man on her left and Dahlia felt him seize her hand. There was a terrible snap as her pinky was broken in half at the joint. Pain instantly shot up her arm, searing her nerves like molten lead. She bit her lip hard to muffle her scream.

"Now you see? This won't be pretty for you."

"Fuck you," Dahlia spat.

Gregory nodded to her right, and with another snap the pinky on her other hand was split in two.

As she thrashed and howled in pain, she could see Law shifting uncomfortably on the pew. Finally he stood up and opened his mouth as if to interject. But no voice came from his lips; only a muffled whimper at the sight of the blood that streaked her face like a Jackson Pollock painting. He sat back down sheepishly.

"Stop," Dahlia moaned, dizzy with pain. All she could see was the red of the blood that dripped into her eyes from her raw scalp.

Gregory pretended as though he had not heard, cupping his hand to his ear. "Come again?"

"Stop!" she cried. "I can't take this anymore."

"So you'll gather the information, then?"

"No," she said, shaking her head weakly. "No, I'll never tell you. Just kill me. Kill me now and get it over with, because I'll never fucking tell you a thing."

Gregory shrugged the square shoulders of his black cassock. "Fair enough. I was hoping you could expedite the process, but we'll just have to figure it out ourselves. And we will."

"Wait!" Law interjected, jumping to his feet again. "Don't kill her!"

Gregory turned slowly on his heels, propping his hands on his hips as he stared Law down over his long, narrow beak. "Excuse me?"

"You shouldn't kill her. I mean," Law stammered, his conviction quickly crumbling beneath him. "She's more help to us alive, isn't she? I'm sure we can find a way to make use of her, even if she isn't going to play along willingly."

Gregory cocked his head, frowning but nonetheless considering Law's suggestion. After a moment of contemplation he nodded. "She's probably more trouble than she's worth, but I suppose it can't hurt." He turned back to the altar boys on the pew and gestured for them to rise. "Bring me the implement, boys."

They bowed and scurried off behind the altar.

"You're lucky your boyfriend made a decent case for you," Gregory said, turning back to Dahlia with another repulsive little grin.

She shuddered. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Oh?"

"No," she said, straining to cast every ounce of her anger and hatred towards. "I hate him for what he's done to me. I hate him, and I will never forgive him."

She saw Law wince on the pew. He hunched forward and let his head droop in his lap, and Dahlia knew she had won after all.

“Judas,” she said, “would you betray the son of man with a kiss?”

Law’s shoulders began to tremble.

She heard the quick, light footsteps of the altar boys as they returned. One boy wearing thick oven mitts nearly to his elbows set a cauldron of smoldering red coals on the pedestal beside where Gregory stood. The other boy carried a long iron pole that reminded Dahlia of a fireplace poker. She felt her breath stop short when she recognized the pattern of the twisted metal at its end. With a bow, the boy placed the poker facedown into the coals and stepped away.

Gregory nodded in approval and crossed his hands behind his back. “In all your years with the Vigil, I do not believe you’ve ever witnessed use of the implement.”

She shook her head wildly and felt the bald man grab her hair again.

“But you’ve seen some who bear its mark, and you know what’s become of them.”

Gregory paced back and forth across the altar, drawing his robes carefully around him. Dahlia could hear the men beside her snickering. She could practically smell the anticipation oozing from the pores of their colorless skin.

Finally Gregory came to a stop, picking up the poker and examining the end. “Perfect,” he said. “Hold her.”

The albino men pinned her hands tightly against the wood, with little regard to not crushing her broken pinkies.

Gregory closed in on her, brandishing the red hot V in front of him. As he brought it closer the heat became terrible, and she could feel the flesh on her left wrist beginning to blister and bubble like hot wax even though the iron was still inches away.

“No. Don’t,” she moaned. “Please, no.”

“Look at you,” Gregory said, sneering sardonically, “begging like a dog.”

And then he plunged the poker forward.

She screamed as loud as her lungs would let her to drown out the sizzling of her skin – so loud that the stain glass began to rattle in the lead casings. Law turned away in time to vomit all over the pew behind him, drenching the missals and prayer request cards.

Before she could process the pain, Gregory brought the iron down onto her right wrist, and another agonized howl escaped from her mouth.

Monsignor Gregory stepped back to examine his handwork. The stench of charred flesh was so strong that even Herbert and Donne screwed up their noses in disgust.

“You have been branded as an enemy of the Vigil,” Gregory said. “If a member of the Order sees these marks, they are under holy authority to kill you. Do you understand?”

Dahlia moaned as pain pulsed deeper through her body with each tired beat of her heart. The ache was hot but dull, and her wrists no longer stung with the white fury of iron searing through flesh. Instead she felt like her insides were

being slowly squeezed up and out of her with every pulsation, like toothpaste from a tube.

“Very well. Herbert and Donne? If you would please escort Miss Ellis out of the Cathedral?”

They wordlessly untied the leather straps from around her wrists. Without the support, Dahlia almost fell face-first into the tile floor, but the men quickly grabbed ahold of her, wedging their thick fingers into her armpits.

“Come on,” Donne said, shoving her forward. The two men had to practically carry her down the aisle; her bare feet dragged uselessly across the smooth tile floor. She did not even cringe as her toes caught on the grout lines.

Herbert and Donne crossed through the narthex and pushed their way outside with their free hands, shoving the hulking wooden doors aside as if they were made of crepe paper.

“Remember what the monsignor said,” Herbert reminded her, unable to resist yanking out one last chunk of her hair. A fresh stream of blood dribbled down her neck.

“We’ll be looking out for you,” Donne said, and Dahlia knew he did not mean that in nearly the same way that Raphy had.

With that they unceremoniously chucked her limp body down the flight of stone steps and into the sidewalk. She banged her face so hard against the pavement that she nearly lost consciousness again.

The blood began to pool beneath her; she couldn’t tell where it was coming from, but it seemed like it was everywhere, in her hair, her eyelashes, between her fingers. She closed her eyes, caressing the pavement as if it were the soft arms of a lover.

She felt the ground tremble as the church doors slammed shut.

CHAPTER 19

Dahlia wasn’t sure if minutes or hours had passed before Father Pierre found her.

She heard his sharp gasp and felt his hands fluttering over her like butterfly wings, frantically trying to feel out the extent of her injuries – what was broken and what had yet to be. He gingerly untangled her wrists and examined the reddened brands with a moan. “Dahlia! Did Gregory do this to you?”

Her lips were nearly scabbed shut, and her eyes were so puffy and swollen she could hardly see. She only nodded, scraping her head against the sidewalk.

He made a clucking noise and reached over to hold her head still. “I’m sorry, I realize you cannot speak. Just rest, Dahlia. You’re safe with me.” When he drew his hands back, they were matted with blood and flecks of skin.

Dahlia felt him pick her body up without faltering, even though she was nearly his size. He slung her over his shoulder, supporting her with his arms around her waist as he hobbled the few blocks to his apartment.

It was not uncommon for priests to live outside the rectory in that parish; the old building was pitifully small and only accommodated a couple clergy including Gregory who was an infamously unpleasant roommate. Dahlia had

never been to Pierre's place, though she knew where it was. He'd written his address on a card and given it to her if she'd ever needed a place to go. The card was tucked in the folds of her wallet beside her little brother's yearbook picture.

Once inside, Pierre set her down onto the couch and disappeared into another room. Dahlia peeked through her swollen eyelids long enough to make out a small white living room with a couple sofas and an overfilled bookshelf. There was no television. Her eyes began to swelter and she squeezed them shut.

She heard his robes swishing as he rushed back into the room, leather satchel over his arm. "I have to go to the pharmacy," he said, touching her forehead. "You need medication stronger than the kind I have here. You're burning up."

Dahlia began to mumble a response, but he hushed her again. "Just rest. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

As he withdrew his hand, she reached out and squeezed it as hard as she could with her bent fingers. Pierre paused, and she could hear him draw a heavy breath in before he bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to her fingers.

Satisfied, she tucked her hand back down next to her.

Dahlia heard him stop in the doorway again, watching her for a moment before he went out. He readjusted the satchel on his shoulder, and then he was gone.

When Father Pierre returned, he was not alone. At his side was his sister, Brigitte, a woman Dahlia had met only briefly before. She was quite a bit younger than he, but shared his perpetual moroseness and wide, handsome features. Brigitte was an ER nurse, who worked long shifts in the inner city clinics.

"I'm going to help you bathe," Brigitte said to Dahlia as Pierre carried her into the bathroom. Dahlia nodded, squinting against the harsh light.

Pierre placed her in the tub and stepped outside, and Dahlia could hear the shopping bag rustling as Brigitte combed through it for the right supplies. Her hands were warm and cool on Dahlia's skin, matter-of-fact but gentle as they removed the itchy burlap dress.

The water was warm and eased the tension out of her limbs as it nudged its way around her. She felt Brigitte cleaning her face with a washcloth, devoting extra attention to clear away the blood that had crusted around her eyes and beneath her nose. In the steam, Dahlia felt the scabs on her lips softening to the point where she was comfortable parting them bit by bit, until she could slide her tongue through to lick the scabs carefully.

Once Brigitte had cleaned the blood and sweat from her body with baby soap, she released the stopper on the drain and wrapped her in a thick towel.

Pierre picked Dahlia up again and set her on the toilet lid, and Brigitte began dressing Dahlia's wounds, working topical antibiotics into the cuts on her face and scalp with Q-tips. When she turned Dahlia's wrists over, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

"I told Pierre that Vigil is dangerous," she said in a low tone, "but he never listen to me, of course."

Out of the corner of her eye, Dahlia could see Pierre frowning in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

Dahlia heard Brigitte's tongue click again as she examined her fractured pinkies. "They are bent out of place," she said regretfully, "I have to reset them."

Dahlia squeezed her eyes shut but nodded to indicate she understood.

"Here." Brigitte handed her a dry washcloth. "Bite down on this."

Dahlia screamed into the terry cloth as Brigitte yanked on one finger and then the other, breaking them again. The hot throbbing began again in Dahlia's arms, working its way down to her chest and then up to her forehead. Brigitte quickly reset the joints and splinted the realigned pinkies by buddy taping them to the ring fingers.

Brigitte helped Dahlia wash some painkillers down with a cup of water and carefully dressed her in a white linen nightgown of her own that sagged loosely over Dahlia's thin frame. After applying some more antibiotics to her wrists and wrapping them up in gauze, she signaled to Pierre in rapid French, and he came back into the bathroom to carry Dahlia to the sofa.

His laptop was set up on an ottoman, silently playing some sitcom streaming online. As she settled into the cushions, he tucked a blanket around her body, which had begun to shiver again from the fever.

"They have made a mistake," Pierre said. "They will pay for this."

Brigitte scowled silently beside him.

Dahlia spent the next few days drifting in and out of feverish slumber, and often awoke with chills, having thrashed her comforter away from her in her sleep. The background noise that the laptop provided was welcome company, especially when Pierre was away at the church for most of the day.

At first her recovery was slow; it wasn't until her fever broke nearly a week later that she began to notice dramatic increases in her energy and cognizance. She ate little, but eventually her appetite increased to the point where she could sit at the table with Pierre and eat simple dinners of chicken and rice. Once a day Brigitte would come over, still in her scrubs from the hospital, to check on her and help her change out of her damp nightgown and into a fresh one that smelled like lavender dryer sheets.

Sometimes Brigitte brought dinner and stayed to eat with them – usually takeout from the nearby Chinese place or pizza. One night she brought a homemade dish of fish in a sweet marinade over brown rice and kidney beans, and fried plantains and a jug of coconut milk, and Dahlia engorged herself, shoveling her way through three heaping platefuls.

"I guess I was hungry," she said sheepishly as she pushed her plate away from her, and Brigitte and Pierre laughed.

In the middle of the second week, Dahlia began taking short walks in the alleys outside the apartment, but never straying more than a block or two. Later that week, Brigitte brought over a couple pairs of jeans and t-shirts and sweaters she had purchased at a department store, as well as sneakers and pairs of fresh white socks and underwear, and a thick wool coat.

“I don’t know how I can repay you,” Dahlia said, pulling her into a tight hug.

“You don’t need to repay me,” Brigitte said, rubbing her back. “My brother loves you dearly, and I do too. You are family.”

At the end of the second week, Dahlia was overcome by restlessness instead of pain. Her pinkies were still tender but healing rapidly, and for the first time her brands no longer hurt. The embossed skin had toughed into dark leather, which felt strange and alien and made her shudder when she ran her fingertips over it.

Dahlia found her walks increasing in duration and distance; she even wandered as far as the strip of stores and restaurants where Sal’s lay, though she resisted the temptation to step back inside the frosted glass doors. She always returned hesitantly to Pierre’s apartment at the end of her walks, feeling more misplaced and homeless every time. It was not home, but it was the only place she had to go.

The more she recovered, however, the more she knew her days remaining with him were numbered. He knew it too; with each passing day, he became quieter and more withdrawn, sometimes eating his dinner in silence as she chattered on about some stupid science fiction film she had watched earlier that day. With her pinkies buddy taped to her ring fingers, she found herself flashing the Vulcan greeting at strangers to entertain her as she paced the same streets over and over again.

The last day she spent with Pierre was a blustery Thursday.

Rain and churning grey skies had kept her confined to the couch for most of the day, so after dinner she excused herself to take the walk she had spent hours anticipating. Pierre’s polite protests did little to keep her bound indoors once the pouring rain let up, and she took no notice of how the sun was swiftly disappearing below the earth, sending bloody rays up in its wake like a warning beacon.

Orange sunlight splashed like fire on the wall behind her as Dahlia let herself out. Pierre was reading in his bedroom, unable to shake his instinct that the worst storm was close on the horizon. He had excused himself so Dahlia would not see his hands trembling.

She threw a light scarf over her shoulders and stepped into the alleyway.

Dahlia hadn’t walked more than a few blocks before she had the distinct sensation that she was being followed. She couldn’t hear pursuant footsteps or see foreign shadows lingering behind her, but she sensed another presence approaching her, soon to close in on where she stood.

Dahlia rushed over to a nearby dumpster and found it was full of scraps of wood and shingles and other building materials. Fishing out the ugliest looking 2x4 she could find out, she crouched with her back to the wall, crossing herself over again a few times.

A massive shadow spilled out from the alley. She squeezed the 2x4 tighter.

The first thing she saw was a glimmer of metal from the tips of leather boots. Then a black coat long as a cloak, so heavy it hardly moved with each step. Long, lithe fingers decked in rings.

She felt hysterical. “No shit! It’s you!”

Seth had a confused smile on his face. “Are you okay? What’s with the piece of wood?”

“I didn’t know it was you,” she said. She looked down and realized she was still gripping the 2x4 and awkwardly flung it into the dumpster with an anxious chuckle.

“Where have you been?” he said. “I’ve been combing the city for the past two weeks, looking for you.”

Dahlia sighed. “Long story short, the Vigil gave me a little present.” She hiked the sleeves of her sweater up, and Seth bristled as he saw her wrists.

“You’ve been branded,” he said solemnly.

“Yeah,” she said, dropping her sleeves back down with shame. “Law turned me in.”

“So they know about me?” Seth glanced to either side.

“Well sort of,” she said. “They know about what you did at the carnival, but they don’t know it was you. Still, they want me to lead them to the Underground. They said something about a book of Nathaniel.”

“Shit,” Seth said, massaging his temples with his thumbs. “Then we don’t have a lot of time before they know.”

“Know?”

“How to destroy us.”

“What, you mean that book is for real?”

“Unfortunately.”

Dahlia threw her head back with exasperation. “How the hell does everyone but me know all this? Did I miss some sort of company memo?”

“I don’t know how the Vigil found out,” Seth said, beginning to pace nervously back and forth. “But we- we just know that fire is bad, just like you know snakes or spiders are bad. We’re all reborn terrified of the Holy Flame and the gospel of its keeper Nathaniel.”

“But what is the Holy Flame? Nobody will tell me.”

Seth threw up his hands. “That’s the problem! We don’t know. It’s a metaphor for something. But I’ll know it when I see it.”

“So that’s it? You guys are all afraid of something but you don’t even know what it is or why you’re scared of it.” Dahlia was growing more and more hysterical, and had begun tugging at her own hair and wincing as she snagged pieces that were still tender from Herbert’s grasp. Just when she thought she could get a straight answer, she found herself at another intersection of millions of new questions. There was no end in sight.

“I know you’re frustrated, and I’m sorry,” Seth said, taking one of her hands between his and staring long at the brand on her wrist. “You’re putting your life on the line, and I can’t even tell you why.”

“I know why,” she said, calming quickly at his touch. Her pulse was steadily slowing back to its normal clip; such was the salve of his presence. She closed her eyes but she could still see him standing there, tending to her gently. She realized that she had memorized every inch of him.

“Oh?”

“I’m in love with you.” The words slipped from her all at once. “I don’t know how it happened, but it did, and I-”

He hushed her with a finger and drew her in to him, kissing her eyes and then her cheeks and chin and finally her lips. “I love you too, Dahlia. And I’m terrified.”

She looked up at him holding her wrists, eyes closed and lips parted as if he were about to receive the host. “You’re so fragile,” he said. “But the thought of losing you is devastating, I can’t even...” He brought his head down to rest in the crook of her shoulder, and she could feel him breathing hard against her exposed skin where the neck of her sweater had slipped down past her collarbone. Another shiver racked through her.

“It’s okay, Seth,” she said, running her fingers through the soft tendrils of his hair. “I’m not going anywhere.”

After a moment he stepped back from her, taking each hand and kissing the leathery welts on the undersides of her wrists. “Let’s go home,” he said.

They traveled a handful of blocks before Dahlia heard footsteps approaching from the other direction. They were so soft that at first she thought she had imagined them, but as she saw the shadows rounding the corner of the next block, she realized why the steps had been so delicate and precise.

“The Vigil,” she said, grabbing Seth by one of his coat sleeves.

He motioned sideways with his head, and they ducked quickly down a side alley before the group could clear the corner.

“Hold up,” she whispered to Seth.

She tiptoed back to the edge of the alley and peered around the corner to catch a glimpse of the approaching Order. They were a group of five men clumped together in tight formation. They were uncloaked but their matching frowns and their severe, flattened eyebrows might as well have been their uniform. She could see the glint of five daggers clutched tightly, quivering in their lust for death energy.

The last man passed by, and every muscle in Dahlia’s body immediately stiffened. She turned back over her shoulder. “Stay put,” she said to Seth. “I have something I need to do. I swear to the Creator, if you interfere.”

He put up his hand to show that he understood, but she could see great reluctance in his downcast eyes.

“I’ll be back,” she said and slipped out into the street.

She stood still in the shadows, watching as the man who held up the rear nervously surveyed every direction. His job was to make sure they were not being followed, and with his training and keen senses she knew it would not be long before she was detected.

Dahlia saw his shoulders tense suddenly and his eyes widen to the size of golf balls and she knew he had seen her. She pressed a finger to her lips and beckoned him forward with the other hand.

The conflict was clear on his face; he looked around wildly to make sure the others had not seen, but she could tell he was dying to alert them to the intruder. But finally she won out, and he mumbled something to his group and slipped gracefully away from the formation, without protest from the others who continued onward down the street.

“Dahlia,” he said breathlessly once he was out of their earshot. She could tell he was doing his best to look unaffected, but the twitching corners of his mouth gave him away.

“Law,” she said flatly.

“You look so much better,” he said, looking her up and down but noticeably avoiding her wrists.

“I had good care,” she said. “No thanks to you.”

“Look, Dahlia.” He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch her, but he kept his hands balled up at his sides. “I’m so sorry. I’ve missed you so much, worried about you every day that I’ve been alone in the apartment. You have no idea.”

“I think it’s a little too late for sorries.”

“Please,” he said, his voice wavering. He looked dangerously close to tears. “I’m so sorry, Dahlia. I should never have put my duty to the Order before you.”

She had never seen him cry before, and the sight jabbed deeply at her. She looked away, smoothing her sweater uncomfortably and silently praying that he would stop.

“I’m so sorry,” he said again, reaching out to place a trembling hand on her shoulder. She went rigid under the tentative touch, but she did not swat him away.

“Law,” she began, but all the resolve and anger that had incubated in her for the past few weeks was quickly becoming muddled, and only made her feel sick and confused. “They tortured me, Law. They pulled out my hair; they branded my wrists.”

Silent tears tracked down his leathery cheeks. “I know, Dahlia, I know. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He pulled her tightly to his chest, startling her with the suddenness of his embrace. His tears stung, salty in her mouth. His untended beard was rough against her face. Though her mind still fought him, her body was beginning to remember what his embrace felt like, and she found herself relaxing in his arms.

“I love you,” he said into her neck. “I can’t live without you. I can’t be without you.”

“Law-”

“The apartment is so empty- it’s haunted without you. Please come home, Dahlia. Please.”

She was surprised to find her own eyes growing heavy with tears. The breath was getting caught in the back of her mouth and was harder to draw. “I

loved you,” she said, forcing the words out painfully over the lump in her throat. “You were my first true love.”

“Dahlia, please.”

“But, I just don’t know anymore, Law. The feelings, they’ve- I don’t know, they’ve just... changed,” she said finally. The admission was more difficult than she had ever imagined it would be.

“So what are you saying? You don’t love me anymore?”

The tears breached her eyes and began spilling out over her cheeks, and when she sighed it came out as more of a wheeze. She cringed, partially at her own patheticness and partially at what she knew she had to say. “No,” she admitted. “I’m sorry.”

He stepped back from her, his eyes red rimmed and drooping. There was agitation in his clenched, jutting jaw. She watched him flinch. “Shut up,” he said.

“What?”

“I said shut up! This isn’t for your entertainment, you sick little fuck.”

It took her a second to realize that he wasn’t talking to her anymore, but to an invisible person beside him. His eyes kept falling to the same spot to his left, a few feet lower than when he looked back at her.

“Law,” she said, with the strange sensation that she was interrupting another conversation. “Are you okay?”

“You didn’t tell me anything,” he sneered to his side. “You were the one who convinced me to turn her into Gregory in the first place!”

“Law? I’m worried about you.”

“Hold on,” he snapped at Dahlia, dismissing her without looking up.

“Look, Nate, I don’t give two shits what we need to do. Yeah, sure. So that’s it? You’d have me kill her?”

Dahlia swallowed nervously and took a small step back.

“You have got to be kidding.”

“Law, I think I’m going to go,” she said quietly.

“No,” he said with a shudder. There was fear in his eyes like Dahlia had not seen before, and he too inched backwards as if attempting to escape. “Please,” he said desperately. “No, please, don’t make me- no!”

His whole body quaked as though he’d been bludgeoned with a heavy object, and Dahlia watched as his face went blank, like a computer resetting. When his eyes opened again, they were expressionless. The muscles in his face were relaxed, no longer fearful but no longer bearing any hint of Law himself.

“Hello, darling,” he said in a voice that was his yet whose inflections belonged to another. It was almost as if someone else were using him as a ventriloquist’s dummy.

“Law, you’re frightening me.”

“Aw, poor thing. There’s no need to be scared. Though that sweater? Unfortunate.” The voice brimmed with disdain, but the face remained an empty slate. “Let me guess: Kmart special?”

She took another step back.

Law’s body shook its head. “But never mind. Let’s get down to business.” With reflexes too quick to possibly be human, Law lunged forward and grabbed

her roughly around the shoulders, gagging her mouth with one hand to keep her quiet.

She bit down as hard as she could, but the slightest pain did not register on his face. "Go ahead, bite them off. I don't care. Not my fingers anyway."

He shoved his face in hers, snarling and getting flicks of spit all over her forehead. "Look, doll. Long story short, you're a pain in my asshole. And if those Vigil pussies wouldn't give you the axe then as they say, I guess if you want something done you gotta do it yourself."

Dahlia tried to scream, but his fingers were wedged too far into her mouth to allow any sound to escape. Instead she pinched her eyes shut, clenched her teeth, and silently cried out to Seth with every remaining molecule of her energy, hoping he would sense her need.

"Anyhow, darling, I would ask if you have any last words but I think the movies have taught us better than to waste time like that, yes?"

Crushing her tightly against him with the same arm whose fingers gagged her, he let his other hand slip down into his pocket and spring up again clutching the Vigil dagger. His long white forearm reared back like a cobra.

He paused for a second to look her over one last time. "Well, I guess that's it. Goodnight princess."

The dagger plunged down into her chest just as she heard Seth wail some ways behind her. "No! Dahlia!"

Over and over Law stabbed her, with inhuman dexterity, so quickly that Dahlia could not count the number of times the blade pierced her chest. The pain was delayed at first but rose all at once, and her chest was on fire, and she felt like she was burning there when he dropped her, and the world around her was falling with her, slowly clattering to the ground with a silent crash.

Seth gathered her up in his arms, but she could tell by the way his body quaked that it was too late. "I shouldn't have let you go," he was crying over and over again into her hair, which had come free from its ponytail and was tangled about her like a crown of brambles. "I'm so sorry, Dahlia. I'm such an idiot."

Dahlia wanted to reach up to him and comfort him, but her fingers were numb and cold, and her whole body was beginning to separate from her, like it was someone else's body, and she was confined to the back of her head, which was the only part she had left. Her ship was sinking, and she had reached the topmost deck.

She had always pictured herself rising from her body when she died, gliding upward into the heavens free from the shackles of mortality, but there was no motion upward or downward. Instead the world was like a flickering light, like an old fashioned television set buzzing off. Everything was like static, frenzied and white and like little excited particles bouncing off each other to form the shapes and patterns she had known.

She tried to say goodbye to Seth, but her tongue had turned into jelly. The last thing she felt was his hands on her face, pressing her eyelids down over her stiffening eyes.

And then she knew nothing.

CHAPTER 20

*That old black magic has me in its spell
That old black magic that you weave so well
Icy fingers up and down my spine
The same old witchcraft when your eyes meet mine*

She could hear the gentle croon of Ella Fitzgerald off in the distance: the smooth warbling as she teased out every note between the punctuations of trumpets and an old ragtime piano. The music was flat, scratched like an old record, but pulled her forward like two hands snagging her soul by its seams. All she knew was that it was something after an immeasurable nothing. The music just *was* where before it *wasn't*, and that was straightforward and simple and beautiful enough to rouse life inside of Dahlia.

Another voice rose against the music, even softer and less assuming than Ella's.

"Easy now, child. Don't fight it. Easy now. Gentle now."

She was aware of the heat rising around her, lapping at her like little waves. First the heat and then the moisture thickening like steam until she knew she was wet; everything around her was wet but warm. The wetness moved against her like a child, suckling at her and squeezing just tight enough to remind her of the pulse she once felt inside of her. The rhythm of life was outside of her now, but all around her, and she was swimming in it.

She could feel Ella's scat singing rippling the waters, like a hundred little child fingers drumming around her. The pressure began to build in her ears, distorting the sound into strange waves of jelly.

The other voice was still clear, though: "I can feel you, child; I can feel you coming back. It's almost time to wake. But easy now. Slow."

The pressure mounted in her ears and spread down through her chest, and she began to realize her physicality. She was not the water, but displaced the water with her own mass, and she could feel the separation now. She was a self, which necessarily excluded all the things that were not her self, and the water was not her self, but she was still of the water, and she still loved it.

*Darling down and down I go, round and round I go
In a spin, loving the spin I'm in
Under that old black magic called love*

And then she opened her eyes.

She gasped and sputtered, thrashing in the water that rushed in her open mouth and down her throat. Hands plunged through the surface above her, holding her shoulders down against the smooth stone of the basin, urging her still with their silent strength.

But the struggling was just a reflex, she realized, because she was not drowning. In fact, the water that filled the lungs in her chest did not burn, and she had no pressing urge to expel it.

“Easy,” the voice said above her. “When you are ready, I will let you go, and you will sit up slowly.”

Dahlia’s muscles relaxed again, swaying with the gentle slosh of the water. It did not take long before she felt herself of the water again, and the molecules of her body were at ease.

“Good,” the voice said. “Now let yourself sit up, but not too fast. I’ll help you rise.”

It took surprising power to pull herself from the bath, but Dahlia knew her time had come. Bracing her hands against the bottom of the basin, she began to sit up against the force of the water, which kept pressing her down again. “But I can’t stay,” she wanted to say. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stay inside.”

She almost slipped and fell backwards a few time, but with the help of the hands on her back and the increasing strength of her own will, she thrust herself up out of the water and into the steam that rose from its surface. Her eyes were immediately heavy with water, and she blinked them over and over again until the moisture drained.

“Welcome back,” Nomi said behind her, massaging her slick back.

Dahlia looked down to find that she was completely naked, but there was no shame at the sight. She felt cold, but she did not shiver. The change of temperature was not uncomfortable.

“I’m dead,” were the first words to spill from her lips. They still felt loose like rubber, but the sensations were beginning to return.

Nomi crawled forward so she was sitting beside Dahlia. She shook her head, and the bells in her hair twinkled.

“You have been reborn,” she said.

Dahlia ran her hands over the striated muscles in her legs, and they responded by twitching against her fingertips. She was itchy with the urge to run as long as she could until every single fiber was stinging with exhaustion. She imagined herself as a newborn antelope, shivering with impatience to test the power of her newly discovered limbs.

“Can I stand up?”

“Carefully,” Nomi said. “Let me help you.”

Dahlia relented and stood up slowly with Nomi’s arms secure around her lower back, despite the itch in her legs. She tried to take one step forward and would have fallen face-first into the basin were it not for Nomi’s embrace.

“I told you to be careful,” she said, and Dahlia saw that the water dripping from her body was soaking the delicate, nearly transparent linens that Nomi wore, and she was ashamed.

“Your dress is getting wet.”

“It’s a dress,” Nomi said, though Dahlia did not want to imagine the cost of the silk trim and the little lines of gold intricately woven through the pores of the fabric, no doubt by hand. It all seemed painfully expensive.

There was a greenish hue to the room, and more Dahlia looked at the steam, the more it looked like mist moving of its own accord, out of sync with the water in the basin. The light was faint, but she could not tell where it was coming from. She looked up and saw that the ceiling was stone just like the floors and the undecorated wall. Water dripped in places down the walls, and she could see moss peeking out from the cracks between the stones. Behind her, an old record player sat on a little wooden pedestal scratching its way through a Doo Wop record. To either side, sweet smoke spiraled from smoldering sticks of incense. A few feet away sat a little wicker trunk.

“Where are we?”

“The Heart of Darkness.”

“The what?”

“We’re Underground, child.”

The truth began to seep in, like the water between the rocks, and Dahlia felt colder than she ever had before, but still no bumps would rise on her flesh. With terrible reluctance, she drew her forearms up to her as carefully as if they were charges armed and ready to explode in her face with the slightest mishandling. The light was faint, but enough to make out seven spindly necks snapping back and forth tauntingly like whips under her skin, each topped with a head more horrible than the rest.

Dahlia screamed and flung her arms away from her, but the hellish serpents still slithered in the corners of her eye. “No!” she shrieked. “Get them away from me! I swear I’ll hack them off!”

Nomi’s arms were around her, but the unbroken flesh of her forearms was almost as horrible a sight, and Dahlia shrank to the ground. All the words she wanted to say fizzled inside her head. The language she had spend her life painstakingly learning amounted to nothing anymore, because no word had been invented to describe what she felt seeing the hydras on her own wrists.

Worse yet, the Vigil’s brands remained; the V’s looked like arrows cruelly pointing down at her marks of undeath.

She sat there by the wall for a long while, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling as though someone had turned her body to stand-by mode. The only thing that felt good, ironically enough, was clearing her mind enough to get to the place where she was nothing, and she thought of nothing, and the world around her did not for that moment exist.

Nomi had gone back to her duties, and was meticulously sweeping the area around the basin with a homemade broom whose bristles never touched the ground.

Something, maybe the scurrying footsteps of a mouse in the walls, roused Dahlia out of her daze, and she sat up again, reassessing herself, her surroundings, her current situation. Unfortunately, the brief assessment yielded the same results as before.

Out of curiosity, she laced her fingers together and pushed her hands out away from her. Her pinkies were still definitely weakened by the break, but they were no longer tender.

“Why are my fingers still broken?” she asked.

“What was that?” Nomi asked, setting the broom carefully against a wall.

“My fingers,” Dahlia said, waving her hands in front of her face. “When I died, my pinkies were healing from a break. But now they’re still broken even though all my knife wounds are gone. Why is that?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Nomi said as the question finally sunk in. “When you are reborn here, your fatal wounds disappear; the waters of life wash away your physical death. But preexisting wounds remain.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Dahlia said, though she seemed hardly certain. “I mean, I guess that’s why I never saw any nephilim walking around without heads or all mangled and gross.”

“Fortunately that’s not the case.”

“Yeah. It still doesn’t make all this a-hell-of-a-whole-lot better, though.”

“I’m sorry,” Nomi said. “I saw your fate when you were first brought to me, and it was with a heavy heart that I brought you back that day.”

“So there’s nothing I can do?”

Nomi shook her head sadly. “Many try to destroy themselves, but they only come back. It’s no respite.”

“So this is it, then?”

“I’m sorry.”

Dahlia sighed and gingerly pulled herself to her feet. Nomi moved quickly to help, but Dahlia motioned her away. “I think need some time.”

“I understand. But if you would wait a moment.”

Nomi turned and rummaged around in the little trunk before withdrawing a bundle of grey linen. She unfolded it carefully and held it up against Dahlia. It was a dress with cap sleeves and a fitted bust, which cinched behind the back with thin strings.

“I’ve been saving this for you,” Nomi said.

Dahlia looked from the dress back to Nomi, whose dark doe eyes were wide and suppliant. She nodded and gently took the garment from her.

Nomi smiled and watched as Dahlia slipped the dress over her head. The linen was soft, like jersey knit cotton but more delicate, and it molded nicely to her skin. Nomi tied the strings tightly behind her back.

“It suits you well,” Nomi said.

“Thank you.”

“We have no mirrors here.”

“Really?” Dahlia said. She moved side to side, satisfied by the way the fabric gently followed her movements. “Well, I guess that makes sense.”

Nomi curtsied low to the ground, kissing the backside of Dahlia’s hand as she rose. “Now I will leave you to explore our home. I have to prepare the chamber for the next rebirth.”

“Okay.” Dahlia remembered the vast cavern that was the Underground, and she was both excited and nervous to uncover the passageways that had once struck such fear within her. She curtsied in return, with hardly the grace of Nomi’s gesture, and set off down the winding hallway.

After a long, unbroken passageway, the hallway made a sharp left and then dumped out into a much larger vestibule, from which another half dozen

hallways branched. Dahlia found it strangely easier to navigate than the last time she had been to the Underground, and she wondered if this was due to a physical improvement in her night vision, or if it was simply easier to explore without the pressing sense of danger from before.

“She’s awoken,” a woman’s voice said, and Dahlia jumped a little in place.

“Hello?” she called into the shadows.

Dahlia heard the scratch of a match and the whoosh of kerosene greedily eating the flame from the tip. Flames burst inside the glass of a lantern nearby, spilling light across the path ahead. Her eyes began at the lantern and tracked their way up a spindly arm and to a haggard face of a woman she had never seen before, but who appeared to be about her mother’s age. Her grey hair was twisted in a loose bun, and unruly tentacles of hair spewed out over her shoulders.

“Welcome,” she said. “We heard a new one was coming.”

Dahlia stood stuck in place, nervously twisting her fingers together.

“Don’t be shy,” the woman said. “Come with me. We’ve been waiting for you in the other room.”

With no other option but to follow, Dahlia silently kept up with the woman’s long strides as she cut a left through a side door and followed another long hallway past countless empty doorways before ducking through a curtain into the orange glow of a lamp lit room. She set the lantern down by the door.

Dahlia crept through the curtain to find herself greeted by five standing strangers, all wearing variations of the same knotted grey rags. They were dirty, but not nearly as saturated by dust as the nephilim she usually saw on the streets.

The man closest to her right smiled a wide, friendly grin and she realized that it was the dust that made his shaggy hair white, and that he was about the same age as she was.

“Welcome,” he said. “I’m Craig. What’s your name?”

“Dahlia,” she said slowly, her eyes wandering from one smiling face to the next. She never imagined that anyone would be so happy to see her, complete stranger that she was. “Dahlia Ellis.”

“No need for last names anymore,” the woman who’d escorted her in corrected. “We’re all one family when it comes down to it.”

“There’s only one name they call us anyway,” an older man spoke up from the back, combing his thick, frizzy beard with his fingers.

“Oh Frank, let’s not dwell on that,” the woman with the lantern said.

“Just pointing out the truth, Ellen.”

Ellen shrugged. “We try to keep our spirits up. I mean it’s not like there’s anything that we can do about it.”

Dahlia frowned at the constant reminder. “I guess.”

Beside Craig was a painfully thin woman with a heavy accent who introduced herself as Anusha and a short man with long, spiky hair and black eye make up who went by Keitaro. The last person in the room was an adolescent girl whose tangled blonde hair was woven into two braids that snaked down her shoulders. She stood silently as the others introduced her as Emma, a name they’d

given her because she'd refused to provide her own. Maybe it was the braids or the blonde hair, but as Dahlia looked Emma over, she ached for Lucy.

"How long have you guys, you know," Dahlia began, stammering awkwardly as she tried to make her lips form words she despised.

"Been dead?" Anusha asked with a bluntness that made Dahlia take a step back.

"Yeah," she said, lowering her eyes to the carpet.

"Most of us were reborn close together," Ellen answered. She took a seat on a battered leather sofa, and like a congregation the others sat down on the sofas and chairs lining the walls. Dahlia sat perched on the edge of a stool in the corner.

"I was the first," Keitaro said, flipping his bangs forward over one eye. "Then Ellen and Frank and Anusha and Craig."

"Emma was the most recent," Ellen said. "Though I can't tell you how many days ago it was. We have no concept of time under here, no days or nights. Just constant dark."

"Don't you ever go up to the surface?" Dahlia asked. With the way the streets swarmed, it seemed like hardly a single naphil stayed caged underground.

Keitaro shrugged his small shoulders. "Sometimes I guess. It's a long way up from here, and it's easy to get lost. And there's not much up there worth going to see."

Dahlia arched her eyebrows high on her forehead. In retrospect, she was glad she had bothered to pluck them just before she died. "You really feel that way?"

"You will too," Keitaro said somberly. "Just give it time."

"It all looks different," Craig said, shaking his head. "It's something you have to see for yourself. It's not like you remember. There's no color anymore."

"It's mostly the youngest ones who walk around up there. They think they can fit back in," Keitaro said. In the shadow of his bangs, his face was a tiny sliver, and Dahlia felt uncomfortable the more she looked at him. But he wasn't nearly as unsettling as Emma, who had not blinked once since Dahlia had entered the room.

"We're not old, though, not by any stretch," Ellen cut in. "The fact that we feel anything shows you how young we are. That much time spent without pleasure or fulfillment and you quite literally become the walking dead. There's nothing inside anymore."

A shudder coursed through Dahlia's body.

"It happens to everyone," Keitaro added. "Just a matter of time."

The crash of a door being thrown open ricocheted through the hallway and into their little room.

"Where is she?" a deep male voice boomed from somewhere nearby.

"She just awoke." Dahlia recognized Nomi's soft intonations immediately.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. I sent her to go wander."

"Damn it! Nomi, you were supposed to come get me when she woke up."

"She needed time," Nomi said pointedly. "If you care about the girl at all you'd leave her in peace while she adjusts."

“I need to find her.”

“Well...” Nomi gave a loud sigh. “She may have gone off with the others. Try the chambers nearby.”

Footsteps stormed down the hallway, as Dahlia heard her name called over and over in a voice she was just beginning to recognize.

She sprung to her feet and rushed for the door. “Seth?”

“Dahlia!”

The desperation in his voice was like nothing she’d heard before. It seemed little wonder she hadn’t recognized him at first.

“Seth, I’m in here!”

“You know Seth?” Anusha asked sheepishly.

Dahlia looked back over her shoulder to find the young woman’s cheeks were tinged dark red. “Well, yeah,” Dahlia said. “Is he famous here or something?”

Anusha’s blush deepened, and Keitaro scratched his arm with clear irritation. “The girls just think he’s cute. It’s annoying. And he thinks he’s too good to live down here with us, like he’s a human or something.”

“He doesn’t come around much,” Anusha admitted, “but when he does he’s like a phantom. It gives me shivers just watching him walk around.”

“I know what you mean,” Dahlia said, distracted as she waited for Seth to find her down the dark hall. Finally she heard the clomp of his boots closing in.

“Dahlia,” Seth said, emerging breathlessly in the doorway. He was winded and harried; his hair was a tangled disaster, his coat was crooked, and the corner of his collared shirt peeked out from the waistband of his jeans. He looked like he’d been caught in a maelstrom.

“Seth.”

“I’m sorry.” He took her hands, kissing the backsides. Dahlia could hear Anusha muffling a squeal from the corner of the room. “I wanted to be with you when you woke. Nomi wouldn’t have it.”

“Seth, do you know everyone here?” Dahlia turned back, gesturing out towards the others. Anusha tried to hide her blush with her hands, Craig fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair, Ellen gave him a pleasant smile, Emma just stared blankly, Frank looked painfully disinterested, and Keitaro wore a fantastic scowl.

Seth shrugged, as his eyes leapt from face to face. “I’m Seth. Nice to meet you guys.”

The others made brief introductions, though most avoided looking him directly in the eye. Dahlia noted this with curiosity.

“Can I talk to you?” Seth asked afterward, shifting his whole body back to Dahlia. “You know, alone?”

“Nice to meet you guys,” she said to the others. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“It’s not like we have anywhere to go,” Keitaro said.

Seth took Dahlia’s hand in his and led her down the hall until he was satisfied they had come far enough out of earshot.

“I’m so sorry, Dahlia,” Seth said, pulling her to him. She could feel his chest trembling against the side of her face. “This never should have happened.”

“Nomi knew,” Dahlia said into his coat. “She said she knew when she first saw me.”

“How could she have known?”

“I don’t know, but I think this was supposed to happen.” Dahlia swallowed around the lump in her throat. “All that talk about my stupid destiny, and here I am.”

“I held you while you were bleeding, and I had to watch you die in my arms,” Seth exhaled more than spoke, his voice trembling and cracking so hard Dahlia was afraid his throat would start bleeding from the strain. “Knowing there was nothing I could do to save you.”

“I was stupid,” Dahlia said. “But I never thought Law would ever...” She couldn’t even say it.

“I held you after you were gone, but after a few minutes I felt your body starting to move, and when I looked down your skin was burning purple,” Seth whispered, drawing in a few deep breaths before he could continue. “I jumped back away and watched your body disappear in black flames. I ran all the way here, and Nomi was already expecting you. She was preparing your way back.”

“How long was I gone for?”

“Three weeks,” he said. “I slept on the floor outside Nomi’s chamber. I stepped out to talk to Nik for a few minutes when you were reborn.”

Dahlia paled. “Three weeks? My mom! Gavin! They don’t know-”

“They reported you missing after the first week. I saw an article in the paper – Law said you took some money from the apartment and took off with another guy.”

Dahlia struck the wall in front of her so hard her knuckles should have crunched, but the pain was so dull she hardly felt it at all. In fact, the sensation was more annoying than painful. “Damn it, Law! So now the whole world thinks I’m some huge, irresponsible slut!”

Seth’s whole face was screwed up with disdain. “He’s a coward,” he said darkly, clenching his jaw so hard Dahlia could practically hear his teeth straining. She realized it was the first time he’d ever spoken ill of Law.

“Which is funny,” she continued, “since that was always his favorite word for me.”

“People like to project their own problems on others.”

Dahlia brushed her damp hair back from her forehead, anxiously pacing the width of the hallway. “Shit, Seth. I have to go to them. I have to show them I’m okay.”

“No,” Seth said, grabbing her around the wrist. “You can’t let them see you yet. You don’t know how you’ve changed.”

She swatted him away. “I think it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“Seriously, Dahlia. Listen to me. You have no idea what it’s like the first time you come up above ground. It wrecks you.”

She balled her hands into fists, feeling tears of frustration beginning to build in her eyes. “Seth, I need to show them I’m alright. I can’t-”

“But you’re not alright,” Seth interrupted, his own frustration mounting. “Just listen to me, Dahlia! You’re not human anymore, okay? It’s going to take

some time before you realize all the ways you're not, and you can't begin to fake it until you understand that."

"I don't have time," Dahlia said, wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her hand. "Every day I wait is another day they're in pain, and I can't just sit and let that happen! You don't get it, Seth, and maybe that's because your family treated you like shit, but I need to go to them as soon as I find my way out of this place."

His body stiffened, and for a long minute he was silent. Dahlia ached just watching the way he grimaced, like she'd slapped him, but the part of her that was still afraid of his power stayed her tongue.

He finally opened his mouth to say something. She could feel his hesitation, but his face was dark and unreadable, which was even more frightening than if he'd been angry.

But before he could speak, Nomi's gentle voice rang through the hall. "Dahlia?"

Seth turned away from her.

Dahlia heard the rustle of Nomi's linen skirts quickly approaching, along with the jingle of bells from the anklets she wore. She was barefoot and her steps themselves were silent, which made her seem like an apparition as she glided toward them with only rustling and bells to mark her movement.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Nomi said, bowing low. Her face looked even softer in the faint torchlight, as if it had been sculpted from wet terracotta by a master's loving hand.

"What is it?" Seth asked, still facing the wall.

"I'm sorry, Dahlia," Nomi said. Her lips grew taught as she took Dahlia's hand. "Nik demands to see you. He will not take no for an answer."

Dahlia shot a nervous glance back at Seth, but he was intently ignoring her with his hands shoved deep in his pockets so she would not see the way they trembled.

She looked back at Nomi, and the pleading in her faun eyes made Dahlia's defenses quickly crumble. "Okay," she said. "Take me to him."

Nomi nodded and gave her hand a firm squeeze.

With one last look at Seth's stiffened shoulders, Dahlia followed her into the darkness.

CHAPTER 21

The path was nearly pitch black and winding, and Dahlia had completely lost all sense of orientation or direction as she clung to Nomi's cool hand. Nomi's steps did not falter even in the total darkness, and Dahlia was beginning to suspect that she was more than mere mortal herself, though neither angel nor naphil as far as Dahlia could tell. She moved with confidence, as if she had endlessly traced the path between her chambers and Nik's.

"Watch your step up," Nomi said.

The lip was a bit higher than Dahlia had anticipated, and she still banged her shin on it as they stepped up onto another platform.

"I'm okay," Dahlia muttered, flushed with embarrassment. Nomi squeezed her hand again.

The walls around them were no longer stone but curved metal, punctuated occasionally by crosshatched vents. Light streamed faintly from a slatted vent only inches from Dahlia's head, and she found herself ducking as they continued through.

It took her a moment to realize they were walking through old sewer pipes, which had long dried up from disuse, but still retained a slight twinge of sewer musk. Dahlia wrinkled her nose, mentally checking "sense of smell" off on her list of remaining human attributes. Given their living conditions, smell was a sense she would've had less trouble parting with.

Just when she thought the pipe would never end, Nomi warned her to be careful as they stepped back down from the lip. The room they stepped into was massive, but so choked with darkness that Dahlia still felt claustrophobic as she looked in each direction. Drafts from every direction rushed by, and were she still bothered by the cold, she was sure she would've been shivering terribly.

"We're almost there," Nomi said. "His apartment is set up against the far wall."

"Where is this?" Dahlia couldn't resist asking.

"The old water treatment plant," Nomi answered. "Much of their water retention was done underground, leaving caverns like this behind. In the eighties, Nik and his followers connected the plant to the Underground."

Dahlia shook her head in amazement. The nephilim had clearly spent some time clearing out the tunnels they called the Underground, to an extent she never would have imagined. If the Vigil had the slightest inkling of their organization, their sense of urgency to banish the nephilim would have increased tenfold.

It was strange, though. Nephilim had always seemed so isolated in their misery, and she had always imagined that they were all living on the fringes of society. Instead, they seemed to have planted the seeds of their own society. If they could mobilize in mass, who knew what they were capable of?

"So Nik's like the king or something?" Dahlia asked.

"The leader, yes," Nomi answered, "but never a king; Nik wouldn't have it. He died at the turn of the twentieth century in the Bolshevik rebellion."

"No shit."

"It's true; he was a member of the early Labor Party. Unfortunately for Nik, miscommunication and rumor convinced his own friends that he was working to betray them. They executed him before they found out the truth."

"That's terrible."

"It is."

"But why'd he become the leader?"

"Nik realized that the nephilim were not the type of people who could effectively self-govern. He begrudgingly accepted the role of leader when no one else would step up."

"And you really don't think it's gotten to his head?" Dahlia rolled her eyes. "I mean, come on. He *demand*ed that I come and see him?"

“It’s not an ideal position for any person,” Nomi said firmly. “Let’s leave it at that.”

Dahlia was at a loss for why someone like Nomi would be so protective of someone like Nik, raging asshole that he was. She remembered his voice clearly, the malice in his words as he’d sneered at her weakened body. Some gentleman.

Finally they stepped out of the shadows and into a room sectioned off not by walls but by the boundary of light filtering from a paper Chinese lantern overhead.

It was a simple room with a twin-sized daybed, a simple wooden writing desk, an oversized armchair, and a glass chess table hosting a chair at one end and a stool at the other. Hundreds of books of all shapes and sizes stood in colorful columns against the far wall, with no apparent regard to organization or alphabetization. The floor was blanketed with another huge Persian rug, though this one seemed much less worn and threadbare than the rest.

Nik sat behind the desk, writing in rapid strokes with a gold fountain pen. His eyes were fixed downward, his bottom lip raked back by his teeth, and he smoothed his short-cropped beard with the thumb of his other hand as he wrote. His intensity was alluring at first, the way he pressed so hard into the paper she could hear the scratching of the pen’s tip. She saw flashes of keen intellect in his beady black eyes, flashes that were oddly mirrored in the pointed face of the huge silver rat on his shoulder.

Nomi stood silently watching him for a moment, as if waiting for him to feel her presence. Dahlia could not peel her eyes away from him and the rat.

He closed the sentence he was working on with a sharp jab of the pen, and set the pen back on its stand. With a quick flick of his wrist, he screwed the cap back on the jar of ink. He did not close the notebook, but stood slowly, arching his back and yawning like a cat waking from its slumber.

“Welcome to the Underground, Dahlia,” he said without looking up at her. “Imagine my surprise when Nomi said you would be back to join us.”

Dahlia stood sullenly, refusing to acknowledge his greeting or admit that the way he said her name sparked something strange inside her.

“Thank you for bringing her, Nomi,” he said. “I’ll come find you later.”

She bowed to him and slowly turned around to leave, eyeing Dahlia with what looked like a mixture of sadness and jealousy. The sentiment was particularly unflattering on Nomi’s gentle face, and Dahlia was relieved when she disappeared into the shadows.

Her relief evaporated when Nik stepped around his desk, leaning back against it with his palms braced on the surface and his pelvis thrust slightly forward. His stance was predatory, his eyes lowered as they explored the contours of her body.

“Nomi’s dress looks nice on you,” he said. “It fits you better than it did her.”

Dahlia looked down at the grey linen, blushing slightly. “Wait, this is hers?”

“Do you think she clothes everyone who comes through her basin? Most scavenge for rags lying around.”

Nik shook his head with amusement at the corners of his lips, and Dahlia felt her face growing hotter. She knew at once that Nik was the sort of person who could effortlessly steal her power over and over again, just like the queen bees in middle school who always got her best, despite her best defenses.

Dahlia felt like she'd brought a rapier to a machine gun fight.

"You're an asshole," was all she could say.

Nik laughed. "Oh don't sugar coat it, my dear. Tell me how you really feel."

She scowled, blushing furiously.

"Oh, come now," he said, as if he were scolding an insolent child. He stepped over to her and draped an arm around her shoulders. The puffy sleeve of his poet's shirt apparently did well to hide just how thin he was; she was surprised by how frail his arm felt against her neck.

"Even in death, you're too beautiful a creature to wear a scowl like that," he said.

The condescension in his voice was so thick it nearly obscured the compliment entirely, and it took Dahlia a second to realize he had said something kind about her. She craned her neck to stare at him with suspicion, but his face was the perfect mask. He'd had nearly a century to perfect the art of "faking it," which Seth had described to her earlier.

"What do you want from me?" Dahlia asked, nudging her way out of his grasp.

He began to circle around her, looking her up and down with such blatancy she almost found the gesture more absurd than invasive.

"I wanted to see you," he said simply. "You've transitioned well."

"Uh, thanks."

"Even when you lay near death on Nomi's mat, I felt the vibrancy of your spirit. You are a fighter, like I am. You will not dull like the rest of them."

She realized he was getting closer to her with every circle, and she whipped around to each side, trying to face forward. She knew better than to turn her back to a man like him.

"Seth was drawn to you because he likes playing with danger," Nik said firmly. "You represented danger to all of us, with what you survived."

"I still can't believe everyone knew."

"How could we not?"

He withdrew his arm from her and took a step back. She looked away, uncomfortable with the way his eyes burrowed into her, judging her every particle.

"You know," Nik concluded after a moment, "Seth is blind to the power in you. He has no idea of your potential."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just suggesting you might be wasting your time with your present company."

"And who should I be spending it with, then? You?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying that it would be a shame not to pursue the power lying dormant inside you."

"I don't want power," she said.

"Don't waste your time and mine with such a poor lie. Of course you do," he said, crossing his arms in front of him. "There's a fury inside you, and I know you cannot resist it. I've seen it in you even since you were a child."

"Since I was..."

The words unchained something inside her, something she had bound up for so long. Like the flash of a camera, the memories were illuminated suddenly and for only a second, but it was enough to capture an image in her head.

She could see the image clearly, perhaps for the first time, and now that she saw it she knew she could never erase it. In the center of the still frame, a man with black hair and sallow skin wrestled Lucy against the ground as he sucked the life from her body through his parted lips.

She knew his face at once.

"You," Dahlia said.

Nik stepped back, and there was fear in his eyes. He had screwed up, and he knew it.

"Dahlia--"

"It was you, all those years ago."

"I swear--"

"You were the one who ripped my sister away from me." There was no rage in her, no hint of the fury that Nik praised. She felt as bottomless as the shadows that ate away at the corners of the room.

"I knew I could not kill you then. I could never kill you," Nik said, as if the words were an apology.

"I wish you had," she said flatly. "I've been damned ever since."

"Dahlia, come on. Don't you see? The pain of that night has made you what you are."

"No," she said, backing farther away from him. "I've made me what I am. Don't flatter yourself."

"You're foolish," he said. "Young and foolish, and you are bound to make terrible mistakes if you do not realize that."

"Well I guess that's my cross to bear, now isn't it?"

She stuck her middle finger up at him and turned back toward the shadows. "Oh, and don't you ever demand to see me again. I'd rather cut out my own eyes and eat them than take orders from you."

Before he could respond she disappeared into the darkness, mentally cheering herself for the display. The warmth of victory didn't last for long, though. The further she wandered through the huge hall, knowing she had essentially no idea where she was going, the more she remembered just how lost she really was in all this.

When she finally stumbled back into the pipe, she sat down just inside it and hugged her knees to her chest. The tears she had suppressed so well in Nik's chamber finally made their great escape down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Lucy," she said. "Some avenger I am."

She did not leave the pipe until she'd cried herself empty.

It did not take her nearly as long as she thought it would to find an exit. The area around the sewers was teeming with nephilim, most of which lay huddled up against the walls, barely distinguishable from the piles of rags they wore. Their misery was overwhelming, like a stench that crept up in the back of Dahlia's nostrils. She brought a hand up to cover her nose and mouth, but realized the gesture was useless.

Still, they were mostly responsive as she walked by. She could hear the heads turn, feel the eyes rolling up at her from beneath the rags. At nearly every turn she asked for confirmation that she was headed in the right direction, and as if to find some preoccupation from their suffering, the nephilim always replied enthusiastically.

Finally her trek came to an end when she saw the iron bars of a ladder protruding from the cement walls. Careful not to step on her dress, she scaled the ladder to the ceiling and pushed up the manhole cover with one arm.

The first thing she realized was that it was either dawn or dusk; the sun glowed pink on the horizon beneath a dusty blue sky. She pulled herself out of the sewer and replaced the manhole cover, making a mental note of her surroundings. Freight cars laden with boxes were lined up in the stockyard nearby, which was partitioned by a rusting barbed wire fence. A brick factory building stood across the street, whose windows were mostly broken out and gathering dust around the edges of the jagged shards. A fat smoke stack protruded from the rooftop, exhaling its poison into the sky.

Dahlia brushed off her dress and followed the street down and around the building. There was hardly any grass, but mounds of dirt and dead thistles everywhere. It figured that the nephilim made their entrances and exits there; in life it would've taken Dahlia a stiff bet to spend even five minutes by that stockyard.

She tried to memorize the path as she walked past the factory buildings towards the highway. After a handful of blocks, the street names began to look familiar. Lockhart and Cedar was the first intersection marked by signs. She was way the hell uptown, miles from the trendy area where she had spent her last bit of cash the day after quitting her job.

Public transportation did not come out this far, and if it did, she had no money for a bus or any idea where to meet it. With no other option, Dahlia set off downtown on foot, wishing she had bothered to ask Nomi for shoes before leaving the Underground. Her feet did not hurt from the rough ground like they should have, but the unevenness was a bit annoying.

Nothing hurt anymore, she mused as she wandered the twenty-some blocks to civilization without tiring. Nothing ached, or stung, or pinched.

Along the way she sliced her palm on the barb from a fence, just to see what would happen. The cut throbbed as it had in life, but without the accompanying pain, which made it more of a nuisance than anything. A few minutes later, she looked back down at it to find the light gash was gone, and the skin was unbroken again.

Dalia let the hand fall limply beside her. She never thought the day would come when she would miss pain.

Water Street took her by surprise. With no physical markers to measure her exertion, the distance seemed endless. Her arrival in town felt almost haphazard.

As she was walking, the sun had steadily tracked its way up in the sky. Luckily the clouds were dense, and the sunlight had to strain to peer out in between clumps of grey. As a result, the morning was nearly as dark as night, a fact for which Dahlia was surprisingly grateful. The sun was no longer felt nurturing but harsh and blistering, like the third degree lamp of a police interrogation.

Whenever she crossed through pools of escaping sunlight, she found her shoulders instinctively hunching down, as if her body were trying to fold itself up into a tiny origami box. Every atom in her body raged against the light.

“Seth wasn’t kidding; I’m not right,” she murmured bitterly to herself.

No one seemed to notice her as she passed by. For once, men did not turn their heads or bounce subtle glances up and down her body. Granted the humans on the street were mostly rushing to work or getting their children ready for the school bus; they seemed to hardly notice each other in their preoccupation. Still, Dahlia could not shake the feeling that their disregard for her was not simply out of preoccupation. Like a dried leaf rustling across the sidewalk, they simply did not notice her.

With every busy block she passed, she became the city: the cement stoops and iron rails and barred windows and ripped awnings and cracked pavement and dented trash cans overflowing with forgotten garbage. She was all of it, barefoot in her simple grey dress with her brown-black hair loose and wavy down her back. For an outsider, she blended in best of all.

To the east of the numbered city blocks sprawled the residential neighborhoods for those who could afford the luxury of lawns. From there, it was less than a mile to her parents’ house.

Halfway down the quiet cul-de-sac sat the house she had grown up in.

It was a quaint French country cottage of tan stacked stone and blue shutters. The window boxes on better days used to overflow with irises and petunias, which also grew in the beds that flanked the path to the front door. Now the beds were bare and covered crudely in mulch, which made them look like two brown kidneys. The thick panels of ivy creeping up the trellises were the only remaining signs of life. The grass had already dried and yellowed for the season.

As she began to unlatch the gate to the front path, the front door swung open. Dahlia darted quickly below the ivy.

She heard Gavin’s voice first, loud and surly as ever. Gavin didn’t have what they called an “inside” voice.

“Geeze, Mom,” he said, scoffing, “I’m fine. Seriously, I’m not going to get butt raped between here and the corner.”

“You don’t talk to me that way,” Rosalind snapped.

Dahlia could practically hear Gavin roll his eyes. “Whatever. Look, you don’t need to walk me to the bus, okay? I’m sixteen.”

“You don’t have to be such a snot, Gavin,” she said. “Even this neighborhood is getting more dangerous. Patti Allen said a guy tried to force his

way into her house just the other day. She said he was all bugged out, like he was on methamphetamines or something.”

“I’m not scared of some stupid meth head, Mom. He can have my backpack if he wants. Maybe he’ll do my homework.”

“That’s not funny.”

Gavin sighed with exasperation. “You know what, Mom? You’ve been all paranoid since Dahlia disappeared, and it’s driving me crazy. You know what? She probably just got tired of all your bullshit and this stupid city and took off, because that’s what I would do if I could. I bet she didn’t even look back.”

Dahlia heard the sharp smack of flesh striking flesh as Rosalind slapped Gavin hard across the face.

“Fucking a, Mom! That’s child abuse!”

“You listen to me, and you listen good, Gavin. Your sister did not just run off, and I know that because I am her mother, and there are things that mothers just know. Okay?” The anger in her voice was quickly fading into pain.

“Something bad happened, Gav. She’s not okay. I just know. But the police don’t even care. They’re just placating me, like I’m going to sue them or something.”

Gavin’s breathing slowed as he began to calm. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, sniffing back tears. “You’re right. I’m being over protective because I think somehow if I can save you, I can save her.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m sorry, Gavin. Losing a child never gets any easier.”

“Do you think she’s really, you know...”

Rosalind choked out a little sob. “Something in my heart tells me she’s still out there, but I know she’s in pain. I can feel it.”

“I hope she just ran away, Mom. I really do.”

“Me too, Gavin. I just want to wake up from a bad dream and have my baby girls next to me. And-” She broke off, too hysterical to continue.

For a few painful minutes, all Dahlia could hear in the garden were the muffled sobs of her mother and the steady patting of Gavin’s hand against her back. Eventually the tears subsided to sniffles, and she heard her mother blow her nose into a handkerchief.

“Thanks, Gav.”

“No problem. Uh, you can keep it.”

“You need to leave now or else you’re going to be late.”

“Aren’t you going to come with me?”

“No,” she said. “You’re sixteen, and I’m being stupid.”

There was a long pause as they hugged, and then Gavin’s quick footsteps began to clomp down the brick path. “See you later,” he said over his shoulder.

“Have a nice day.”

Dahlia tore away from the house, ducking behind their neighbor’s huge stone mailbox. She watched as Gavin lumbered off towards the end of the cul-de-sac, nearly tripping over his oversized feet as he went.

Once he had disappeared beyond the horizon, she snuck back towards the front door, keeping low so she would not be visible behind the trellises.

Rosalind lingered on the front step, sniffing as she watched Gavin retreat. Dahlia peeked through a hole in the ivy and almost shuddered when she saw her mother.

She had completely fallen apart. Instead of her usual matching track suits, she was wearing a pair of stretched out sweat pants and a t-shirt that was stained by coffee and at least three sizes too big. Her hair was tied back in a knot and much greyer around the temples than Dahlia remembered. Her freckled face was horribly gaunt, and the bags under her eyes drooped like two deflated balloons.

Rosalind blew her nose hard into the handkerchief again, which Dahlia recognized as one of her father's. Gavin must have swiped it before he left. Defiance through imitation.

Dahlia shook her head. She desperately wanted to jump up from the trellis and wave her arms and scream out to her mom, but when she looked back at the hydras slithering down her forearms, she knew she had to stay hidden. Even if she'd had sleeves, there was nothing lost on a mother.

At least if Dahlia had been kidnapped, she would find eventual solace in death. There was no escaping the fate of the nephilim.

After a few minutes, Dahlia heard the front door swing shut.

It took every ounce of her will power to peel herself from the trellis, but she knew she couldn't stay. The house belonged to a neighborhood which belonged to a city which belonged to a world that was not hers. All she had anymore was what was unseen underground. Every place had its dark secret, and Dahlia was part of Avington's.

Dahlia skittered away from the house like a frightened animal and did not stop running until she reached the city blocks. She dried her eyes and began the twenty-five block trek uptown.

As she passed through the rows of trendy boutiques and coffee shops, she let her eyes linger on the elaborate displays, but for once she did not covet a thing behind the glass. Nothing, not even the designer handbags she had once longed for, pleased or interested her.

"And so it begins," she said, swallowing hard.

CHAPTER 22

Consumed by her thoughts, Dahlia made her way past the trains and the stockyard and back down into the sewers of the Underground. She hardly remembered the walk, but somehow she ended up back in the wide vestibule near Nomi's chamber.

She figured she ought to seek out Seth eventually, but she hadn't the slightest idea where to find him. Furthermore, she wasn't ready to tell him that he had been right all along.

Instead she found herself heading back down the side hall to the room that Ellen had first brought her. She ducked under the curtains, trapped so far in her own head that she didn't even see the room or its inhabitants until a familiar voice snapped her back to reality.

"Dahlia Ellis? No way."

Dahlia blinked, turning to find a face she recognized among the nephilim huddled on the sofas. She felt her jaw spill open as she caught sight of the slick purple hair parted at the center and the eyelashes dusted with glitter.

“Raven?”

Raven jumped to her feet, stepping forward expertly on precarious-looking five inch pumps. “I can’t believe it! I never thought I’d see you here, Miss Vigil.”

Dahlia stood gaping, feeling like her brain had been set to overclock. “How the? How didn’t? I mean... I.”

“Oh sweetie,” Raven said, pulling her in a tight hug. “When you first came into the bar, given what you did and all, I was totally prepared to hate you. But you were such a total doll! I wasn’t about to let anything ruin our friendship.”

“I must be the worst fucking Vigil member ever,” Dahlia said, shaking her head.

Raven laughed, patting her back gently. “Don’t be hard on yourself, darling. Plenty of us masquerade as the living. More than any of you kids know.”

“Yeah, apparently.”

“Which reminds me,” Raven said, adjusting the collar of her purple leather jacket. As she raised her arms, the silver sequined tank she wore lifted to reveal hard, square abs. “My shift starts early tonight. Care to join me for a little girl time? Drinks on me.”

“Sure,” Dahlia said after a second’s deliberation. “I’ll probably skip on the drinks, though. I have the feeling they won’t do much...”

“Oh,” Raven said, reddening with embarrassment, “I’m so sorry, doll. I forgot. I’m just used to, you know-”

“Me being alive?”

She nodded hesitantly.

“Yeah,” Dahlia said. “And you think it’s hard for *you* to adjust to.”

“Look,” Raven said, chewing on a fake red nail as she looked Dahlia over. “My room’s down the next hall, and I think I have some things you could wear. I mean, if you want to. I think my tighter stuff might fit you.”

Dahlia looked down at her grey linen dress and realized that Raven had a point. “Oh. Uh, sure.” Anything to blend in, right?

“Alrighty, dear. I’ll come get you a little before I leave,” Raven said, turning and heading towards the door in a cloud of glitter. “Will you still be here?”

Dahlia shrugged. “Probably, I mean, not like there’s much else to do.”

“You can always catch up on your reading,” Raven laughed, gesturing towards a bookshelf tucked between two chairs.

“Sure.”

“Well toodles!” With a loud smack of her lips, Raven disappeared beyond the curtains in the doorway.

Dahlia looked at the others in the room, but did not recognize any of the people. They were sitting silently, some reading tattered paperbacks, others simply staring off into space. With a sigh, she bent over beside the bookshelf and fished through the volumes jammed inside. Finally she settled on an old leather bound edition of *Paradise Lost* and took a seat on the sofa across from the door.

"I forgot how hot the devil is in this thing," she mused to herself as she flipped through the first book.

"Didn't you hear? He's hot as hell," the woman next to her cackled. Dahlia shook her head slowly. It was going to be a long eternity.

Dahlia had finally gotten to the fall of man when Raven poked her head into the room. "Hey baby girl. Come with me."

"Is it time already?"

"Told you, time flies when you're having fun."

Dahlia smirked, closing the book and jamming it back into the middle of the overstuffed shelf. "Yeah, something like that."

Raven had changed into a fireman red jumpsuit and enormous red vinyl pumps, which she wore effortlessly.

Dahlia envied the ease with which Raven wore a variety of looks no matter how outrageous, as if she had been born in them. She was a true chameleon at heart; that was probably why Dahlia had never figured her out. That and Raven, despite the overly ostentatious persona she wore, had a purity of spirit unlike any Dahlia had encountered, save for perhaps Pierre.

She followed her silently down the hall until they came to a door with a sparkly "R" taped above the handle.

"Step into my dressing room," Raven said, flinging the huge door open as if it weighed nothing.

The room was almost the exact opposite of what Dahlia had been expecting. Nothing glittered, nothing was beaded or feathered, and the colors were muted and mostly earth tones. A woven Tami mat was rolled out across the stone floor, and the furniture – a daybed, a vanity, and two matching chairs – were made of bamboo with simple lines. A ceramic incense censer sat on a shelf above the bed, and the walls were decorated by scrolls and wooden fans painted with scenes from fishing villages and beaches with huge rolling waves. The bulging rack of clothing against the far wall was mostly hidden behind a curtain.

"Holy day spa," Dahlia remarked as she drank in the surroundings.

Raven laughed. "You can't glitter and be gay all the time. I needed a little Zen space, so I took over this room."

"Does everyone have a room here?"

"Only the ones who want one," Raven said. "Believe me, it's not like we're strapped for space."

"Do we sleep?" Dahlia asked, gesturing to the daybed. "I mean, sorry to ask, but I noticed Nik and Seth have beds, and to be honest I'm still as wide awake as when I first woke up."

Raven smiled sadly, taking a seat at the end of the bed and running her hand over the forest green comforter. "That won't go away, except after a while you won't feel quite as awake as just..." She paused, carefully considering her words in a manner that seemed terribly uncharacteristic of her. "Existent."

"So I won't get tired," Dahlia said, shifting her weight around awkwardly before finally settling down into one of the chairs beside the bed.

“No, but you’ll train yourself to sleep. We all do. It’s the best way we know to make the time pass.”

“You know it’s funny,” Dahlia said with a sigh. “When I was in college I used to wish I didn’t have to sleep. I mean, damn, just think about what I could get done with those extra seven or eight hours a day. I thought I would be unstoppable.”

“This is sort of the cruelest irony,” Raven said. “Only in death does so much of life seem farcical.”

“I guess we’re as postmodern as it gets.”

Raven chuckled and threw a pillow at her. “Let’s not get too literary here, Miss Academic.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Raven said, but the smile was fading quickly from her face. “Things we take as absolutes in life – race, class, gender – they’re just illusions at the end of the day. It becomes painfully obvious down here when the dust settles and everybody’s broken and dirty.”

“They say death is the great equalizer,” Dahlia mused.

“But we’re not dead,” Raven said. “So it’s only partially true. It’s not that death equalizes as much as points out the inequalities of life in the first place. You realize the playing field is as hilly and covered in ruts as a crappy golf course.”

“We’re still people,” Dahlia said with a start, as if the idea had only just occurred to her.

“Of course we are,” Raven said dryly. “Or if you prefer, ‘formerly viable individuals.’ I think that one’s my favorite. Or maybe ‘cardiologically challenged citizens.’ It’s a toss-up, really.”

“‘Homeostatically suspended persons?’”

“Oh, that’s a good one. Just whatever you do, don’t you dare drop the z-word.”

Dahlia chuckled despite herself. “I take it that’s not very well received around here?”

“Well we’ve heard them all,” Raven said, rolling her eyes. “All the human euphemisms – nephilim, fiends, zombies, undead; they get old, you know?”

“I can imagine.”

“It’s not like it matters much, though.” Raven stood up, crossing over to the vanity and picking up one of the photographs that lined the back shelf. She caressed the glass gently with the tip of one fingernail. “People here have alarmingly little self-reference, but can you blame them? How can you reconcile a self anymore when the world you’ve always known doesn’t want you?”

Dahlia bowed her head. “I understand,” she said.

“Here,” Raven said, bending over to hold the photograph in front of Dahlia’s face. “Look familiar?”

It was a portrait of a man sitting uncomfortably in a stiff checkered suit, posing for the camera with a smile that looked more like a wince. The backdrop was one of those blue abstract screens of professional photographers. Dahlia recognized the sea foam colored eyes immediately, though the receding brown hair and thick eyebrows seemed foreign and out of place.

“My college senior portrait,” Raven said. “1983.”

“Wow,” Dahlia said, unable to resist staring into those miserable, yet enchanting green eyes. “You looked so... unhappy.”

“And I was. Since I could remember I’d been stuck in that stranger’s body.” Raven handed Dahlia the photograph and began to pace uncomfortably around the small room, though there was hardly anywhere to go.

“But you’re okay now, right? I mean you’re a, I mean-”

“A woman?” Raven finished. “I wish.”

“Oh.” Dahlia tucked the photograph into her lap, feeling the urge to see how much of her foot she could fit into her mouth.

“It’s okay. I should be. I should’ve been right years ago. But I had jack shit for money and I was desperate, Dahlia. You can’t imagine.”

“What happened?” she pressed gently.

“I went to a cheap clinic in Nuevo Laredo; they said they could do the surgery for the two grand I had on me. There wasn’t even an anesthesiologist. I should’ve said no, but I was at my wit’s end, Dahlia. It was either that or a kiss from the revolver in the shoebox under my bed.”

Raven was growing more anxious and agitated and nearly doubled over with the pain that the memories unlocked. “I went through with it, I shouldn’t have, but I did. Something happened during surgery, and I lost too much blood, and the doctor couldn’t get me to a hospital before I bled out, or he didn’t want to go to the trouble. I couldn’t really tell. Anyway, I died on the table.”

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia said, but each word felt like a blow to the chest. To think that during their years of friendship Raven had hidden that trauma so expertly.

She had never cared for postmodernism as a philosophy in college, but Dahlia had to admit that its philosophers were onto something when they hailed satire as the highest art form.

“So now I’m not a he or a she,” Raven said. “I’m a thing. My genitals are mutilated and unrecognizable.”

“But you know what?” The way Raven was grinning made Dahlia feel exhausted, even though she knew better. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Down here there’s no pleasure in sex and we sure as hell can’t procreate, so what I have downstairs couldn’t matter less. Gender is an abstraction of a living, reproducing society, after all.”

“I’m so sorry, Raven. I had no idea.”

“There’s no need to feel sorry, sweetie,” Raven said. It was clear she was beginning to calm down. Her wandering had slowed, and her voice no longer trembled with agitation. “It’s too late for apologies or regrets; I’ve learned that by now. They’re just other remnants of the world of the living.”

Dahlia was beginning to see sparks of the Raven she knew, who wore outrageousness as a cape in the fight to save the world from mediocrity, or so Dahlia had thought. At the end of the day, though, everyone was the same. Every fight, when it came down to it, was a fight for the self, against the hands of time.

But without time or self, there was no fight. It was no wonder the nephilim sat huddled in the filth of their own rags, nearly as lifeless as the stones in the walls. And it was no wonder the living loathed and feared them so deeply.

“Ugh, this is depressing,” Raven said, shaking her whole body as if to ward off the melancholy that had settled in the room. “Let’s get you made over stat, girl, and then blow this scene.”

Dahlia couldn’t agree more.

Less than an hour later by Raven’s watch they found themselves at the club.

After a fitting conducted under Raven’s careful eye, Dahlia had been shoved into a tight vinyl mini dress with electric blue lacing up the sides. She wore black shiny peek-toe pumps and fishnet stockings, and despite her initial arguments, had let Raven paint her face with enough make up to rival a geisha.

As she passed windows and other reflective surfaces, she had to admit that she looked good, though. She was vampiric with her pale skin almost blue in the moonlight and the shadows heavy around her eyes, which were darkened with black powder and thick eyeliner. Her pale irises seemed almost white in contrast, and that much eerier.

When Dahlia sat down at the bar, she ordered a gin and tonic out of habit. Better to keep something in front of her to hold on onto.

The vinyl gauntlets she wore up to her elbow were itchy and cumbersome but necessary to mask the hydras, whom she had jokingly nicknamed Snow White and The Seven Dwarves, with each head on her right arm named after a separate dwarf. The nicknames were Raven’s idea, which she had suggested as a way of coping with the whole intrusiveness of the nephilic rebirth thing. Raven’s own hydras were Thelma and Louise.

For the first hour or so they made fluffy conversation, occasionally dipping into celebrity gossip and people-watching, but Dahlia could not shake the image of Raven lying bleeding and mutilated on a dirty clinic bed in Mexico. The world had not wanted her when she was a woman in a man’s body, and now that she was a naphil, the living were no more receptive.

Raven intersexed for eternity when all she’d wanted was her real body, Seth with his antagonistic mix of Anglo and Indian blood, Nik who fought for freedom only to be shot by his own men, and Dahlia branded from childhood by the death of her sister and guilt of her own survival: none of them had lived in a world that was right for them. And now that they were the most fundamental contradictions of nature – the living dead – the change did not seem so significant. Perhaps their souls had been marked for damnation from the start.

“Look,” Raven said, polishing the bar top with a rag until it squealed. “I’m on the clock for the night, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have some fun. Just be careful, okay?”

Dahlia looked up from the gin she hadn’t touched and shrugged. “I mean, I don’t want to ditch you.”

“Honey, it’s my job to stand here and look pretty. Besides, there’s a group of tall dark and handsome that keep coming over, and not that you’re cramping my style or anything...” She gave her a wink, and Dahlia took the hint.

“Right. I’ll see you in a few,” she said, pulling herself up from the barstool. Raven waved and cleared her glass away.

Rolling her eyes but unable to shake her grin, Dahlia wandered through the crowd to the dance floor, where the music that blasted from the speakers was so loud that Dahlia felt like she was inhaling it when she opened her mouth. It was the usual sweaty mess of bodies gyrating and occasionally piercing themselves on spikes from another’s outfit. The blood dripping down slick limbs only added to the ambience in its own way.

Dahlia danced on the fringe of the crowd, and occasionally she would feel the hands of drunken men pulling her up against stiff leather crotches. In those cases, she would smile apologetically, gesture to a “boyfriend” among the faceless crowd, and disappear into the sea only to reemerge safe on the other side.

That strange sort of dance continued for a few hours before Dahlia got sick of taking elbows to the ribs and wiping other people’s sweat from her face. She was far from ready to go back to the underground, though.

She shoved her way through the crowd like a carp fighting its way upstream and followed the red-faced people outside to the back patio. She had never been out back, mostly because it didn’t provide much of a strategic position to watch for the threat of nephilim. Now she was that threat, moving silently through the crowd like a plague, enviously eying the heaving and groaning of the mortals who knew pleasure better than they knew themselves.

The patio was large but mostly empty, and though Dahlia could not feel the temperature change, she felt immediately refreshed. She leaned up against the railing, letting the breeze between the buildings dry the sweat caught in the lines of her face.

“Some night, huh?” a man spoke up.

“Oh what?” She snapped to, turning her head this way and that to figure out who had spoken to her.

Her eyes settled on a man leaning against the rail to her immediate right. He was a few inches shorter than she was, though she was cheating with the huge pumps, but well dressed in an Armani suit that Dahila knew was no knock off. His hair was slicked back but not greasy; his eyes and skin had just enough of a dark sheen to make him exotic. His goatee was trimmed expertly and perfectly even. Everything about him, down to his posturing, seemed sleek and expensive but altogether strange in a club like the Bat Cave. Dahlia tried not to let herself stare.

He withdrew a silver cigarette case from his pocket and nudged it toward her. “Cigarette?”

“Um, sure,” she said. She wasn’t sure why she’d said yes, other than out of a craving to imitate habits she’d once cursed. She took a cigarette from the case, fingering it idly at first. It was one of the long ones, which she’d never smoked because they were too expensive and took longer to finish than her cigarette breaks usually allowed.

He struck a match and offered it towards her, and Dahlia almost had to remind herself to lean forward and catch the tip of the cigarette in the flame. Once it was lit, she took a long drag, but the smoke was stale and dry in her lungs. She exhaled without any hint of the nicotine rush she had known in life, but the smell remained.

“My name is Rami,” the man said with a sideways grin, lighting his own cigarette.

“Dahlia,” she said. “Thanks for the smoke.”

“My pleasure. May I ask if you come here often?”

Dahlia looked down at Raven’s shiny vinyl dress and snickered. “Yeah, uh, I guess I do. I mean I used to be here a lot more, it’s just things have gotten kind of busy.”

Rami listened to her speak with his head cocked, as if she were presenting fascinating scientific data. His dark eyes were narrow and intense, but not in the way that Seth’s were intense. They were sharper, keener, but lacking his raw physical power.

Dahlia found a man like him somehow much more intimidating.

“So yeah, I guess my answer is sort of?” she said.

“I must confess I haven’t been here before. I’m new to town,” Rami said with a polite smile. “I moved here a couple weeks ago from Dubai.”

“Dubai?” Dahlia couldn’t help gawking. “No shit! Do you live on like an island shaped like a palm tree or something?”

He laughed and shook his head, and the earnestness of his laughter was warm like a bowl of homemade soup, and Dahlia decided she liked this guy. “No, just a plain old apartment on a plain old block,” he said. “All of it was quite disappointingly square.”

“You speak English really well,” she said, feeling herself naturally beginning to lean into him. There was something infectious about his energy, something that made her feel light.

“Oh thank you. I’m not unique, though. Most everyone in Dubai speaks English, at least as of the late economic expansion.”

“Heh,” Dahlia scoffed, “some people here can hardly speak English properly, and it’s our mother tongue.”

For what was felt like a couple of hours she listened to him speak about his life, bombarding him with questions that he answered enthusiastically, as if she were doing him a favor by asking. He was the youngest of five brothers born into luxury because of his father’s business ties to Middle Eastern oil. He’d gone to boarding school at Eton where he’d discovered a fondness for polo, which he still played religiously some ten years later.

All the while she had managed rather effectively to deflect the questions he politely posed to her in return. She had practically his entire life’s story and as far as he knew, she was just some local aspiring graduate student in between jobs. He did not ask her if she had a boyfriend.

The longer they spoke, the longer she realized that she really, really liked this guy. In fact, there was something about his presence that soothed her in a way she had scarcely known before. She wanted to stay next to him for the rest of the

night, not necessarily even talking or touching, but just being close enough to feel whatever it was that seemed to radiate from his pores like a cool white light.

He seemed to have other plans, though. Just as he finished describing his favorite of his father's horses, a sleek appaloosa named Jezebel, he took her by the tip of the chin and kissed her mouth.

The touch, soft as it was, unlocked a sudden frenzy of hunger and desperation inside Dahlia. She grabbed the back of his head with both hands and wrenched him in tighter to her, kissing his lips as if she were sipping from an ambrosial fount.

He struggled at first against her, perhaps out of surprise, but began to reciprocate with the same heightened passion. She felt the energy rising, and pleasure branching out through her body like IV fluid flowing through her veins.

In an instant she had gone from feeling utterly numb to alight with the most incredible sort of euphoria, which she couldn't imagine even heroin users felt when they got high. In her thirst, she did not notice how Rami had begun to weaken in her arms, or how his face was slack and pale, his eyes staring out blankly over her shoulder. She also did not notice her own lips, moving as she spoke words that she did not know the meaning of, but words that felt as natural to her as her own name.

"Dahlia!" Raven called frantically from the doorway, sprinting over to where they stood.

The trance was broken just long enough for Dahlia to realize that something was wrong. Rami was hardly breathing, and she was afraid that if she let go of him he would topple over the railing.

"What have I done to him?" Dahlia said, clutching his sagging body to her chest. "What the fuck have I done?"

"Calm down," Raven said gently, stepping up behind Rami and supporting his back with her arms. "We need to get him sitting down in a chair."

Together they guided him to one of the metal patio chairs, and Raven disappeared for a moment to fetch a glass of water.

Rami was moaning lethargically, and drool had begun to leak from the corner of his mouth. Dahlia was hesitant to touch him, but finally let herself wipe it away with her fingers, keeping her touch as light and quick as possible.

"I'm so sorry," she said to the semi-conscious man, unsure as to whether he even heard her or not.

The thirst, which had moments ago seemed so euphoric, now struck Dahlia with cold terror. She had nearly harvested a man's life, even without meaning to, because every fiber of her body was death, and death craved life as plants craved water. It was an unwritten principle of entropy; just as order constantly sought chaos, dull particles sought those with a vibrant charge. It made sense when she thought about it, but the logicity did little to mask the horror of it all.

She had become the monster that she had feared as a child. Raven had not misspoken when she said the cruelest ironies of life became far too apparent in death.

“Here,” Raven said as she returned, lifting the edge of the glass to Rami’s pallid lips. “Drink this and take slow, deep breaths.”

He complied and sipped the water as carefully as he could, occasionally coughing as stray drops made their way down the wrong pipe. By that point some color had begun to return to his face. The moans he made were beginning to sound like consonants and vowels, though Dahlia still had difficulty making out actual words.

“What happened?” Rami managed to iterate after a long period of recovery.

“I don’t know,” Dahlia stammered.

“You are dehydrated,” Raven broke in. “You shouldn’t be out drinking without lots of water, young man. You almost fainted.”

“Oh,” Rami said, smiling sheepishly like a scolded boy. “I guess I should be more responsible in the future.”

Once they were confident that he could stand and move on his own, Dahlia and Raven excused themselves to Rami and made their way back toward the bar. Rami did not ask Dahlia her phone number, though she could tell he was itching to ask her something. She followed Raven out before she could find out what that was.

“Holy shit,” Dahlia said once they were back inside.

“Now you know why we keep to ourselves,” Raven replied sternly. “I told you to be careful.”

“I didn’t know that’s what you meant! Fuck, I almost killed a man, Raven.”

“Keep your voice down.” She let herself back in behind the bar and grabbed her purse from below the countertop. “My shift’s done, sweetie. Let’s head back home.”

“Raven, I just want to know: does this make me a bad person?”

Raven shook her head, exhaling a heavy sigh through her shiny red lips. “Darling, it’s what we are. We thirst for the living because we want their lives. It’s not good or bad; it just is.”

Dahlia accepted the explanation without further argument, but she felt deeply unsatisfied. How could Seth have put himself through the agony of being with Dahlia, constantly hungering for her life’s energy? So many things about him still baffled her, despite the sacrifices she had made and would continue to make for him.

As they walked back, Dahlia found herself eager to return to the Underground. At least there she would not face the constant temptation of the living, even if it meant eternity spent less than comfortably numb. It was the least penance she could do.

CHAPTER 23

“I’m a monster,” Dahlia said from the doorway.

Seth looked up from the book in his lap, furrowing his eyebrows when he saw the distress in her bloodshot eyes. “What’s wrong?”

He was sitting alone in one of the empty rooms along the hallway in a simple wooden chair that he'd dragged over. When Dahlia got back to the Underground, Nomi had told her that he was sitting there waiting for her to return.

"I almost did it, Seth," Dahlia said shakily. "If Raven hadn't interrupted me, I would be a killer."

He slammed the book shut so hard she gave a little startled jump.

"Dahlia, I'm so sorry," he said, standing up and pulling her close to him in one swift motion.

"It was like nothing I've ever felt, Seth. I felt like, I don't know. Like I was in paradise."

"It is paradise," he said, stepping back and wiping the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "It's the closest we have to feeling alive again."

"I wanted to kill him," Dahlia said. "I actually really wanted to take his life. What's wrong with me?"

"We don't do it because we're bad," Seth said, looking away from her. His face darkened like a shade had passed over him, and for a brief moment he would not meet her eyes. "That's another reason so many of us stay away from the sun. Daylight means people which means temptation to kill. We may be dead, but we're not heartless."

"So that's why they-" Dahlia corrected herself hesitantly, "*we* always look so miserable and defeated."

"Well what would you choose? Misery or pleasure at the cost of other people's lives?"

She and Seth both knew the answer. He pulled her back into his arms, stroking the length of her hair with one hand. Occasionally his rings hit a snag on tangled hair, but there was of course no pain.

"But those nephilim in the carnival," Dahlia said, letting her hands wander over the stiff fabric of his coat.

"Not everybody is good in life. Why should death make any difference?"

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. "You should've seen the way that girl spoke to me. There was something missing inside of her, like something was broken. I think the hunger drove them mad."

"It happens," Seth said. "Covens that try to break away from the Underground always seem to go crazy in the end."

"What is it about this place that keeps us sane?"

"That's easy. Nomi."

"Nomi?" Dahlia said, chewing on her lower lip as she pictured the other woman with her curly hair bouncing freely about her shoulders. She was beautiful but in an ethereal way, and Dahlia always had the feeling she was much older than she appeared. "Oh, wait that's right. She did say something to me once about being able to soothe th- us."

"Nomi has powers way beyond ours. I can't even try to say I understand them."

"So what is she? Mortal? Immortal? There aren't any hydras on her arms."

"She's Gaia," Seth said simply. "She's the earth and the air and water. She's the mother."

Dahlia was dumbstruck. She pulled her way out of his arms and stepped back, goggling at him with disbelief. But the seriousness in Seth's face pressed down on her, and she could almost feel her body getting heavier, like a huge stone had been rolled onto her shoulders.

"Okay, okay. So you're serious."

"At some point, and for reasons I can't possibly understand, she fell in love with Nik," Seth said. "She told him incredible things, stuff you wouldn't believe if I told you. I barely believed him, until the pool..."

Seth opened his mouth to say something else, but suddenly clammed up. He shook his head, as if he had already told her too much and would not let himself risk another word.

Dahlia, who had been hanging on every syllable, felt like the projector cord had been yanked out right at the climax. "Come on, Seth," she said, bouncing up and down anxiously on the balls of her feet. "Until what pool?"

He shook his head again, and made a locking motion with his hand and then tossed the invisible key over his shoulder.

Dahlia groaned. "Come on! What pool are you talking about?"

"I shouldn't have told you about Nomi," Seth said.

"Why? Wasn't I going to find out eventually?"

"No one knew beside Nik and I. He swore me to secrecy."

"Come on, Seth." She was practically pleading at this point. "For better or for worse, you already let it slip We're in this together, Seth. What's the harm in telling me?"

"Plenty," he said with agitation, turning away from her. He stood in the doorway obscuring the light from the hallway like a massive black monument. "If I tell you, you'll insist on- no. I'm going back to my apartment."

"Damn it, Seth!" She struck him in the back as hard as she could, with strength that surprised her. He doubled over, more astonished than injured, but when he looked back at her his eyes were black slits.

She felt a chill rush up her back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have."

"I'm not going to fight you," he said, straightening up. "But I can't let you destroy yourself."

"Please don't leave," she said, voice trembling like a scorned child's.

"Please. Help me, Seth. I almost killed a man today just to feel something. I can't do this alone."

The tears had begun their silent trek down her cheeks again and splattered onto her grey dress. She did not bother wiping them away anymore.

He stood for a long time in the doorway, staring off into the shadows behind her and clenching his jaw so tightly his neck looked like a bundle of thick, bulging ropes. His mouth was screwed up in a tormented grimace.

"Fine," he said. "I've already come this far into the deep. I might as well let you choose."

"Thank you," Dahlia said, but Seth turned back away from her.

"Follow me," he said.

When they crossed the vestibule, Dahlia realized they were making a beeline for Nomi's chamber. Seth kept looking over his shoulder and stopping, drawing a finger to his lips and straining to listen for the sounds of motion. Eventually they crept up to the door, which was closed, and Seth pressed his ear up against the wood. After a few seconds, he stepped back and rapped against the surface with his knuckles.

There was no response.

"Nomi?" he called, careful not to let his voice echo through the hallway.

"Are you there?"

Silence.

Finally satisfied, he produced an ornate brass key from one of the many pockets of his coat. It had to be at least four inches long and obscenely heavy. Dahlia wondered if Seth even felt it in his pocket.

The door unlocked with a soft click, and he pushed it open just slowly enough so that the hinges did not creak.

After poking his head through the doorway and glancing quickly about the room, he gestured for Dahlia to follow him inside. He shut the door behind them.

With no lamp lit inside, Dahlia had expected to find herself in complete darkness. Instead, the room was lit by a dim greenish light that radiated from the basin at its center, which still steamed and bubbled like a living swamp. The light came from no discernible source – no light bulb or fiber optic or anything – but from some other world perhaps, or maybe some other dimension.

"Do you know what that is?" Seth asked, gesturing towards the basin.

"That's the Heart of Darkness," Dahlia said, recalling Nomi's words.

"That's where I was reborn."

"It's where we're all reborn," Seth said. "Whether it's our first rebirth or our fifth, we all come through those waters. They're the waters of life, and Nomi is their keeper."

"So you mean this is what happens when the Vigil slice and dice us?"

"Eventually, yes. We always come back here."

"Damn, talk about a respawn point," Dahlia said. Seth cocked his head in confusion, but she dismissed the comment with a wave. "Don't worry about it."

"Look," Seth said, hushing her back to a whisper. "We have to make this quick, because if Nomi catches us in here we're done for. When I ran into her earlier, she was on her way to see Nik, so I figured she'd be busy for awhile, but..."

"Okay, so what is it you wanted to tell me?"

"Uh, okay. So bear with me here." He took a step closer in towards the pool and beckoned for her to approach too.

"You remember how I said that the nephilim have to choose between misery or pleasure at the cost of human life?"

Dahlia nodded.

"Yeah, well, what if I said you didn't have to choose?"

"You mean-"

"These waters are basically the essence of life. Do you catch my drift?"

“So it would be like eating a thousand souls! But minus the living victims,” Dahlia said, squeezing her hands so tightly she was surprised she didn’t snap her fingers in half.

“Exactly. But you can’t drink too much, that’s what Nik said. Otherwise, well, I don’t know. Something really bad would happen.”

“So how much do I drink?”

“Hold on,” Seth said, shoving his arm out between her and the basin, as if he feared she would dive headfirst into it. “Who said you’re drinking anything?”

“Uh, Seth, you basically just explained that this stuff saves me an eternity full of wailing and gnashing of teeth. Do you honestly think I’d even think twice?”

“It’s not that simple,” he said sternly. “There are consequences. They’re... they’re sort of severe.”

“And eternal numbness isn’t?”

“Dahlia, please. See? This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“No, no I understand,” Dahlia said, throwing her hands up and taking a few steps back from the steaming pool to satisfy him. “Everything has its consequences. But just tell me one thing and for fuck’s sake be honest with me: have you drank from this?”

“Yes,” Seth admitted, bowing his head toward the ground.

“Look at me,” she said, taking him by the lapels of his trench coat. He hesitantly brought his eyes up to meet hers. “You and I are in this together, okay? And whatever this does to you, even if it’s really horrible and gruesome and icky, I want it too. I want all your pain and pleasure, okay? I want everything. I love you.”

He cupped her cheeks in his hands, tangling his fingers in her hair. “I love you too,” he said, drawing her face close and kissing her.

“Then let me follow you,” she said against his lips.

“We have to hurry then,” he said, releasing her. “Cup your hands together and fill them with water and drink. No more than two handfuls, okay?”

“Okay.”

She knelt down beside the basin, and as she leaned over the water’s surface, the steam was so thick it forced her eyes closed. She reached down with cupped hands until she felt them submerge into the warm bath, whose water was so light it hardly felt like water at all. When she raised her hands, she had to peek between swollen eyelids just to make sure they were really full.

“Quick now,” Seth said from above her. “Drink twice without thinking about it. Then we have to go.”

Without further hesitation, she brought her lips to the heels of her hands and drank down the water in a couple gulps. Her entire throat was tingling, like she had swallowed a bottle of Listerine, but she forced herself not to be distracted by the sensation. With her eyes still pressed shut, she plunged her hands into the water for another cupful, which she drank even quicker than the first.

She tried to stand up, but her knees buckled underneath her.

Seth grabbed her under the arms, pulling her to her feet, but they too failed her. Her legs collapsed underneath her like limp rags.

“Alright, Dahlia. I don’t think I have a choice,” he said and slung her over his shoulder like a caveman’s trophy.

He carried her easily as if she weighed nothing and managed to lock the room up again with one hand while he held her up on his shoulder with the other. Once they were safely in the vestibule, Seth put his hands around her waist and tentatively eased her to the ground.

“Can you stand?”

“I think so,” she said.

He lowered her down, placing more weight on her feet until she was almost standing by herself. Once it seemed clear that her legs would not buckle again, he drew his hands away and inched back.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Let’s go back to a room to talk,” he said, eyes darting back and forth across the room. “I don’t want to be overheard.”

Hand-in-hand they wandered down one of the halls until they came upon an unlocked room. It was simply furnished, but still furnished, with a wide white futon and a couple of chairs. Seth closed the door behind them and latched the lock.

Dahlia sat down on the edge of the futon, grabbing ahold of the sheets as waves of nausea racked through her. She was horribly motion sick, but welcomed the sensation after what felt like weeks of nothing. The world spun around her, like it had those times in college she’d kept drinking way past her limit. Closing her eyes did little to stave off the feeling.

“Holy shit,” she said. “How long does this part last?”

“Not long,” he said. “You’ll feel dizzy and weak and sick for a little bit, but your body is sort of getting a make over. Just give it time.”

He sat in a chair across from her, watching patiently as she writhed on the blankets. The pain was finally miserable to the point that Dahlia no longer embraced it and began to wonder just what exactly she had gotten herself into.

But then it ended as abruptly as it had begun. The world stopped spinning off its axis, and the five Seths merged into one, and she sat up, clutching the stones in the wall for support.

Out of a hunch, she struck her knuckles hard against the wall and recoiled, whimpering in pain. “It hurts,” she said to Seth. “It hurts!”

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg,” he said.

“I’m back. I feel like myself,” she said, practically squealing with excitement. She clapped a hand over her heart but felt no movement, to her slight disappointment.

“It won’t bring you back to life,” Seth said. “But... well, you’ll feel again.”

She looked at him and for the first time in a long time felt like she was really seeing him, the man clenching his hands together, brooding and hunched over in a chair that was slightly too small for him. His wavy hair was swept back over his shoulders, lustrous and dark as the eyes that could rouse everything from terror to desire in her.

He stood up, brushing himself off and taking a seat next to her on the futon.

She trembled as she watched him looking at her; she could feel his eyes tracking gently over her flesh. She usually abhorred vulnerability, but for some reason she wanted to be bare in front of him. She wanted to turn herself inside out if she could and expose to him the parts hidden deepest inside her, even those that she herself did not know.

He leaned in and kissed her on the lips, and the electricity she had felt at his touch once again arced down her spine, like impulses firing from synapse to synapse. He kissed his way across the line of her jaw, and she was his again.

She clung to him as they tore at each other, peeling away their clothes and burrowing their way towards the center of the futon. She looked up at him crouched above her, and without his shirt she saw the full extent of the tattoos that covered his body. Across his pectoral muscles, she made out the words, *ad maiorem dei gloriam*.

“For the greater glory of the Creator,” he said, following her eyes to his chest.

She meant to comment on the irony, but she was quickly lost when his hands pinned her wrists up against the bed and he was kissing his way across her collarbone. She could feel the thick muscles in his thighs straining against her, as hot as the blood that pumped through living veins.

Whatever force had burdened Seth in his apartment had dissipated between them. Dahlia finally knew him entirely for what he was, because she was what he was, and she was now of his flesh. The mystery had fled, but not the intrigue.

She made love to him with a passion she didn’t think herself capable of, but he had unchained something inside of her and she was ravenous. Every movement of his hips was ecstasy, locking them together tighter and tighter until she could hardly distinguish her own body from his. She cried out and he kissed her lips, and she tasted traces of blood on his tongue.

When their bodies could take no more they passed out on the bed side-by-side, spent and basking in the sweltering heat they had generated. The pleasure was mediated by the limits of exhaustion and physical pain, just as it had in her mortal days, but Dahlia felt fulfilled in ways she had never known.

Naked and bare on the white sheets, with their hands locked together, they faded in and out of consciousness.

Dahlia could feel Seth next to her even as she lay wrapped in dreamless sleep like a caterpillar in a cocoon. The frenzied euphoria had subsided to a gentle peace that massaged its way through her body, relaxing every muscle as it passed by. Although she would probably never see the afterlife, she could hardly imagine that her paradise would feel much different than this.

Seth’s sleep was not so unburdened. Beside her he stirred restlessly, overcome with the gravity of what he had done. It would not be long before she too realized the consequences, but it was already too late.

And anyway, as Raven had pointed out, regrets and apologies only belonged to the living.

CHAPTER 24

“So where are we going?” Dahlia asked, struggling to keep up with Seth’s strides. For once, his movement was deliberate and as a consequence, intimidatingly quick.

“Old mall north of town,” Seth said. His eyes were fixed ahead, his concentration entirely focused towards their destination. Dahlia had never seen him so intent.

When they woke up together, he had seemed like another person entirely. He seemed panic-stricken, like something had spooked him during the night, and his eyes were bruised and red rimmed from turbulent sleep. Without much of a “good morning,” he had pulled his clothes back on and instructed Dahlia to do the same, because they had to go somewhere immediately, and there was no time for further explanation, but she would understand why when they got there.

Dahlia hadn’t the slightest idea why they needed to make haste for the old mall of all places.

In the 1960’s, in an attempt to civilize the rougher areas north of town, the city had begun building a multi-million dollar shopping mall in the hopes of attracting suburban life north. The mall was never completed, though. One day, while the workers were busy outfitting the interior, they all disappeared at once. There were no signs of a struggle either – two hundred men had just literally vanished. Suffice it to say, people did not take the disappearance as a good omen, and after that point the city struggled to attract other contractors to the project. Eventually the funding ran out, and the construction was abandoned. Now nearly fifty years later, the structure sat empty and hollow, gathering dust and crack-addicted squatters in its abandoned halls. Even drunken high school kids wouldn’t venture inside on dares; Dahlia had never known anyone who actually went inside and came back to tell the tale.

Even though she herself was probably the most frightening thing a person could find inside, the thought of entering the mall raised every hair on Dahlia’s body in defiance. There were mausoleums in the cemetery she would rather spend time in.

But the intensity in Seth’s narrowed eyes frightened her perhaps more than the idea of the old mall, so she did not bother arguing. Instead she followed, pensively but quick on his heels, as he brought her up through the maze of sewers she now knew spanned the north areas of town.

Finally, the tunnel dead-ended in a checkered iron grate. Seth reached down and grabbed the grate without hesitation, as if he had performed this same action over and over again before, and effortlessly wrenched its bolts free from the pipe. He released the grate and it clattered to the ground like a little bridge over the muddy concrete storm drain.

He raised a hand towards her. “Dahlia?”

She took that as her cue to cross over the grate, and clutched his hand for support as she carefully walked its length. On the other side, the grass of a ravine ran thick and wild, choked with weeds and wildflowers that were surprisingly

pretty for that part of town. Dahlia could not resist plucking a lush white daisy and tucking it behind her ear.

Seth picked up the heavy grate and realigned it so that the bolts were positioned over the holes they had been plucked from. With one powerful shove, the bolts were driven back into the end of the pipe, and the grate stood in place again.

“Come here often?” Dahlia asked, still impressed by the ritualistic nature of his actions.

Seth shrugged his massive shoulders. “It’s a short cut not a lot of people know about.”

“Oh. Uh, cool.”

He took her hand in his and led her through the moonlit ravine. His pace was less desperate this time, and Dahlia actually found herself enjoying the stroll. Something about the way the dusty face of the moon lit the valleys of bowing grass was enchanting. Clouds of fireflies sparked in the air, like little twinkling stars.

Seth seemed to notice it too. Dahlia felt him lace his fingers through hers and give her palm a gentle squeeze.

The flood plain wound its way through dense, untended forests, naturally landscaped with fallen branches and ivy creeping up among the rocks. After a mile or so, the curtain of trees parted to reveal the hideous cement structure Dahlia recognized only from photographs, sitting alone on a hill like a fortress before them.

Its wings had been built at odd, disjointed angles, and the more Dahlia stared at it, the more she felt like she was looking at an M. C. Escher painting. The glass skylights were green with mildew, and its doors were barred shut by rusting grates similar to the one that capped the end of the sewer. Dahlia’s instincts screamed at her to turn around and run as quickly as she could in the other direction, but instead she numbly placed one foot in front of the other, grasping Seth’s hand harder the closer they got.

“You okay?” he asked when they began to climb their way up the hill. The concrete that had been laid for the drive had since been reclaimed by nature. The chunks that did remain were cracked and choked with weeds, which sprouted up from between the cracks like millions of parasites.

“Uh, yeah,” Dahlia said, betrayed by the way her voice wobbled. “I mean, this place always creeped me out as a kid.”

“I remember when they built it,” Seth said. “I was in high school.”

Dahlia tried not to consider the implications of that, and instead focused on the harrowing cement prison in front of them, which was not difficult to do.

“So uh, are we actually going inside?”

“Yep,” Seth said.

“Does that mean you’re going to bust off another fence or two?”

“I was thinking we’d go in the side door by the loading dock instead. It’s never locked.”

“Oh,” Dahlia said, giggling nervously at her own stupidity.

“But hey, if you like watching me twist metal with my bare hands, by all means...”

“No,” she said quickly, though the image of Seth shirtless, muscles flexing, as he performed ungodly feats of strength, sent tingles through her.

“Okay then,” he said, laughing at the blush that rose across her face. “Side door it is.”

She tried not to look at the massive garage doors rusted shut or the broken cement ramps where semi trucks would have backed their trailers up to the doors for unloading. But when she closed her eyes, the sight became the loading docks of the Avington Square Mall, and the huge blue dumpsters that had hidden Nik’s crime.

Dahlia shuddered.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Seth said.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she said mechanically. “I mean, it’s just malls in general too. You know...”

“Oh shit,” Seth said, as the realization smacked him. “I’m sorry, Dahlia. I never should’ve- we can go back.”

“No,” she said, gritting her teeth. “It’s okay. I’m a big girl. Let’s just go inside, okay?”

She couldn’t believe those words had come out of her mouth.

Seth paused with his hand on the door latch. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” she said, pinching her eyes shut.

He reluctantly pushed the door open. The hinges fortunately did not creak like Dahlia had imagined they would, but the sight inside was no less disquieting than she had pictured.

The stench of damp rot was so overwhelming that Dahlia nearly gagged when she walked in. The only light came from the full moon streaming in through the skylights, but the mildew gave it a strange green-grey tinge. Dahlia would have almost preferred pitch-blackness.

They were in the middle of the central atrium, whose ceiling hulked nearly fifty feet above four levels. She could see plenty of places where the railings either had crumbled or were still incomplete, and even though Dahlia stood on the ground floor staring up, she was stricken by the sort of vertigo of looking over a ledge.

Most of the glass storefronts were still intact, but shadows permeated the insides, making it impossible to see into the individual stores. She knew they were empty, at least she wanted to think that they were, but the sense of mystery did not help her nerves any.

In the center of the atrium, a blue tarp was still spread over the tiled floor, and a sawhorse held two pieces of rotting wood.

“Damn this place is creepy,” Dahlia said and nearly jumped when she heard her voice echoing maddeningly from every surface, over and over again.

“Nice echo, huh?” Seth said, just quietly enough to keep his voice from bouncing through the atrium like Dahlia’s had.

“So what are we doing here?” Dahlia whispered, unwilling to risk using her full voice again.

“Well,” Seth said, stepping further into the center of the room. “One thing I bet you didn’t know about this place is that the walls are all reinforced concrete, the same stuff they use in bunkers, which is supposed to reduce radiation if say, a bomb goes off. You can thank the red scare of the 60’s for that one.”

“What about the skylights, though?” Dahlia asked, gesturing up to the glass ceiling overhead.

“Bulletproof, apparently,” Seth said. “But I didn’t say the McCarthy people were all that smart.”

“So what does that have to do with us?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Seth said with a smirk, and Dahlia realized he was clearly enjoying this far more than she was. “You said it yourself, the Vigil found out pretty quickly about the spike in death energy when I destroyed the nephilim in the carnival, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Within a day they knew.”

“Well this place has always been a nice training ground for me,” he said, taking off his coat and folding it over the saw horse. “The special concrete also seems to reduce radiation from death energy. At least to the point where the Vigil won’t immediately notice it.”

“Wait,” Dahlia said, beginning to feel the pieces clicking together in her head. “You mean, you’re going to teach me how to do what you did?”

“Something like that,” he said.

“What’s the rush, though?”

“I had a dream,” Seth said frowning. He swept his hair up into a ponytail and secured it with an elastic band.

“A dream?”

“A premonition, more like it. They’re coming, Dahlia, not to long from now. We’re both in a lot of danger.”

“Who are they? The Vigil?”

“I think so,” Seth said, “but I don’t know for sure. The dream didn’t get specific. All I know is that something is coming, and you need to be able to protect yourself. That’s why I brought you here.”

“Oh,” Dahlia said, feeling anxious energy beginning to build in her again. Her legs tingled with pins and needles, like when she sat on them for too long, and it took a lot of effort to keep standing up straight. She wrung her hands in front of her just to keep them from deadening too.

“I didn’t want to teach you this,” he said grimly, “but I don’t think I have a choice. But I want you to promise me that you will never, ever use this power unless it’s absolutely necessary. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” she said, apparently without enough conviction.

“I’m serious,” Seth said louder. The word “serious” echoed ominously through the empty mall.

“Fine,” she said. “I swear to the Creator I won’t use it unless it’s life-or-death.”

“Good,” Seth said. He gestured for her to stand opposite to him, and she noticed that he had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. The hydras on his forearms whipped their heads around with agitation, like rattlesnakes flicking their tails.

With his fists up, he looked like he was ready to spring into a boxing match; Dahlia feared for his opponent.

Dahlia assumed a similar stance to his, legs spread shoulder-width apart and fists up in front of her chest.

“Okay,” he said. “Now let’s begin.”

When Law came back to the apartment, he found Nate in his usual spot up against the window sill, silently watching drops of mist forming on the yellow tulips in the window boxes. Nate didn’t follow him everywhere much anymore; he mostly sat around the apartment when Law had to go to work, and he wasn’t much of a fan of errands. He never missed a Vigil meeting, however.

Law didn’t bother asking Nate what he was looking at anymore. His forlorn behavior was hardly remarkable, and in fact had become somewhat of a normalcy for the small angel. Nate and Law did not speak much anymore, and when they did it was to exchange distant pleasantries. Nate commented obsessively on the weather, and when he wasn’t at the window he was parked on the couch in front of an endless loop of the weather channel.

When Law came inside, he shut the door with his foot and set his bulging grocery bags on the kitchen counter.

“Your world is so beautiful and so strange,” Nate spoke up when he heard Law’s footsteps in the kitchen.

Law stiffened at the unusual address. “Beg your pardon?”

“It’s funny,” Nate said without turning around to look at Law. “The Creator made this world for you, his creation, filled with so much wonder and passion and delight, and yet there was no room for us inside it. We were his children too, but when you were born we were cast aside like second-rate citizens.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Law said offhandedly, mostly to placate him.

“You know what it’s like to be scorned by a father,” Nate said. “You should understand.”

Law felt the heat of anger beginning to rise in him at the ballsiness of Nate’s accusation. Who was he to nonchalantly assume he knew what Law should and should not understand? Still, he knew better than to surrender to his mounting anger; infuriating as the little man was, he was all that Law had left.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Law said curtly.

“I bet you are,” Nate said with a smirk. Law could see the whites of his eyes in the window pane as he rolled them back.

“I’ve got work to do,” Law said, unpacking the last of the groceries into the cabinets and the fridge. He scooped up the pile of briefs from the other end of the counter and started for his bedroom.

“I found them again,” Nate said, just as Law had stepped through the doorway.

Law froze mid-step. “What did you say?”

“Dahlia and Seth. They came back above ground, and I can see them.”

Law set the stack of briefs on the bed and came rushing back into the living room. He was not sure why, but for some reason Nate’s angelic Sight was

unable to penetrate the Underground. Maybe it was the sheer concentration of death energy that radiated there. So, as long as Dahlia and her boyfriend stayed down there, he had no way of keeping tabs on them.

When Nate had first said that Dahlia was back and a naphil, Law didn't want to believe him. It took another dose of those horrible drops before Law saw for himself the truth that he had condemned the woman he once loved.

He had been furious with Nate, but he kept that anger bottled up as he always did, and eventually it had simmered down to a constant resentment that burned at the back of his throat when he saw Nate sitting there at the window or in front of the television.

What's done was done, though, and he couldn't help but blame himself as well for having lost her. On a few occasions, he felt resentment for Dahlia seeping into his consciousness. He tried his damndest to chase that resentment, but ultimately he couldn't bring himself to stay angry at her. The feelings always faded nearly as quickly as they bubbled up.

The fact that Dahlia and Seth were together above ground did not surprise him, but the hurt still lingered like a dull ache in his chest.

"Where are they?" Law asked, sitting down on the couch behind Nate.

"Some huge old warehouse or something," Nate said, squinting at the glass as if he were looking through it for answers. "Let's see, the sign out front says 'Northcreek Mall.'"

"Northcreek Mall?" Law said with a start. "The hell are they doing there? That place was abandoned like fifty years ago. Would've been torn down but apparently the city was too scared to even go up there with bulldozers."

"Shh," Nate hushed, waving at him to be quiet. "He's doing something with his arms now and- Oh snap!"

Law sat up straighter on the edge of the sofa. "What is it?"

"Your boy Seth just blasted an entire wall of glass into smithereens."

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing left of it. It's gone! Kaput! Burned up in black flames. Oh, here Dahlia goes. She's trying to do what he just did, I think."

"Wait," Law said, frowning as he stroked the stubble on his chin. "Black flames? You mean Seth used death energy?"

"I'll say," Nate said. "Makes that little projector presentation they showed you kind of look like Billy Elliot."

"Of course!" Law slammed his fist down on the sofa next to him, which made a loud smack against the leather. The skin on his hand begun to sting. "So he's our naphil! Figures Dahlia would be so adamant against telling the Vigil anything."

"Wait, wait!" Nate said, as if he were commentating a base ball game. "Hold it. What's that? Looks like Dahlia's summoning some of her own deathly power."

"No shit."

"There's the wind-up, and here's the pitch, and- daaaaaamn! That's a hundred mile per hour fastball if I've ever seen one."

Law sprang to his feet. "Stop fucking around, Nate! What did she do?"

“Your girlfriend is kind of freaky,” Nate said. “Oh, sorry. Ex-girlfriend.”

“What happened?”

“Well, let me put it this way. She clearly doesn’t know what she’s doing. But somehow she managed to hurtle a blast that didn’t just hit her target window, but decimated at least ten windows around it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying she’s obnoxiously powerful, and the scary part is she’s not even trying. If she did actively channel all that death energy, the Creator only knows what sort of destruction she could cause. I’m thinking Hiroshima and Nagasaki, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh fuck,” Law said, collapsing back into the couch cushion. “I just can’t believe it. I never thought Dahlia would be capable, I mean... She wasn’t even that strong a person in life.”

Nate brushed his hands off and turned around from the window, as if he had to clean himself after witnessing that vision. “I’d say she’s the Vigil’s new number one threat.”

“So what should we do?”

“Well,” Nate said, dropping down onto the couch next to Law. “I think it’s time we took things to the next level, so to speak. Granted the next step might seem a little bit drastic at first...”

“Define drastic,” Law said, eying Nate skeptically. If Nate was calling something drastic, Law was at a loss for what it could possibly be. He made a mental note that anything involving nuclear armaments was immediately out.

“So,” Nate began, twiddling his thumbs with a nervous chuckle, “you may have noticed that Monsignor Gregory is sort of, um, holding things up shall we say.”

“He does tend to get caught up in the theatrics of things.”

“Understatement of the year,” Nate said, rolling his eyes haughtily. “You and I both know he’s all talk. He prances around with that book doing the Spanish Inquisition act on everybody, but he could never go through with the actual ritual.”

“Well, I mean, I read that passage. It’s kind of harsh. Are you sure it would even work?”

“Would I really have wasted all this time coming to earth to sit like the stupid little angel on your shoulder all for something that doesn’t work? Seriously? You think it was a pleasure cruise, having to escape from the Empyrean unnoticed and all?”

“Okay, okay. Point taken. But you really think Gregory won’t do it?”

“Nah, he’s too much of a sheep to be comfortable with the, you know, necessary measures and all.”

“I can’t say I’m entirely comfortable with it either. But if it’s the means to salvation-”

“You’d do what you have to do,” Nate finished, nodding vigorously.

“Exactly. Which is why a person like you makes a good revolutionary. But like every good revolutionary, you’ll need an army. You know, a bunch of highly

specialized, highly skilled men waiting at your beck and call to execute your orders.”

Law shoved his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Are you referring to the Vigil, perhaps?”

“Why perhaps I am.”

“But Monsignor Gregory is the leader of the Vigil,” Law protested, “and he will continue to be until the day he... oh. Oh no. I see where you’re going with this.”

Law stood up from the sofa as if trying to put distance between himself and the very idea. “No. Absolutely not.”

“Oh come on, Lawrence,” Nate whined from the sofa. “You’re really going to let a little blood on your hands ruin your chance to save the world? Haven’t you ever heard you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet?”

“Killing a monsignor does not constitute breaking a few eggs,” Law said sternly, folding his arms in front of him. “If anything it rather ensures I get to spend my afterlife in Lucifer’s infernal prison.”

“Oh come on,” Nate repeated, kneeling on the sofa with his hands folded suppliantly in front of him. “You think Gregory’s really getting beamed up to the Empyrean to chill with the Creator? Besides it’s not like you had that much trouble killing last time, and as they say, once you get your first one over with it’s really smooth sailing fr-”

He was interrupted when Law grabbed him around the throat and squeezed as hard as he could. To any normal man that would have meant a crushed trachea, but Nate merely glanced down at Law’s hands and rolled his eyes. He shook his head, and Law was clutching only his own fists.

“Look,” Nate said when he reappeared, shoving Law down onto the sofa. “Sit down and shut up. You’re either going to do this on your own, or we’re going to play ‘invasion of the body snatchers’ again, and you can have a front row seat to the carnage. Your choice. But I promise if you make me do it, I’ll make it a more gruesome, awful death than your pretty little blonde head could possible think up. Got it?”

Law shuddered, hugging his knees to his chest. “Just give me a little time to think about it, okay? Please.”

“Fine,” Nate said, stepping back towards the window. “I’ll give you a couple days, but if you can’t make up your mind after then I’ll just have to make it up for you. Clock’s ticking, sweetheart, and we’ve got a lot to do.”

Law rocked back and forth clutching his knees, but the nausea would not retract.

Nate sat down on his perch by the windowsill. “Are we clear?” he shot over his shoulder.

“Crystalline,” Law stammered.

CHAPTER 25

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this exhausted before,” Dahlia said, clutching Seth’s hand as he led her through the winding maze of downtown blocks.

“You have the right to be,” Seth said, but the attempt to comfort her seemed half-hearted. Ever since she’d done something – she still wasn’t even sure what it was – and managed to practically clear out a whole section of wall, Seth had become withdrawn from her, constantly staring off into space and rubbing one cheek as if he’d been slapped.

“Seth, please,” Dahlia said, tugging at his hand. “What’s wrong? Why won’t you even look at me? Did I do something bad?” She felt like a little girl again pleading with her father for his attention, and the very notion made her want to gag.

“No,” Seth said darkly. “You did just what I told you to do.”

“Come on,” she said, cradling his hand between hers. “Will you please just stop and look at me?”

“Fine,” he said. He turned on his heels and stared impatiently down at her with a look that made her wince at first. But the longer he looked at her, the more his expression softened until he could no longer maintain the steel in his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said finally, stroking her cheek with one thumb. “You just scared the shit out of me, Dahlia.”

“I didn’t mean to,” she began to argue.

“I know,” he said, hushing her. “You’re just really powerful, probably more than Nik and I combined. That’s kind of hard to swallow.”

“Do you regret taking me to drink from Nomi’s pool?”

“No,” he said, though she could feel the hesitation in his response. “It was probably selfish, but I wanted you to be able to feel like me. I just never expected *this*.”

“But this is because of the pool, right? These powers?”

“I think so,” he said. “I mean, I think all nephilim can use death energy. It’s just, they don’t have the clarity to even know how to use it.”

“All that suffering and numbness must act like a buffer,” Dahlia said.

“Exactly. I mean, after decades of feeling nothing you just stop caring. And why should you even try to use the energy you have?”

“So we’re the only ones? You and me?”

“And Nik,” Seth added.

Dahlia put her hands on her hips. With her chin jutting out and her lips pouted, she looked like quite the headstrong child. “Well we need more than just us, Seth, if we’re ever going to fight the Vigil. We need to start getting a lot of people to drink from the pool.”

“We can’t do that,” Seth said, holding up a hand. “Nomi doesn’t even know that you and I have drunk the water. She’d never let more people drink.”

“Why?” Dahlia whined. “Isn’t she on our side?”

“She’s not on a side. She’s just there to make sure the natural order of things doesn’t get screwed up. That’s what she says.”

“So what? Our suffering is natural?”

“We’re nephilim. We’re supposed to stay that way. When she told Nik about the pool, she basically violated her most important tenant.”

Dahlia scowled, crossing her arms in front of her. “No. That’s not good enough. I’m going to get everyone to drink even if it means getting Nomi out of the way. I’m not scared of her.”

“You should be,” Seth said sharply.

“And why? Because Nik says so?”

The patience was clearly draining from Seth’s face, which was beginning to flush red with frustration. He grabbed Dahlia by the elbow just forcefully enough to make her listen. “Stop it, Dahlia! Stop trying to manipulate things you don’t know shit about. Nomi is Gaia, okay? She’s the Earth Mother incarnated. Can you imagine the sort of power she has? She could raise her arms and strike us all down with lightning, you get it?”

“Okay, okay!” Dahlia said, jerking her arm out of his grip. “Fine. Nomi’s scary. Got it.”

Seth let out a deep sigh through his clenched teeth. “Besides. There’s something else.”

“What?”

“Look, remember when I said there were consequences?”

Dahlia nodded, watching apprehensively as Seth shrugged off his coat and dropped it on the pavement next to him. He swiftly undid the buttons of his shirt.

She let out a tiny gasp when he parted the shirt. Across his abdomen, a thick streak of skin had been burned away. Instead of normal charred flesh, however, the burn was filled with a strange iridescent black jelly that sort of reminded Dahlia of tar, but seemed much less viscous. From some angles, she caught a purplish glow. It looked like it was alive with the way it moved of its own accord, out of synch with Seth’s body. A parasite? Dahlia felt nauseous just watching it wiggle.

“Shit,” she said, feeling her head beginning to swim. “What the hell is that?”

“The consequences.”

“That wasn’t there last night,” she said weakly.

“No,” he said. “It’s from our little training session. The mark will probably go away in a couple days when the skin grows back, but the most concentrated death energy stays.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like mercury. Once you get it in your system it stays there forever.”

Dahlia reeled, overcome with the urge to peel off her dress right there and scour her own body for marks. “What do you mean?”

“The more you use this power, the more concentrated death energy will deposit in your body. We might be fiends, but we’re human fiends. Our bodies can only sustain so much of this matter.”

“Before what?” she asked. She shivered, feeling very much like someone had just dumped a bucket of icy water over her.

“We lose our humanity for good. Our bodies are destroyed and we get a one-way ticket to whatever you want to call it – hell, Lucifer’s prison, whatever – to hang out with the rest of the fallen. Maybe, if we’re lucky, one day we’ll get to come back when some stupid kid uses a Ouija board.”

Seth shook his head morosely. "But none of that matters anymore, Dahlia. For better or worse, we're the Creator's whipping boys now."

"Well shit," Dahlia said, sitting down on the edge of the curb and resting her chin in the heel of her hands. "That sucks."

Seth refastened his shirt and picked up his coat from the ground, brushing it off before putting it back on. The impatience had fled from him, and he took a seat next to Dahlia, wrapping an arm around her trembling body.

"I'm sorry," he said tenderly. "I didn't mean to scare you, Dahlia. Truth be told it takes a lot of death energy to get to that point, and according to Nik you'll definitely start to feel it."

"So Nik told you all this?" she said, raising her head to look at him.

"Yeah. Nomi warned him about everything before she let him drink."

"Funny. A warning. Wouldn't that be nice? I don't think I've gotten a single one of those since this crazy shit all began."

"I know you've gotten baptized by fire as they say," Seth said, bringing his face in close to hers and kissing her cheek. "You're a tough chick, though. You never stop surprising me."

"No I'm not," she protested with a whine. "I'm a total coward, at least I was in life. Just ask Law, he can tell you all about it."

"That guy's a fuckstick."

Dahlia snorted a laugh. "Really? Fuckstick? That's a new one."

"I call them as I see them."

"You're a total piece of work, Seth," she said. "But somehow I managed to fall in love with you."

"Well that's your bad. Didn't your mom teach you not to bring thugs like me home?"

"Thug? Psh. You're a kitten. A really big, really muscley, sort of less furry kitten. And, you know, minus most of the cute. And plus a lot more brooding."

"So let me get this straight. The kitten did steroids?"

Dahlia smacked him in the shoulder, which naturally ended up hurting her fist more than it hurt him. He pouted his lower lip, rubbing his deltoid gingerly as if she had actually done any damage.

"So, uh, what do we do now?" Dahlia asked.

"Well," Seth said, glancing up at the clock tower glowing white like a lighthouse above the city. "According to Big Ben there, it's close to five now. Wanna go to the park and watch the sun come up?"

"Oh I meant like what do we do in the long-run, but that works too," Dahlia said. Seth stood up next to her and extended a hand to help her to her feet.

"There is no long-run, baby. When you're staring down forever you just gotta take it one day at a time," he said, pulling her up.

Dahlia realized she had stood up only inches from him, but when she saw the boyish mischief in his smile, she knew she'd been had again.

Seth cinched his arms around her waist and kissed her. Dahlia felt herself smiling against his lips, as her hands made their way up around his neck. She was unable to resist letting her foot pop up at an angle, like the women in the movies

always did at the end when the heroes took them by the waist and kissed them like they'd never been kissed before.

And that was how Law saw them, arms wrapped around each other, Dahlia's foot popped up behind her, lost in an early morning kiss. He grabbed the lamp off the table and flung it as hard as he could at the wall, causing it to shatter in an explosion of raining glass.

He threw himself onto the couch and cried, with Nate standing behind him rubbing his shoulders.

"Fuck it," Law said between sobs. "I'll do it."

"That was quick," Nate said, a toothy grin slinking out across his face. "I think we're running out of nighttime though. Best do it tomorrow."

"Fine. Whatever." Law wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I just want to get it over with before I change my mind."

"My thoughts exactly, dear boy," Nate said. "My thoughts exactly."

"You know you brood a lot," Dahlia said as they slunk along the gravel paths of the park, hand-in-hand.

"You talk a lot," Seth said.

"Come on, you're like an expert brooder," she pressed him, swinging his hand energetically up and down. "You've even got the black hair and all. Thank the Creator you're not into eyeliner."

"Well I've had a lot of practice," he said. "But the black hair's all natural. I think I can thank Bo for that one."

Dahlia nodded, slowing her swinging. The way his tone faltered just mentioning Bo's name was enough to zip the child up inside of her.

"Besides, it's my favorite activity. You know, along with corrupting the innocent."

He nudged her in the ribs and she playfully slapped his hand away, but the momentary touch was enough to cause a little squeeze in her heart, even though it didn't beat anymore. The more she grew accustomed to the effects of the water of life, the more she found herself reacting to him physically.

"I want to do a test," she said, pulling him to a stop in the middle of the path.

Seth stared at her as apprehensively. "What now?"

"A test. Just for giggles," she said, releasing his hand by his side. "I'm going to close my eyes, okay? I promise I won't peek. And you're going to bring your finger really close to my arm – don't touch me though – but keep it a few inches away. Just move it around my arm, okay?"

He took a few seconds to make little circles in the gravel with the steel toe of his boot. "Um, okay," he replied. "Sure. But why?"

"I just want to see something, okay? I have a hunch."

Seth shrugged, as if deferring any blame should the experiment provide less than optimal results.

"Okay now." Dahlia pinched her eyes shut and held out an arm in front of her. "Just run your fingers up over my arm, but don't touch it, okay?"

“Uh, sure.”

For a little bit, Dahlia felt nothing but early morning wind rustling the hairs on her arms, and she considered peeking one eye open to see if Seth was actually humoring her. But then she felt it; it was like a caress, but softer and tickled more. She did not feel it tactically so much as emotionally, like he had foregone her skin and was directly touching the part of her brain that controlled the sensations in her arms.

After a second the touch began to move in a line down towards her wrist, and then back up again. She could hear Seth make a little whistling noise through his teeth.

“What’s up?” Dahlia asked.

“This is pretty weird,” Seth said. “Can you feel it?”

“Yeah.”

She could feel him getting more into it; the touch moved from just lines to zigzag patterns across her forearms to dramatic ocean waves.

“No way,” Seth said. “I’m not even touching you. This is insane.”

Unable to resist any longer, Dahlia let her eyes flutter open. Following Seth’s finger was a raised trail of goose bumps a few inches long. The bumps were like a shadow, or maybe more like a tail, and kept a temporary record of where his finger had recently traced.

“I’m not even touching you,” Seth repeated. “But your body is reacting.”

“That’s insane,” she said. “I had the feeling there was something going on with me.”

“I wonder if it happens to me?”

She pulled his arm out straight and shoved his coat and shirtsleeve up and ran her own finger just above his skin as he’d done to her. Sure enough, the pores on his arm stood at attention wherever her finger passed. She brought the finger closer and farther to figure out the range, and it seemed that after moving more than a couple inches away, the effect diminished rapidly.

“Wow,” Dahlia said. “What does this mean?”

“You’re under my skin,” Seth said, rolling his sleeves back down and straightening them. “Apparently I got to you too.”

“Whatever it is, I think it’s more confirmation that we’re bound for good,” she said.

He was about to respond when muffled voices approached from below the hill. Seth and Dahlia instinctively ducked behind a stone planter full of dirty rainwater. A dead bird floated on the surface, engorged and featherless in its decomposition.

Dahlia recognized the cautious gait of the approaching party almost immediately. It figured, though, that they’d be the only other people at the park before dawn.

The Vigil member in front stopped suddenly in his tracks, nearly causing a pile-up behind him as the followers dug their heels into the gravel. They glared at him with annoyed sighs.

“Do you hear something?” he said, perching his hands on his hips.

“No,” the man directly behind him said. “We didn’t hear anything back by the fountain ten minutes ago, or five minutes before that, and we don’t hear anything now.”

“Calm down, Elliot,” someone else said. “Jude’s a newbie. You know you were paranoid when you were a new recruit.”

“Whatever,” the man named Elliot said, his voice practically oozing with derision. “I think he’s been wasting our time all night, but whatever, that’s just me, what do I know having served for twelve years now?”

The rest of the group seemed to be ignoring him, and as they resumed their pace, ambling as it was, Dahlia could see their faces beginning to form in the lamplight.

She had to slap a hand over her mouth to keep from gasping.

The man leading the patrol – the new recruit – was her own father, Jude Ellis. He was dressed as casually as Dahlia had ever seen him, in a Polo button down and a pair of dirt stained khakis, but he was still vastly overdressed compared to the others. If Dahlia knew her father, he’d have the khakis dry-cleaned first thing in the morning on his way to work, and he would spend a good hour buffing the dings from the gravel out of his shiny brown loafers.

He was clutching a dagger too tightly in one fist, as if his life depended on the piece of steel. Beginner mistake, Dahlia thought. Only the new and inexperienced thought they could hide behind a fancy decal, when in fact what made an effective Vigil hunter was the presence of mind to improvise when things fell apart, which they had a nasty habit of doing.

Jude Ellis, however, was not a man accustomed to improvisation. His inflated sense of industry had somehow wrung the last remaining bit of creativity from him years ago. There was no plan b, unless it consisted of loudly threatening whoever was in the way of plan a.

If he were lucky, he’d only encounter nephilim from the Underground. Dahlia couldn’t imagine someone like her father surviving a carnival crawling with creatures so demented by hunger they had become less human than the wolves stalking the brush.

Muttering and rolling their eyes, the procession marched onward past the only two dangerous creatures in the park.

“I feel you shaking,” Seth whispered once the patrol group had disappeared beyond the horizon of the next hill. “What’s wrong?”

“Seth, that man in the front, the guy who told them to stop. That’s my dad.”

“What?” His eyes shone with disbelief. “Really?”

“Really. They gave him my dagger, too.” She shivered harder, recalling how it had felt to see his bloodless knuckles around the handle she’d gripped a thousand times. She knew without a doubt it was her knife, just as she’d known in the church when the monsignor waved it in front of her face like a hypnotist’s coin.

“Those assholes,” Seth spat. “Is there a low they won’t stoop to?”

“Law knows about my father, he knows our history. I bet he told them, just so they could figure out a way to get to me.” A thought hit her, and she

opened her mouth in a silent cry, taken aback by the horror of it. “Oh shit, Seth. What if he told them all kinds of personal stuff? What if they know everything about me – all the embarrassing secrets and things Law’s learned over the years? Do you think he’d just give it all up to them like that?”

“I don’t think he’d do that,” Seth said, bringing her in close to console her, but Dahlia knew that even he didn’t fully believe his words. “He still loves you, Dahlia. It’s pretty clear. Otherwise this stuff between us wouldn’t have upset him so much.”

“I don’t care how he feels,” Dahlia said coldly, stiffening in his arms. “He gave up that right when he turned me in to the Vigil. He can go fuck himself for all I care.”

“Your friend Pierre,” Seth said, stroking her hair. “He’s still in the Vigil, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you gotten in contact with him since you, you know, woke up?”

“How could I let him see me this way?”

“You said that Pierre shared your doubts about the nephilim. I think if anyone can, he’ll be able to see that you’re still you,” Seth said gently. “Besides, I think it might help to have somebody on the inside.”

“But don’t you think they know that?” Dahlia asked, sitting up and taking him by the shoulders so she could look straight into his face. “What if they’re using him as a spy or something against his will?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it past them,” Seth said with a sigh. “You’re right. It might be better for Pierre’s sake, actually, if you stayed away from him.”

Dahlia groaned, turning in Seth’s arms so that her back rested up against his chest. “I hate this. Tell me it gets better?”

She felt him shrug against her. “You get better at compartmentalizing. Everybody just sort of becomes an acquaintance, like those strangers you talk to in line and never see again.”

“You’re way stronger than I am,” she said.

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

She felt him uncross his legs and splay them out around her so he could tuck her closer to him. “What makes you say that?” he said, resting his chin on the shelf of her shoulder.

“You had to go through all this alone, but I didn’t. I have you.”

“Hey, what’s thirty-five years in relation to eternity? I’ve got you now, and that’s what I know. That’s what’s important.”

Dahlia settled back against his chest with the smile melted onto her lips. Times like these she sat with Seth, neither of them saying a word, she felt like she could actually handle forever. Things like her father and the Vigil became minor annoyances on that scale, like little mosquito bites on her skin that itched like hell but would go away after a couple of days.

Still sometimes she could not shake the foreboding she felt when her mind returned to the Vigil. They were up to something, and the installation of Dahlia’s father as her replacement only confirmed it. But as much as it tore her apart, she

could not depend on Pierre for reliable intelligence when he himself – willing or unwilling – was a cog in the same machine that wanted to grind her bones to dust.

When she remembered the way he and Brigitte had nursed her after the church left her bleeding on its steps, she felt a little fist of pain clenching in her chest. But times had changed, and nothing felt safe anymore but Seth's hands – the same scarred and tattooed hands that had roused such indignation in her when they first met – tucked around hers.

She let her eyes wander slowly over the fancy letters tattooed across his knuckles. *Opus Dei*, both hands said; "Work of the Creator." Unlike the other tattoo, this one didn't seem the least bit ironic.

CHAPTER 26

The days ticked by one after the other, and the only indication Dahlia had at all that the world was still turning was the way Raven obsessively marked off each day with a big red X on the calendar in her room.

Dahlia had started coming over for daily girl talk, which almost always lapsed into deeper, more existential prodding. Over the course of their talks, she had come to find out that Raven had been a history PhD student at the time of her death; she was perhaps better educated than Dahlia herself, and certainly more eloquent. She also found out that Raven's legal name up until she was twenty-four had been Ken Garcia.

Adjusting to life in the Underground wasn't particularly demanding. Dahlia came and went as she pleased, but found herself loath to move above ground during the daylight. Occasionally she exchanged polite hellos with Ellen and the others she had met the first day of her damnation, but they had become further withdrawn over time, and eventually did not come to the room with the books anymore.

Seth had made it rather clear that he hated the Underground, but he still managed to come around frequently enough that Dahlia was passing the majority of her time with him. Most nights they would spend hours tangled in each other on the white futon, only falling asleep when their bodies could no longer sustain consciousness.

He did not often suggest that they go to his apartment, perhaps sensing her increasing discomfort at the thought of walking above ground. Whether it rivaled his discomfort at spending time below ground, or whether he once again was sacrificing his own wellbeing for hers, she was not sure.

After another nightlong passion play, Dahlia and Seth were slumped out on the futon, wrapped loosely in cheap polyester sheets. She rolled in close to him, resting her head against his naked chest. His chest cavity was hollow and silent under her ear, but she had grown desensitized to that silence to the point where she would've been startled if his heart had begun thumping again.

She began to trace lazy circles on his abs with her fingers, amusing herself by the way her nail caught on the deep striations in the muscle.

Seth was lying back with his arms folded behind his head, and his eyelids were beginning to bruise and droop with fatigue. He let out a yawn like a lion's roar, and Dahlia giggled as she felt his chest vibrate below her face.

"I'm totally spent," he said, stretching his arms out towards the ceiling with another yawn.

"I'm actually really wired," Dahlia said, shifting up so that she was lying face-to-face with him. "Weird, right?"

"Some nights are like that." He wrapped Dahlia to him in one arm and let the other one come to rest by his side.

"I don't think I can sleep," she said, nuzzling her face into his trunk of a neck.

"Sometimes reading makes me tired."

"I don't know. Not really in the mood to read. I think I'm just restless."

He nodded, and it was clear he was drifting off to the point where verbal responses cost too much effort.

"I think I'm going to take a walk," Dahlia said, scooting out of his arms and sitting up in bed.

"Be careful," Seth mumbled, pulling the sheet up to his chin.

"You know me," Dahlia said, fishing around for her grey dress on the floor and pulling it back over her head. "Always careful. Never in trouble."

Seth threw a pillow at her as she crept out of bed.

Perhaps out of habit, Dahlia found herself heading for the city park. After coming up through a manhole in an alley behind a Japanese udon bar, she wandered the six blocks to the northern gate, to the sound of the wind picking the trees bare leaf by leaf.

The park was entirely deserted at this hour, which according to the clock tower was a few minutes past ten. The hills looked like black ice, the grass like little needles pointing this way and that in the wind. The cloud cover was so tightly stitched that Dahlia did not know if there even was a moon out.

She could not remember the last time she had made her way through the park that late completely without fear. Even in the Vigil's tight clumps, she could never shake off the constant vulnerability that followed her through the city. Somehow a five-inch blade did little to soothe her nerves.

Shoulders relaxed, chest forward, arms swinging by her side, Dahlia strolled the winding paths as if it were a sunny summer day instead. She inhaled deeply through her nostrils, hoping to catch the sweet scent of freshly cut grass, but she could only smell the rot of old soil. For a moment, she wondered how many bodies had ever been buried or hidden in the park's 200-some acres. She cringed and banished the thought immediately with a shake of her head.

As Dahlia walked on she could practically feel the air alight with energy, and she closed her eyes to let herself savor the nighttime percussion. Cicadas hummed merrily from the shrubs and like the shimmer of cymbals, along with crickets whose rhythmic chirps carried the beat of the snares. Bullfrogs would occasionally belch from the reeds by the pond, providing a bass drum to the little serenade.

This was what she had come for. With her eyes closed and her face tilted towards the sky, she felt herself become an inseparable part of the natural world around her, just as she had been born of the water steaming in the basin. Though blood no longer flowed through her veins, the steady rhythm of the night provided an ample pulse, which she began to feel in her chest the longer she stood there, arms outstretched toward the night.

A shrill, humanlike shriek suddenly resounded through the park, and Dahlia felt like she had been thrust from her state of tranquility, and she was a she again, and the park was an it, and the cicadas and crickets and bullfrogs were as separate from her as an alien species. The gravel underfoot might as well have been chips of moon rock.

There was another shriek, this one closer, and Dahlia strained to hear the distinct sound of feet raking desperately through the gravel.

Goosebumps ignited her flesh, and she felt an inkling of her days in the Vigil returning, just a slight inkling, but enough to remind her of what it felt like to be the rescuer. There was a day when the slightest sign of distress would have been enough to send her hurtling toward any sort of danger.

She yanked nervously at her skirt, pacing and biting the chap on her lips. She liked to think the goodness in her had not fled when she'd flung her dagger into the darkened alley. But what if now given her current situation she did more harm than good? She had vowed never to see a face limp and pallid like Rami's on account of her own thirst for vitality, and stubborn as she was, Dahlia never broke a vow.

The third scream seemed the most pathetic, more like a pig's squeal than a human cry. Dahlia dropped her skirts and rushed down a flight of wooden steps past the pond, following the pain that still echoed in the air.

She saw him below her on the stage of the stone amphitheater. His fluorescent red hair stuck out over his head like an anemone, and his skinny arms were clenching a fuzzy mass to his oversized blazer. The top hat he usually wore lay grey with dust on the ground behind him.

Like vultures circling a fresh kill, the men of the Vigil paced around him, taking far too much enjoyment in their slow deliberation. Eddie was clearly terrified, and his eyes flicked frantically in every direction, as if trying to find a single sympathetic face among the mob. From the way they constantly darted from face-to-face, Dahlia imagined this was a futile pursuit.

"Please don't send me away!" Eddie plead, turning around and around in dizzy circles to follow the circling men. "Without me, Miss Annabelle ain't got nobody to look after her!"

"Tough," one of the men said with an excited shiver.

As she snuck closer to them, Dahlia realized that what these men felt for Eddie was more than basic disdain for the nephilim; they hated him with the sort of bottomless hatred that craved to wring him out again and again like a rag, until he would beg for the mercy of their daggers. They would torture him to the brink of insanity and in doing so seal him in a hellish eternity on earth, caged in with the horrors of his own mind.

One of the men grinned and gestured toward the cat buried in the lapels of Eddie's shabby coat. Dahlia shuddered at the thought of what would happen next. She had to act quickly.

"Hey! What's with you guys and your stupid little daisy chains?" Dahlia spoke up, jumping down from the ledge onto the stage beside them.

The men wobbled like upset bowling pins, gaping as they searched for the source of their interruption. Some of them reddened when they met her eyes, as if she had caught them engaged in some sort of sordid public act. In a manner of speaking, she supposed she had.

"Seriously, guys," Dahlia said. "All you need is loincloths and clubs and you have the perfect little caveman dance gong."

"What are you doing out this late, little girl?" one of the men snarled.

They seemed not to recognize her. Dahlia wondered for a moment if they were new members, but their faces seemed vaguely familiar when she pictured the expanse of men choking the pews every week. No, Dahlia realized with a start, it was not that they had never seen her. Rather her damnation had effected such a change to her being that even though she did not *look* much different, she had become almost unrecognizable.

"Don't you have bigger baddies to catch?" Dahlia asked, pointedly ignoring the question. "How about I walk him back to the Underground and you go reel in the big ones? I hear north of town's where it's at if you want a decent fight."

"That's cute," another one of the men snickered. "But I don't think we're open for negotiations."

Dahlia stepped into the circle through a gap between two men who swiped at her with their daggers as she passed, missing her by inches. "Oh that's good," she said. "Cause neither am I."

She could practically hear Eddie's teeth chattering in his skull next to her, as he shrunk down farther into a little ball. She put a hand on the shoulder of his blazer to steady him, and the touch sent speckles of dust dancing across the air like little grey stars. "It's okay," she said softly. "They're not going to hurt you or Miss Annabelle."

"As touching as this moment is," the man spoke up again. "I do believe we have a twofer tonight. Talk about an unexpected bonus."

"Truly," another man sad, crossing himself. "Praise be to the Creator."

"Oh don't bring the Creator into this," Dahlia snapped. "Nothing you do has anything to do with him."

"Really? Because as far as I see it, removing naphil scum is as righteous as it gets."

"Go to hell," Dahlia said.

"I'd say the same to you, but I think you're already on the fast track there," the man sneered. He raised his dagger up above his head. "Gentlemen!"

At his summoning, the men dove in for Dahlia and Eddie, tackling them to the stone stage. Dahlia thrashed and clawed and bit her way free enough to see that Eddie was utterly overwhelmed as he attempted to fend the daggers off all the while shielding a howling Miss Annabelle under his arm.

Their slices were swift but shallow, and she winced as she watched her arms and legs growing striped with blood. Eddie did not react much to the cuts, but she could see the despair heavy in his dark eyes.

“Enough!” Dahlia screamed, kicking one of the men beneath the diaphragm and sending him falling back against the stage.

The pressure of her rage had bubbled over inside her and was becoming unbearable. Just as Seth had instructed her at the mall, she reached inside herself to harness every dark thought, every drop of hatred and anger and cruelty and judgment, and she guided it down along a path through her arms down to her hands, and she did not force it out so much as release it from her fingertips. The momentum of this darkness had built steadily as it coursed through her body, so that when she released it, it was like unlatching the fence that restrained a pack of foaming hounds.

She pictured it black as oil, navigating her empty veins the way the nephilim moved through the abandoned subway tunnels. The key was to make it physical - it didn't matter what she saw it as, so long as she had something to hold in her mind to guide it to her fingers.

Shrieking like a harpy, she let the death energy explode from her body in bursts of black flame, seeking out human flesh like heat seeking missiles. The men of the Vigil were incinerated before they could process what had happened, burnt instantaneously to a molten ash, which rained solemnly down on the stage like black snow.

White ecstasy coursed through Dahlia's body, like a hit of amphetamines, and the pleasure was so intense that she didn't have time to process the dread of knowing what that high meant, and at what cost it had come. “Whoa,” she said, staring at Eddie through glassy eyes.

“Blimey, what was that?” Eddie asked, sitting up and gingerly gathering Miss Annabelle, who was so frozen with fright she nearly looked dead. The only thing that gave her away was the occasional twitch of her shaggy tail.

“This power,” Dahlia said, grinning so hard her cheeks began to hurt. “It's our birthright.”

“Birthright?” Eddie said, cocking his head like a wide-eyed puppy. “I been dead for almost fifty years now and I ain't seen anything like that before.”

“Soon it'll be yours,” Dahlia said, jumping to her feet. She extended a hand and helped Eddie up with so much force she almost pulled him up off the ground.

“All due respect, I don't think I can do stuff like that, mum. And I don't think I wanna.”

“I'm telling you, Eddie. Just wait and soon you'll see.”

“People sure is strange,” Eddie muttered.

Dahlia marched back to the Underground, Eddie uneasy at her heels. Her head still felt swollen, like she'd pumped it full of helium, and though the pleasure had somewhat subsided, it had left in its wake a manic energy that riled the anger inside her.

She would not stop until she had rallied every person in the tunnels, and then they would demand that Nomi let them all drink from the fount. She could

not stop any army. After they all drank, even the Vigil would not be able to stop them anymore, and Avington would be theirs again, even if it meant a glorious, bloody revolution.

Dahlia threw the manhole cover aside and jumped straight down into the sewer tunnel. She did not wait for Eddie to follow, but tore off down the pipes.

"Come on!" she cried, and beside her the heaps of rags and flesh began to stir. No one yelled in the Underground tunnels; hardly anyone even spoke.

"Follow me, please!" Dahlia urged, gesturing wildly towards the frightened faces that peered up at her, eyes wet and black like those of the rats that scurried along the tunnels. "Come on!"

As she ran along the path toward Nomi's chamber, she realized that she had started to gather something of a crowd. While some stayed motionless along the walls, others turned toward each other with silent looks and shrugs and stood up to follow her, mostly out of curiosity.

Dahlia laughed, giddy and flushed with excitement at the sight of the faces behind her, each one like a pixel in a different shade of grey. "Come, and we'll drink from the waters of life!"

In her joy she nearly collided into Nik, who was standing out in the middle of the hallway, his hands jammed on his hips. His eyebrows were nearly vertical with rage, and she could see the corner of his lip turned up, bearing sharp white teeth like fangs as he snarled.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"None of your business, Nik," she said, attempting to push past him. "Just taking back what is rightfully ours."

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, knuckles white and trembling. "You stupid, stupid girl! You have no idea what you're doing."

"Let me go!" She struggled against him, but his grip was fixed.

"Damn it, woman. Come with me." He turned toward the crowd and made a sweeping motion with his arm. "Sorry, everyone! Nothing to see anymore. Dahlia's simply become delirious with the shock of her transformation."

A few disappointed groans echoed through the chamber, but most simply turned quietly on their heel and made their way back to their places in the tunnels as if nothing at all had happened.

Eddie cut the opposite way through the crowd, excusing himself loudly to those he bumped into. "What's going on? Why is everyone going back?"

"Nothing worth anything," an older man said beside him. "Like usual."

"But Dahlia! She fought off these Vigil guys with this black fire, and it was just--"

"If you say so," the man said blankly. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Nik practically dragged Dahlia by the arm to his chamber, and when they stepped into the light of his little apartment, Dahlia ripped it out of his grasp.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"You're a fool," Nik said, sitting down on the corner of his desk. "You have no idea what you're doing, and you're going bring the whole place down around you in your attempt."

“What would it hurt?” Dahlia said, throwing her hands up with exasperation. “What would be the problem with letting them experience some pleasure for once?”

“For one,” Nik said, shaking his head at her impertinence, “you’re assuming that everyone has the strength, or – perhaps more importantly – the character to handle such power. You’re essentially equipping an army of people with nuclear missiles, whose usage will eventually eat them alive and then trap them in Lucifer’s prison. But I suppose Seth told you all this already when he snuck you into Nomi’s chamber.”

The guilt in her chest rose up to her cheeks, and she felt them growing prickly with a blush. She tried to turn her face away, but she was too late.

“So he did bring you in there!” Nik said. “I should’ve known he’d be so ballsy. I mean, you’ve got your merits, don’t get me wrong, but every time I think he’s laid everything he possibly can on the line for you, he proves me wrong...”

“What are you trying to say?” Dahlia stammered, feeling more flustered with every accusation. What was left of her euphoria from the souls she’d consumed had dimmed significantly and flickered like a bulb about to go out.

“Look, here’s something I bet you don’t know. The water in Nomi’s basin is finite. There may seem like plenty now, but if you get thousands of nephilim to drink from it, it won’t be long before it dries up. I don’t want to think what would happen then.”

“I didn’t know that,” Dahlia said quietly. All that was left of her defiance was her bottom lip jutting out, almost pouting.

“Look,” Nik said, standing up from the desk and circling around behind her. Dahlia did not turn her head to follow him; she could feel him the closer he got to her, like she could feel Seth’s presence. She could differentiate the two, though. Like two different colors or scents or sounds, there was something fundamentally unique about them, and their presences roused far different emotions in her.

What was harder to admit was which emotions overlapped. She felt her pores rise to meet his fingertips as he drew his hand lightly across her shoulder.

“As idiotic and poorly thought through as it may be, your task is still admirable,” he said. This time there was no hiding her reaction to his touch. Her legs were wobbling at the knees, and she could feel the heat rising in her abdomen, tingling its way down past her thighs.

“Please,” she said.

“I fought for a rebellion, perhaps the greatest rebellion in modern history, and what did it get me besides a bullet in the temple?”

“You ask the impossible, Dahlia. These people are hardly even people. They have spent so long lying around in misery that even if you did have a magical solution, few would even step up to take it. You cannot expect anything from them. They are broken.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said, wincing when he blew gently into her earlobe. She clenched her fists by her side, channeling every bit of her energy into attempting stoicism.

All it took was one hand brushing against her hip, and Nik had undone all her focus and concentration. A moan escaped her lips.

“You can feel it,” he said, letting his hand slide down her abdomen.

“Feel what?” she stammered, breath caught in the back of her throat.

“Anything.”

He grabbed her by the back of her head and pulled her to him, and before she knew what was happening he was kissing her, and she her body was reciprocating much to her alarm. She screamed at herself to stop, but she felt like once again she had been sequestered to the back of her head, made to watch her body act of its own accord.

His hands teased their way up and down her body, and she was shaking so hard she could barely stand up anymore. He bit her lower lip and shoved her down onto his desk, and she could feel her shoulder blades bruise against the books scattered unevenly across its surface.

He settled on top of her, moving his hands up her thighs and taking the hem of her dress up with them. The rush of cold air to her legs was enough to cause a lapse in her body’s autopilot, and she took that opportunity to shove him back away from her.

Unfazed, Nik caught himself on a chair and stalked back towards her. “So you like to play rough?”

“Stop,” she said, pulling her skirt back down.

“What?”

“Stop,” Dahlia repeated, swiveling around on the desk and standing up. Books thudded to the ground around her, knocked from the desk by her movement.

Nik glowered at her, straightening the sleeves of his white button up shirt. “Is that your idea of a little tease?”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she said. “I didn’t want it.”

“Bullshit!”

She frowned and looked away from him, knowing fully well that he had called her bluff. “I need to go. Seth is asleep and waiting for me.”

“I’m telling you, you’re wasting your time with him. He doesn’t understand your power.”

“Oh no,” Dahlia said, brushing off her dress. “I think he finally does, Nik. But unlike you, Seth’s not looking for a cheap thrill.” She walked away, trying not to turn and look back at him as she went.

“So you think you know him so well! You’re in for a big surprise, darling girl!” Nik called after her. Once she had disappeared in the shadows, he swatted the remaining books from the desk with so much force that the books thundered against the wall like cannonballs.

Dahlia made her way by memory back to the pipe. The darkness did well to hide the way her knees still trembled, even as she walked away.

It also hid the figure of Nomi, tucked only a few feet from Nik’s apartment. She sat crouched against the wall with her face buried in her tearstained linen skirts.

CHAPTER 27

“I don’t understand what the point of coming out here was,” Law said, drumming his fingers on the bench. The wood was still damp from the rain that had fallen that evening, and he could feel the mud oozing up through the grass, sucking onto his nice wingtip shoes as he walked.

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a bit of a control freak?” Nate asked from the other side of the bench. He was sitting perched up on the bench’s back, his feet on its seat.

The more Law watched Nate, the more he noticed a discrepancy in the way Nate interacted with the physical world around him. Everything he did was unique but a little heavy handed, like he was still improvising in a world that was unfamiliar.

“Look, you drag me out of sleep at nearly,” Law turned his wrist over to glance at his Rolex, “*two A.M.* and you don’t think I have the right to ask why?”

“Just be patient.”

“What are we looking for anyway? I see nothing but a deserted, foggy park – it’s quite creepy at this hour, mind you.”

With the fog choking the air, Law could hardly see much farther than ten feet away in any direction, which made him feel as though he were trapped in one of those rooms whose walls moved closer and closer together. The little bubble of visibility seemed like it was rapidly shrinking around them, but Nate seemed not to notice or care.

“Just wait,” Nate said. “You’re lucky I had the courtesy to invite you along instead of just taking your body on a joy ride.”

It was hardly an idle threat either. Ever since the murder a couple weeks ago – a rather seamless affair, which for all intents and purposes looked like Gregory had just happened to take a few too many of the sleeping pills he so enjoyed – Nate had started taking over Law’s body on a frequent basis.

The tasks Nate performed by proxy seemed menial and random at first, such as when he walked ten blocks across town just to wander through a dog park and scratch every dog there behind the ears. But after a little while, Law was beginning to discern a common theme: ordinariness. It seemed that all Nate wanted was to experience normal human life from a first person perspective, and Law’s body enabled him to do just that.

Nate had quickly grown so entranced by this lifestyle that he hardly left Law alone. Luckily it seemed he could never sustain the possession for more than a couple hours on end before he had to take a rest. But lately it felt like Law was spending more time watching the world go by from the back of his head than actually interacting with it.

When Law would ask about the main plan, Nate would always dismiss the subject with a quick, halfassed explanation followed almost immediately with a burst of anger at Law’s nosiness. Law was tired of hearing that the time wasn’t right, but he knew better than to press Nate too hard on the topic.

But Nate was enjoying himself far too much for comfort, and Law wondered secretly if they were ever going to get back to their objective, or if he

would spend the rest of his life like a vegetable, staring out at places and people with no ability to reach them.

“Just a minute or two now,” Nate said, his eyes wandering across the horizon. Law wondered if Nate was summoning the Sight, and if the fog was just another point on the plane of existence to him.

Still, Law would rather take a needle to the eyes than bear another dose of those horrible drops. It wasn’t that the physical pain was so unbearable – Law liked to think he had a pretty staunch pain tolerance. Rather, the burden of being forced to see what he abhorred to see, without even his eyelids for escape, was something he wanted to avoid at all costs. He knew in his gut what was going on with Dahlia, but knowing and seeing were two different things, and somehow trapping her in his head was a better salve for his pain. At least then his imagination had the wheel.

“Oh, there we go. Look to the left – your ten o’clock,” Nate commanded, snapping Law back to attention.

Law sat forward, squinting as if he could urge the fog to move aside. He saw nothing at first but the grey mist, like static buzzing on a screen, but after a moment he started to notice a darker grey shape like a shadow moving against the mist.

“I think I see someone,” Law said, blinking to refresh his eyes.

Nate smirked, standing up on the bench’s seat. Despite the added height, he would still be a couple inches shorter than Law if Law stood up. “Over here, sweetheart,” he called, waving his arms above his head.

Law knew whoever it was couldn’t hear Nate – nobody seemed able to except for him for some reason – but to his surprise, he watched the shadow stop mid-pace.

“They can hear you?” Law asked with disbelief.

“Not so much hear as feel,” Nate replied. “You human kids are so vulnerable to suggestion it’s a wonder you’ve made it this far, what with all the evil lurking out there...”

Law watched, frozen on the bench, as the shadow grew larger in the distance. Whoever it was, this person was coming over. He shot a nervous glance at Nate, but the angel was grinning widely as if he was enjoying the best sort of reality show.

As the shadow enlarged, Law began to make out the silhouette of straight hair falling over bony shoulders and a long dress that nearly reached the ground, made out of fabric so thin it clung to the legs underneath with every step.

She looked like a phantom up against the mist, with her face grey and blank, her features unrecognizable. She almost glided more than she walked, as if the ground provided little resistance against her lithe strides. He realized she was barefoot, but she showed no sign of pain from the rough gravel under each step.

“Is that... no,” Law stammered in disbelief, turning back towards Nate.

Nate’s smile only widened as he gave him a little nod in confirmation.

“I can’t,” Law said, but he found himself frozen against the bench. “I’m not ready to see her.”

“I know. And that’s why I couldn’t tell you who we were meeting. You never would’ve come.”

She disappeared again in front of him, and Law briefly thought that maybe she had been a specter all along, mercilessly playing with his mind. But after a moment, she emerged from the last curtain of mist, stepping into the little bubble of clarity around the bench. She was in full form, solid and real.

“Dahlia,” Law said, feeling his voice catching in his throat.

“Hello, Law,” she replied.

Dahlia wasn’t sure what had urged her down that path; she wasn’t going anywhere in particular that night, but allowed her body to wander where it willed.

Still, something had forced her to turn there, like a set of invisible hands pulling her by the ankles, and she found no reason to fear or disobey. So she’d pressed forward, making a little tunnel through the fog like the ones she navigated underground, unsure of where she was going or why or how she would know when she got there, but something inside her told her there was a destination this time, even if she did not know what it was.

The pull had become more urgent the more she walked, and by the time she crossed the threshold into Law’s little world, she knew she was nearly there.

What she hadn’t expected to see was Law sitting rigid on a bench, face nearly as pale and bloodless as hers, staring up at her as if she were a ghost. She supposed she was, in a manner of speaking.

Law was a mess. He look like he’d been rushed out of bed, and he’d fastened his shirt so quickly that he had managed to skip two buttons. His khaki pants were wrinkled and looked too big on his thinning frame – he’d definitely lost weight since the last time she’d seen him. She noticed tendrils of grey among the blonde strands of his hair, which was uncombed and stiff like straw. The whiskers across his jaw were speckled with white.

“Hello, Law,” she said, clenching her teeth to mask her surprise. She tried not to stare at him and noticed he was doing the same.

“You look good,” he said meekly, distinctly trying to avoid looking at her forearms. She had the sudden urge to shove them forward in his face, and why shouldn’t she? He had bought her that fate, and he could live with the consequences, hideous as they were.

But Dahlia found herself unable to conjure much more than pity as she looked down at the man who was beginning to peel apart like cheap paint at only thirty years old.

“How are you?” she asked, though the answer was written clearly in the purple veins crisscrossing under his eyes.

“I’m okay,” he said, “you know. Same old.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said awkwardly.

“Hey, uh, do you want to like sit down or something?” he asked, gesturing toward the bench which appeared empty to her.

“Um, I’m kind of passing through, but,” she began, but the quiet desperation in his slate grey eyes was wearing at her. “Okay,” she said, taking a seat beside him.

He did not shift to face her, but she could feel him looking her over. "You look really good, I mean, healthy or something," he said.

"How ironic. I guess undeath has agreed with me," Dahlia said dryly.

"That's not what I meant," he said, paling even more and swallowing something in his throat with a painful-sounding gulp.

Dahlia shook her head sympathetically. "It's fine, Law. It's been like a month or something now of running around like this, and I guess I'm sort of used to it."

"Yeah. About that, Dahlia--"

"Let's uh," she interrupted, "let's not do that, okay? I don't think you want to open that can of worms with me right now."

"Oh, okay," he said. She had never seen Law back down so immediately. It was almost as if he was the one who had been turned into a naphil. "Sorry."

"It's fine," she said. "Apologies are all sort of too late now. Besides, that's a human thing. It's a waste of time to apologize to the dead."

"I guess you're right. I just want to make it up to you somehow, if there's anything I could do."

"No," she said, silencing him with a raised hand. "Just leave it. What's done is done."

"Do you think maybe someday we could be friends again? I'm not asking you back," Law corrected quickly. "I mean, I miss you so much, Dahlia."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "You sent me to another world, for better or for worse. I don't belong to yours anymore."

"But you could," he protested, beginning to turn his body slightly in towards her. "I mean, no one has to know. You can come and go from our- my place as much as you want."

"Law, I don't think you understand. I can't just walk around like I'm one of you. It's painfully obvious, especially in the daylight, that something's off."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!" She let out a little groan of exasperation. "Look, Law. You're still in the Vigil, which makes you and me enemies. See these things here?" She raised her forearms up to him, pointing to the squirming hydra under her skin. She could see Law grimace at the sight, and in a way she took pleasure in his reaction. "This means you're not even supposed to be talking to me right now. You're supposed to whip out your knife and cut me a new one, remember?"

"Dahlia, that's not what I want."

"Well too fucking bad, Law. You think I wanted to be condemned to this life? You think I want my mom and my little brother grieving for me at twenty-five?"

"Dahlia--"

"Fuck it," she said, standing up from the bench and wiping off the front of her dress. No dust rose from the fabric, no matter how hard she patted it. "I should've just walked away when I saw you."

Law scrambled up from the bench. He grabbed for her arm, but she was too quick and whipped it out of his reach. "Dahlia, please!"

“You’re still the same, Law,” she said, narrowing her eyes with disdain. “Still a selfish child. This isn’t about me at all – it’s about clearing your conscience and simplifying your life back to what it was.”

“That’s not true!”

His breaths were shallow and quickening, and for a second Dahlia thought she might actually witness a cold front moving through hell as Law began to cry. But in typical Law fashion, he had his emotions on a constantly short leash – he had always chalked it up to a repressive childhood or something, or maybe just being British.

“Look, Dahlia,” he said, steeling himself off to limited avail. “Without you I’m nothing. I mean that. I can’t eat, can’t sleep – I can’t even keep my fucking job. I got fired Tuesday, Dahlia! Me! Fired!” His voice had begun to squeak again, like a rusted hinge in desperate need of oil.

“What?”

“I didn’t want to burden you with this, but what the hell. Tuesday morning I came into work to find the contents of my desk in a tub by my office door with my last paystub taped to the top. Something about low client satisfaction.”

“Look Law, that sucks for you but you know, I don’t have to eat, I only barely have to sleep, and I couldn’t hold down a job even if I wanted to,” Dahlia said. “But this isn’t tit-for-tat, Law. You made this bed, and now you have to sleep in it. Sorry it isn’t pretty enough for you.”

She turned on her heel to walk away, but she felt his fingers around her wrist like a sprung bear trap.

“Let me go,” she warned. The anger was beginning to rise again, roiling inside her like the darkness that she knew would explode from her the moment she gave it the slightest permission. For that reason she kept her defenses focused, and pictured reinforcements on the wall that sealed the death energy in.

“Just look at me,” Law said, yanking her by the wrist around so she was facing him. “Look at me!”

She stared up at him, and her eyes had darkened like a tumultuous sea, from their pale frost to a blue so dark it was almost black. She could feel Law shiver just looking into them.

“I just want to love you,” he said. “Like I used to. That’s all I want, to hold you again and prove to you how much I care.”

“I’m sorry,” she said coolly. “It’s too late.”

Law let out a sob and grabbed her around the middle, burying his face in her breast. She tried to push him away, but his grip was like iron.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I love you,” he said. “I love you so much, it’s tearing me apart.”

“Damn it, Law. You’re pissing me off, and you do not want to piss me off.”

“I love you!” he wailed, so insulated by his own grief that he clearly did not hear one word she’d said.

Dahlia rolled her eyes, trying to calm herself down and pry him away properly.

But then he his whole body shuddered, as if a bomb had exploded inside his core, and he went limp around her. Her first thought was that maybe he was having a heart attack, but when he straightened up and looked at her with those blank eyes and vacant smile, she realized what was happening.

Whatever had possessed Law when he struck her down in the alley had returned.

“Hello, poppit,” he said.

She took a half step backwards. “Who are you?”

“I’m your Lawrence, silly bear.”

“No you’re not.”

He crossed his legs and took a sweeping bow in front of her. “Bravo, Madame. You caught me. I admit that I just *love* using your little friend here as a ventriloquist dummy.”

“I asked you who you are.”

He ignored the request again, resting his chin in the “L” between his index finger and thumb as he looked her over. “You know, you don’t appear too worse for wear.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well come on, sweetheart. Tell me you don’t feel it building up inside you. Too many stunts like last night and you’ll be looking forward to a one way bus ride to the infernal prison.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Let’s not beat around the bush, dear. I can practically feel the death radiating through your body when I touch you. You’ve got powers that make things go boom, but they’re eating you faster than you apparently know.”

Dahlia stared down at her own body with horror, wondering if her senses had possibly betrayed her. Seth said she would know when the residual death energy had grown too concentrated, but honestly she felt no difference. She had not even noticed a mark on her skin when she had undressed for bed.

“You know it’s true,” Law said.

“Well that’s too bad,” she said, gritting her teeth. “It’s the best defense I have – the world has – against creeps like you.”

“Not to rain on your parade or anything, darling,” Law sniggered, pacing around her, “but the world doesn’t even want you. What makes you think it’s worth defending?”

Dahlia balled up her fists, frustration hot in her chest. “I don’t even care what the world thinks,” she stammered. “My mom and my brother-”

“Think you’re dead, right?”

“Look, this is still the only world I’ve ever known. I mean, even if I’m sort of outside it now, that’s no reason to abandon it or the people in it. Especially with evil like you lurking around...”

“Yeah, okay. Whatever you say, sweetheart.” Law said, turning away from her. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I think it’s time I took this boy home before he wets himself.”

“Fuck you.”

“Curse all you want, love.”

Dahlia was considering diving for him and igniting his body like a huge black bonfire, but she had the feeling all that would do was amuse whoever this spirit was. She sunk down into the bench, watching as Law's body limped weakly away into the curtain of fog.

Even if she'd wanted to destroy him, she felt like the flames inside her had been doused with sand. As abhorrent as his words were, they were also true. The world did not want her; in fact, the world would probably rest easier if they could see her destroyed. But still she could not shake the fierce loyalty inside her to people she knew did not deserve it, but people she loved nonetheless.

"Why me?" she groaned into her palms, doubling over on the bench. "Why can't I just have an easy stupid life with flowers and sunshine and a husband and 2.5 kids?"

But even as she cast her miseries into the empty park, the answer resonated in her head. She was not meant for that sort of life and had never been, from the moment she survived Lucy's murder.

After muttering just about every curse word she could think of, Dahlia stood up and continued wandering her way through the park. Every step echoed like Law's voice in her head, reminding her – as he had always reminded her – that she was going nowhere fast.

CHAPTER 28

When Dahlia stumbled back into the Underground a few hours later, Nomi was waiting at the vestibule for her. Her hair looked flattened, like she had been lying down on it for too long, and her eyes were striped with red blood vessels.

"There is a human here," Nomi said when Dahlia approached.

Dahlia turned her ankle stopping suddenly. "What?"

"He says he is here to see you," she said. "He is Nik's chamber."

Nomi bowed rigidly and stalked off towards her own chamber.

Normally Dahlia would have stopped to wonder about Nomi's unusually curt demeanor, but too many disconcerting questions were coagulating in her head. What human knew where the entrances to the Underground were, much less expected to find her there? Furthermore, who with any shred of survival instincts would actually brave the Underground to come looking for her?

The same couple questions circulated through her head all the way to Nik's chamber. As she navigated the shadows, she could see someone sitting over in the armchair, but from her angle she could only make out a pair of black pants and well-polished shoes. The wings of the chair hid the visitor's identity.

"Ah, here she comes," Nik spoke up from the other chair before Dahlia had even crossed into the light.

She wanted to think that maybe he had heard her footsteps or the movement of her skirt, but something suggested that her presence had been more of a feeling to him than anything else. She could almost feel her stomach churn, even though she knew it sat there rotting into a hardened pit like the rest of her organs.

"Dahlia?" the man in the chair said, rising to his feet.

“Pierre?” she said with disbelief, stepping past the shadowy threshold.

Sure enough, it was Pierre. The undersides of his eyes were swollen with puffy little bags, and his cheeks were gaunter than she had seen them before, but she could still virtually hear the blood roaring in his veins and she let out a tiny relieved gasp.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” he said.

She practically dove forward into his arms, and he was laughing, holding her close to his chest and smoothing down her hair with both hands as if here were still convincing herself that she was tangible.

“How did you know I was here?” she asked once he’d let go of her.

“I had a hunch,” he replied. “After way too much moping, I decided my last resort would be to come here. Couldn’t hurt to check.”

He chuckled, and Dahlia heard his voice warble just a little and remembered how every hair on her body had stood up the first time she had wandered the halls of the Underground. The ceiling had felt like a trap then instead of just another wall, pressing down on her like a lid, permanently nullifying any chance of escape. Everything seemed so heavy with the stench of death, too; in a sense, it felt a lot like she imagined it would feel to find herself buried alive in someone else’s casket.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come up to see you,” she said, standing awkwardly with no chair of her own. She could practically feel Nik glowering up at her from his chair, but she refused to give him the courtesy of a sideways glance.

“Believe me, Dahlia – given what you’ve gone through I expect I was the least of your concerns.”

She smiled meekly, but the smile soon grew stale on her face.

“Your friend Father Pierre was just telling me how he found us when you came in,” Nik spoke up from the chair. There was an edge to his voice which sliced so subtly and sharply that Dahlia almost missed it. Apparently she couldn’t make anyone happy these days.

“Oh, right,” Dahlia said, interiorly darting back to her question from before. “How did you get here?”

“Funny you should ask,” Pierre said as if the inquiry was not to be expected. “Do you know the young man with a penchant for the church cemetery, the one always carrying the cat?”

“Eddie,” Dahlia said. “I’ve caught him in the cemetery too. I don’t know what his deal is with that place, I mean, but seriously-”

“His parents are buried there,” Nik interrupted.

Dahlia brought her hand up to her face and pinched her lips shut.

“But go on, Father,” Nik said with a pronounced smirk, crossing his legs like a talk show host.

“Well,” said Pierre, “to make a long story short, Eddie was out and about in the cemetery this evening, and I just went over to him and asked him. I told him I was a friend of yours, Dahlia, and he led me all the way here. He said you saved his cat last night?”

“Oh,” Dahlia said, blushing at her feeble attempt at heroism. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

Nik raised an eyebrow.

“He could not say enough kind things about you,” Pierre said, smiling with a pride that looked almost paternal. Dahlia took immediate pleasure in the gesture, and she bowed her head so he would not see her blush deepen.

“But it was important I came to find you,” Pierre finished, his expression turning grave. “A lot has happened, and I don’t think you’re aware of it down here.”

“Why don’t you sit down first, Dahlia,” Nik said, rising and pulling a stool out from under the chessboard. He gestured toward the chair and took the stool himself, though Dahlia felt that his politeness was strained. Her standing seemed more of an annoyance to him than to her.

“Thanks,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the armchair and crossing her legs like Nik had done earlier. “So go ahead, Pierre. What’s up?”

“Well firstly, Monsignor Gregory is dead.”

“What?” Dahlia reeled. “When? How? I thought that troll would never bite the big one!”

“*Bite the big one*,” Nik repeated to himself, shaking his head.

“He was found dead in the rectory a couple weeks ago,” Pierre said. “Apparently he had overdosed on the drug Ativan.”

“Holy shit,” Dahlia said, before remembering her company and crossing herself. “Sorry Pierre.”

He held up a hand as if absolving of her the curse and continued. “The coroner reported the death as accidental, but I’m not so sure... I cannot articulate very well why, but I have my suspicions.”

“You think somebody did him in?”

Nik shook his head again. “*Did him in*? For fuck’s sake, what’s next?”

“I can’t say for certain, obviously,” Pierre said, adjusting his Roman collar anxiously. Dahlia imagined it was probably already soaked through with sweat. “I guess it’s just his death in conjunction with the other odd things that have been happening.”

“Of course, couldn’t just be one odd thing in Avington,” Dahlia muttered. “Go on, give me your worst.”

Pierre winced. “It’s to do with Law, mostly. I’m sorry; I know this is an uncomfortable topic.”

“I can handle it,” Dahlia said flatly. “Go on.”

“Well, he’s been acting quite strangely. I’ve noticed it for a while now – he talks to himself a lot, as if he’s having a full-fledged conversation with another person – and at first I was afraid he might have developed some sort of schizophrenia. But then he started changing.”

“Let me guess,” Dahlia said. “He’s a lot smoother, but kind of flamboyant. Acts like a really sadistic valley girl.”

“Oh?” Pierre said, cocking his head to the side. “I take it you’ve seen this part of him before?”

“Oh he’s definitely possessed,” Dahlia said. “He’s told me stuff like that he couldn’t possibly have known. He’s done things...”

Dahlia's voice shuddered and cut out, and Pierre looked over at Nik who was picking at his nails with boredom. "He's the reason she's here," Nik answered nonchalantly.

At that point Dahlia was hardly surprised that Nik knew all about it; to his credit, there was little about the Underground or the nephilim he didn't know.

"He was himself and then he just, he changed or something," Dahlia recounted hoarsely. "His eyes went totally blank, like he wasn't there anymore. He said some weird stuff he never would have said – the inflection was definitely someone else's – and then he was stabbing me over and over, and the next thing I knew I woke up here."

"I'm so sorry," Pierre said, leaning out to reach for her hand. "I can't help but feel that was my fault for not insisting you stay inside. You weren't well yet."

"It was supposed to happen," she said, reaching for his hand and squeezing it tenderly. "There was nothing you could do to stop it. I knew I was going to die all along somehow, even long before it ever happened."

"Still, I'm sorry for the pain you've had to go through."

"Well I'd say what don't kill you only makes you stronger, but considering the circumstances..."

Dahlia saw him crack a grin and felt victorious in that moment.

Nik however cleared his throat sharply. "Shall we continue?"

"Right," Pierre said, withdrawing his hand and sitting back with his impeccable posture. "I'm not sure if you're familiar with the process of appointing a new Vigil leader."

"I'm not," Dahlia said. "But I can imagine it's a cluster."

"Well, yeah. The Vatican itself decides the successor when a Vigil leader dies or is expelled; the individual archdiocese doesn't even have a say."

Dahlia whistled.

"And given the thousands of Vigil sects in the world and the nature of their activities, it's not that uncommon for a leader to die. At that point, the College of Cardinals looks through a master list of higher ranking clergy – usually bishops and archbishops, though increasing demand has called for instatement of monsignors too – and selects the proper man for the position."

"So I'm guessing that takes a while," Dahlia remarked, "you know, if I remember anything about the College of Cardinals choosing a pope."

"That's right," Pierre said, frowning. "The College of Cardinals already has lots of other things to take care of, and sometimes the Vigil gets put on the back burner. The sects with missing leaders also tend to pile up. All that adds up to months of wait time sometimes, and an acting leader has to step up during the wait."

"So let me ask the million dollar question here," Nik said. "Who's acting leader for Avington's Vigil?"

"I think I know," Dahlia said, narrowing her eyes with disgust.

"I am becoming more and more convinced that that person is not Law," Pierre said. "He's loud and pushy, and everyone's afraid of him, even Herbert and Donne. He hasn't yet resorted to physical violence, but it seems a pretty likely possibility."

“Man, sounds like you guys are just having a blast without me,” Dahlia said, shaking her head. “I guess I got out at the right time.”

“Well, that’s not really the worst of it,” Pierre said, wincing again.

“You mean to say?”

“Yeah, there’s more. I think you’ll understand when I tell you why I was in such a hurry to find you.”

Dahlia slapped her forehead with her palm, and the skin must have made an awful smacking sound, because Pierre was staring at her with eyes like quarters. “Oh, don’t worry. It didn’t hurt,” Dahlia said quickly. “Go on.”

“So, uh, I don’t know how to put this gently, but here goes,” Pierre began, resuming his nervous gesture of twiddling his thumbs. “They know how to destroy the nephilim.”

At that Nik perked up significantly. He lowered his fingers from his teeth.

“Shit,” Dahlia said. “Guess Gregory wasn’t bluffing when he read to me from that Nathaniel book.”

Even just saying the name made her hackles rise, as though the sound of the word itself had conjured a hex on all who beheld it.

“No, he unfortunately was not. But the method is a bit upsetting.”

“Spare me,” Dahlia said, though she knew her stomach could no longer turn.

“So Law is planning on conducting the first of these banishment rites soon, which the book calls the Primal Sacrifice. And as you can imagine, the Primal Sacrifice requires the banishment of a naphil,” Pierre said.

“And let me guess who’s number one on their list,” Dahlia snickered.

“Actually, they are not planning on banishing you,” Pierre said, and Dahlia felt cool relief spreading through her chest. But the sensation was short-lived.

“Your friend Seth is their target,” he finished.

Nik was sitting bolt upright on the stool, and Dahlia could have sworn his skin had an even greener tint than usual.

“I think I know who was in charge of that decision,” Dahlia muttered bitterly, picturing how desperately Law had clung to her, begging her to love him again. Pathetic. “Attack my lover to get back at me? What are we, in high school?”

“Whatever his motives may be, those are his plans as he’s announced them to us,” Pierre said. “And that’s the Creator’s honest truth. You know I would never be dishonest with you, Dahlia, even if they commanded me to do so. After all our years of friendship, I owe you that much at the very least.”

“Oh hush,” Dahlia said, fanning the air in front of her with both hands. She hoped the flush on her cheeks would pass as gratitude. “The thought never even crossed my mind.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Pierre said. “Truth be told, they did approach me to get me to find you before they knew you were a naphil. I told them to get lost, even if it meant my dagger. I think the only reason they have yet to eject me is that they still think I’ll inadvertently lead them to you.”

“And you won’t, right?” Nik pressed, boring a hole through the center of Pierre’s forehead with his black marble eyes. “I hope you made sure you weren’t being followed or overheard.”

“Of course,” Pierre said calmly. “I’m very careful.”

“He is,” Dahlia said, as if he needed confirmation.

Nik flicked his eyes sideways. “Just figured I would ask.”

“So what do we do now?” Dahlia began to ask.

As if in response, swift footsteps echoed through the chamber, growing faster and louder along with the rustling of a heavy coat.

“Seth,” Dahlia said, standing up as he emerged like a phantom from the shadow.

“Dahlia, I heard there was a human here, and I was afraid-”

“It’s not Law, don’t worry” Dahlia said, taking one of his big brown hands in hers. “I want you to meet someone.”

Pierre rose as well and stepped around the chair. He and Seth locked eyes with the quiet apprehension of any two natural predators meeting for the first time. The tension inside Dahlia was building, and she began to wonder if she had made a mistake introducing them with such nonchalance.

But then Pierre smiled, and his row of straight, white teeth was like an antidote to their stalemate, shattering all apprehension between them.

Dahlia looked up at Seth over her shoulder, and he too was smiling, and then he released her hand and stepped forward towards Pierre, offering it towards him warmly.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” Seth said.

“I feel the same,” Pierre replied, taking Seth’s hand graciously between two of his own.

“Pierre, Seth,” Dahlia said, glancing from one to the other. “I’m sorry it took so long for you to meet. I think that’s my fault, mostly.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pierre said, as both men turned back towards her with similar looks of consolation on their faces. “It is not as though we are the most likely friends. You are the one who bridged the gap.”

Dahlia saw Nik shifting uncomfortably out of the corner of her eye, and the way his dark eyes were turned down and his mouth was pressed flat roused guilt in her. Was it possible Nik was jealous of the roles Pierre and Seth occupied in her life?

“Pierre and Nik have met earlier,” she said quickly, trying to draw him into the conversation with limited effectiveness. Nik would not meet her eyes, but she felt like he wanted to say something to her just then despite his pressing silence.

“Yes,” Pierre said. “Nik has been an accommodating host.”

“Good to hear,” Seth said, though Dahlia caught a hint of an edge in his voice.

Dahlia began to wonder just what sort of conversations, if any, the two had had concerning her. Part of her, the part she was most ashamed of, rather enjoyed the attention in the sort of way that a medieval princess enjoyed watching two young men joust to the death over her affections. But Dahlia also knew that if

anything would happen to Seth – and in some senses even Nik, she realized to her astonishment – part of her would be destroyed alongside them.

“Seth,” Dahlia said, stepping forward and grabbing his hands. “Pierre had some really important things to tell me. Some terrible things that you need to hear.”

Seth glanced back at Pierre questioningly, and by the way his dark brows furrowed Dahlia realized he was fighting his lingering doubts as to whether Pierre had come of his own accord, just as she had earlier.

“He’s on our side,” she urged.

“I understand, given the circumstances, if you don’t trust me,” Pierre said.

“No,” Seth said quickly. “It’s okay. Dahlia trusts you, and that’s enough for me. You risked a lot to come here.”

She squeezed Seth’s hand appreciatively, and Nik stood up to drag another stool over from the chessboard.

“If you don’t mind Santino’s hair, you can sit here,” he said to Seth who stiffly thanked him and took a seat.

“Would you mind terribly if you told Seth all the things you told me?” Dahlia said to Pierre once they took a seat in their own chairs. “I think it’s better if he hears it first-hand from you instead of me.”

Pierre nodded. “Sure, I suppose I’ll start from the beginning again.”

“Thank you,” Dahlia said.

Pierre cleared his throat and sat up straighter, folding his hands in his lap. “I wish this got easier with each retelling, but unfortunately that doesn’t appear to be the case.”

“Nothing gets easier,” Dahlia heard Nik mumble beside her.

She shook her head, but the same guilt from earlier still sunk in her gut like a wrecked ship.

With a sad smile crossing his lips, Pierre began to speak.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so humiliated in my life,” Law said as he kicked the apartment door shut behind him. He shrugged out of his leather bomber jacket, which now dwarfed his gangly frame, and threw it carelessly over the counter.

“Got to keep those things better under wraps,” Nate said, though without the derision Law was expecting.

Law threw open the fridge, which was nearly empty except for a mélange of brown beer bottles standing on the bottom shelf. He grabbed the nearest bottle without looking at the label and snapped the lid off with his teeth, spitting the top into the sink.

“There’s no arguing with her now, anyway,” Nate continued, following Law to the living room. “She’s made up her mind.”

“I can see that,” Law said bitterly. “I guess they say hope springs eternal, though.”

“Yeah, screw that,” Nate said, scrunching up his nose. “Take a rest, though. You’re going to need some energy for the next couple days.”

“So you mean we’re actually going to do something?” Law piped up, trying unsuccessfully to temper the disdain that he knew thickly coated his voice.

“It’s time to act,” Nate said. “I think we’ve put it off long enough, yes?”

“I’ll say,” Law said into the neck of his beer.

“Tomorrow we’ll start putting the plans into motion,” Nate announced from the windowsill. “But for now, get some rest.”

Law nodded halfheartedly and tipped the bottle up to swallow the rest of the beer. He left it on the coffee table, uncaring for once if the sweat from the bottle would leave a ring.

“I’ll be in my room,” Law announced, though he knew the gesture was hardly necessary. There was no secrecy or privacy for that matter with a creature whose eyes could see every point in the physical world, with very few exceptions.

Law stepped into the bedroom and shut the door, more for his own piece of mind than anything else. He stood by the door for a few minutes, taking in deep breaths and massaging his sweaty temples.

He needed to soothe himself, and these days there were few things he could do that provided even temporary comfort. This particular ritual was one that actually seemed to make Nate uncomfortable, to the point where he never asked or commented on what he knew Law did alone in that bedroom. It was yet another reason the ritual so appealed to Law.

He silently stripped off his clothes and let them fall to the carpet. The only light in the room came from a single orange nightlight, which he would’ve considered pulling it out of the wall if it weren’t necessary to help him navigate.

Under the cloak of near-darkness, he crossed over to his dresser and undid the clasp of a little box, no bigger than a shoebox, which rested on top of it. From the box he carefully withdrew a coil of white leather. He unwound the whip, making sure the seven tails were not tangled together, and took the thick braided handle in his hand.

He stroked the handle, and tingles of pleasure zipped through him, concentrating on the lines of hardened scar tissue that crisscrossed every inch of his back, some still pink and swollen from his most recent penance.

It was a ritual he’d picked up in college, as part of a secret society whose initiates underwent a series of mortifications of the flesh that put his seven-tailed whip to shame. He’d found the pain soothing then, perhaps because of the way each sting reminded him of his humanity, and his natural superiority to those whose nerves were permanently severed.

As he underwent those tortures, he pictured himself standing as the Son had before a legion of Romans, with the wind sweeping up the dust from the road beneath him. He imagined the itching of the sackcloth wrapped tucked around him, and the way his wrists blistered from being constantly bound.

From that point on, flagellation had become a spiritual exercise, to the point where he felt jilted and empty when he went too long between rituals, like most devout Catholics felt when they missed too many masses. He craved the kiss of the leather against his skin and the heat that bubbled up from each line; the way the little streams of blood tickled his skin as they dripped down below his waist.

Just hearing the crack of a whip was sometimes enough to stir up an erection.

“Bless me Father,” Law said, stepping into the center of the room and kneeling down onto the carpet, “for I have sinned. Though I confess my sins, I still sin each day without end. All I can offer to you, Lord, is my penance.”

He raised the whip above his head and closed his eyes. “I chastise my body and bring it into subjection; let perhaps when I have preached to others I myself should be castaway,” he whispered, lifting his face towards the ceiling. “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in the Son’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is the church.”

With a hard flick of his wrist, he cracked the tails of the whip down over his shoulder.

CHAPTER 29

“What is it now?” Dahlia demanded as she stormed into Nik’s apartment. “Nomi was practically in tears when she told me you were asking for me.”

Nik turned around from the chessboard where Santino sat. He appeared unconcerned by Dahlia’s irritation. “Did the good Father make it back to his church?”

“Seth’s walking him home,” Dahlia said.

“Good.”

“Look, Nik,” Dahlia said, feeling the irritation beginning to rile in her again. “I don’t know what the hell you want from me.”

“Well for starters, I’d like to talk to you about these recent developments. Alone.”

He paused at the last word, as if stopping to taste it on his tongue. Dahlia was stricken with a mixture of revulsion and intrigue, a strange cocktail of feelings she had come to expect when she was around Nik.

“So we’re screwed, apparently,” Dahlia snapped. “What of it?”

“Come on,” Nik said, rolling his eyes at her petulance. “I know you well enough to know you’re not going to give in without a fight. I mean, you’re a stubborn little brat, but no one can say you’re quick to surrender.”

“Yeah, well, if the whole Vigil wants us it’s not like there’s a lot we can do to fight back. Trying to torch that many guys would be suicidal.”

“Oh I agree,” Nik said, sitting down against the edge of the desk with his arms folded. Dahlia had begun to recognize that posture as the one Nik assumed when he was certain he had the trump card, and she realized with a frustrated groan that she had unwittingly began playing into his hand.

“What do you want?” Dahlia said again, kneading her eyes with the heels of her hands. “I’m sick of your stupid games.”

Nik cocked his head, eyes wide and soft as if he had been hurt by her assumption. Dahlia, had she not known better, would have churned with guilt at the look.

“I’m not playing a game, Dahlia,” he said. “This is all very serious.”

“Yeah, okay,” she muttered, looking away from him.

“Look, you’re right. If that many Vigil members want you, they’re going to get you. You saw how easily Pierre found us last night. Just imagine if Eddie had placed his trust in the wrong person...”

“Eddie screwed up,” Dahlia said. “Everybody knows that you don’t give up the Underground, even if they send you back. I’m going to talk to him.”

“Yeah, you do that. And you’d better hope no one else is as weak-willed as he is.”

“I don’t know what else you expect me to do.”

“Well, just count your blessings that it’s not you they’ve chosen for their little primal sacrifice thing.”

“It might as well be me,” Dahlia said, casting her eyes to the ground remorsefully. “I’d switch places with Seth in a heartbeat.”

“I think they’re counting on that.”

“I mean, wouldn’t you?” she said, gesturing towards the shadows. “What if it had been Nomi? Wouldn’t you?”

“If it were Nomi, I mean, I,” Nik stammered at first, flustered. As always, though, it didn’t take him more than a second to regain his composure. “That’s not the point. Nomi’s not their target.”

Dahlia smiled to herself, enjoying her little victory as monetary as it was. So Nomi’s love was far from one-sided, and even Nik’s façade could not maintain the illusion of indifference all the time.

“If you’re trying to convince me not to go after Seth, you’re wasting your time,” Dahlia said. “I’d follow him to hell, if that’s what it took.”

Nik shook his head sadly, and to Dahlia’s surprise she could not milk any disdain from his expression. Something was still earnest about him; he apparently had not fully recovered from the way she dropped Nomi’s name.

“Your loyalty is foolish, but beautiful,” Nik said.

“It is what it is.”

“There’s something you need to know, though,” he said, locking his eyes onto hers. “I’ve been keeping it from you since I first realized who you were, because I knew it would devastate you.”

Dahlia could not look away from him as much as she wanted to and instead stood paralyzed by the seriousness on his face, which he wore with the ease of an itchy sackcloth. She silently prayed for the cocky playfulness to return to him.

“What are you talking about?” she forced out.

“I just want to make sure you’re fully informed before you make any decisions,” Nik said. “I suppose I owe you this.”

“Informed about what?”

He sighed with evident pain and hesitation, and Dahlia had never felt as uncomfortable in her life as she did watching Nik’s black eyes brim with regret.

“Look,” he began, carefully selecting each word before he spoke. “When you were a child and you witnessed your sister’s death – do you remember anything about it?”

“Of course I do,” Dahlia said, her voice crackling worse than a phone with terrible reception. “You know I do.”

"I know, but what else do you remember? Other than me, other than Lucy."

Dahlia squinted, struggling to pull up memories that were quickly unraveling the more she tugged. "I don't know."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said. "What are you getting at?"

"Just be patient," he offered. "Close your eyes if that helps."

Dahlia hesitantly complied, letting her eyelids slowly droop until she could see nothing anymore. She urged her mind to click on like an old projector, and frame-by-frame she began to replay the scene again, and the images sharpened a little at a time, as if she were running them through a filter.

She winced as she watched Nik slap Lucy again, who went limp in his arms. The despair of Dahlia the child overcame her senses, and she almost cried out for her long-dead sister there in Nik's chamber; but there was another channel to her emotions, one which had not been there twenty years earlier when she was a child but now built inside her. Resentment steeped in her veins, black and hot like the fire she commanded, urging her to destroy every inch of the man whose selfishness had paved the rest of her life with misery from that point on.

"Concentrate, Dahlia," Nik spoke up beside her. She realized the resentment for him was practically oozing from every pore in her skin.

"I hate you," she said.

"I know. And that's okay. I deserve your hatred."

"I want to destroy you."

"I know. But that's not what this is about. Just keep pushing through the pain of the memories. Think."

She begrudgingly returned to her task, driven only by an urging in her gut that there was something important hidden underneath, some truth that would unlock the mysteries that had tormented her all her life. While her brain vehemently reamed her for trusting Nik, her instinct knew better. *Press on*, it said. *Once and for all*.

She imagined herself as she had been, five years old and itchy in her stuffy Yule dress. Her hair was curly and matted in sweat, and she had torn her tights on the pavement. Her left knee was scraped and bleeding.

She was sitting there wailing as Nik tore Lucy's life away, but watching nevertheless. Why was she watching like that? Even at five, Dahlia would have fought until there was nothing left to propel her little limbs. Why was she watching? Why didn't she fight?

"Someone's holding me," she realized aloud.

"That's it," Nik said.

The memory came back in waves, sometimes blurry and faint, and sometimes so startlingly vivid that she could still practically feel the winter chill on her face. Another rush of memory like a swell from the tide settled over her, and she remembered the arms around her, keeping her still. There had been another.

"Another man," Dahlia said. "I can feel his arms around me, but he's not rough. He never hit me."

“No,” Nik said dryly. “He didn’t.”

“And that sound,” Dahlia said, hearing the piercing whistle again as Nik started to draw Lucy’s soul out of her mouth. She clapped her hands over her ears at the memory, but the gesture was of course futile. “Please make it stop.”

Nik said nothing, but she could hear him pacing anxiously next to her. She was edging closer and closer, and he knew it.

“That sound. My heart,” Dahlia moaned, grasping at her chest even though there was no longer anything inside. “Oh shit. I’m-”

But like that the sound was smothered, muffled but not gone entirely, reduced to the annoying buzz of a mosquito in her ear. She felt the pain in her chest beginning to release. “It’s almost gone; I can barely hear it.”

“The pressure...” And then it struck her. She took a huge step back, almost losing her balance, and Nik had to move quickly to steady her. “His hands,” she said. “He’s covering my ears. It’s the sound – that’s why I survived. I couldn’t hear the sound.”

She opened her eyes, searching for Nik. He was standing beside her, his hand still clenched around her upper arm.

“I remember,” she said. “The other man saved my life.”

“Good,” Nik said, though she could tell by his tone he thought it was anything but. “I’m sorry to put you through this again, but you wouldn’t have believed me if I told you. Seth swore he was never going to tell you.”

“Seth?”

Nik froze, watching her with his head tilted. “You don’t remember his face?”

“I never saw his face,” Dahlia said, feeling her stomach churn as the pieces snapped together. “Why did you say Seth?”

“I thought you remembered,” Nik said softly, stepping back from her.

“Remembered? Wait. It was Seth, wasn’t it? He was the one with you.”

“And now you know why I had to tell you.”

“Oh fuck,” Dahlia said, shrinking to the ground. “Oh fuck. No. No. This is a joke. A sick joke.”

Nik wasn’t smiling. His hands were clenched uncomfortably before him, and he looked like he wanted to leave.

Dahlia felt like she was going to throw up, and almost wished she could have. “How could he lie to me?”

“How could he tell you?”

Dahlia rocked back and forth, clenching her knees and moaning into her skirt. “Damn it, Seth. Damn you.”

“I’m sorry,” Nik began to say, but Dahlia shook her head forcefully.

“Just leave me alone,” she said. “Fuck you and fuck him. He should’ve just let me die with her.”

Nik sighed and wandered back towards his daybed against the wall, Santino at his heels.

Dahlia wished she could cry, but her tear ducts felt dry and swollen. The rage and sorrow had built inside her to the point where she felt claustrophobic in her own body, but she had no release. Her first thought was to destroy herself at

least for a momentary escape, but she quickly dismissed the thought with disdain. She was sick of running away from her problems.

“Fuck!” Dahlia screamed, climbing to her feet. “Fuck!”

“Let it out,” Nik said, but she ignored him.

Her chest felt hot and swollen with anger like a zeppelin, and she imagined the ground shaking under her feet as she stamped out of Nik’s apartment and down the pipe towards the main vestibule. Nomi stood at the end of her hallway, watching Dahlia with pity in her eyes.

She wanted to scream until she couldn’t scream anymore, to rip the tapestries off the wall and tear at the furniture until there was nothing left but scraps of wood and rusting nails. But her body felt numb and heavy, like she could hardly lift her arms. Even walking took all her strength.

Dahlia did laps around the vestibule, steeping silently in her rage. The other nephilim seemed to know better than to approach her, and even Strange Eddie watched her sadly from the shadows.

She recognized Seth’s footsteps the second she heard the heavy dragging across the stone floor. He saw Dahlia slumped and pacing, face contorted with rage, and he stopped in his tracks.

“Dahlia?”

“Damn it, Seth,” she said, unable to force her voice to rise. “When were you going to tell me about what happened that night? When were you going to tell me you were there?”

His eyes widened to golf balls, and he grimaced, doubling over as though he had been stabbed between the shoulder blades. “I’m so sorry, Dahlia.”

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t remember one day?”

“I didn’t think-”

“No!” she cried hoarsely. “You didn’t think! You didn’t think about anything before you swooped in to toy with me.”

“I didn’t know at first,” he said in weak protest. “I don’t know why, but I didn’t put two-and-two together until later.”

“How much later?”

“I- I mean-”

“For fuck’s sake! How much later, Seth?”

“At the bar. When we stood outside, I looked at your face and realized who you were. I swear to the Creator that’s the truth.”

“I can’t believe this,” Dahlia said, her eyes finally beginning to squeeze out a few tears. She wiped her face, fighting the momentary urge to gouge out her own eyes in her humiliation. “You made a total idiot out of me.”

“I didn’t mean to, Dahlia.”

“Well, congratulations. You succeeded.”

He took a step in towards her, but the hatred in her glare drove him back.

“Just get out,” Dahlia said, rubbing her eyes. “Just get the fuck out of the Underground and never come back. If I ever see you again, I will destroy you.”

“I love you, Dahlia,” he said.

“I don’t care.”

"I don't know what happened, but somewhere down the line I realized I was in love with you. I couldn't let you go; it was selfish."

"No kidding."

"I should have told you, but I didn't know how. I thought you'd hate me."

"Well too late," she said, shuddering as she choked out another sob. "Just get out, okay?"

"I didn't know what I was doing," Seth protested. "I begged Nik not to do it, but he wouldn't listen to me. He just wanted to feel something again. And when I felt you giving out in my arms, I just put my hands on your ears. It was instinct."

"Well thanks for rescuing me," she said sarcastically. "I think every girl wants a life haunted by the ghost of their dead sister."

"I didn't think about that! I just did what my gut told me to."

"Fuck your gut," Dahlia spat. "It's been all about you from the beginning – and Nik says I'm a brat! Who knows? Maybe you saved me then so I could grow up hot enough for you to bone me one day."

"Stop it."

"You want to go? You want to hit me, Seth?"

His lower lip jutted out in defiance, and she could practically see him shaking. The rage was beginning to build in him too; she could feel the heat sweltering under his skin.

"You want to finish what you started?"

His eyes flashed black, and for a second she thought he might actually raise his hands to her. But the rage just as quickly died away, and he turned back towards the door.

"I'm sorry," he said sadly over his shoulder. "I never meant to hurt you."

"I'm sorry too," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"You won't ever have to see me again," he said. "I'll leave you alone for good."

He slunk away, retreating back through the main hallway almost silently. Dahlia watched him disappear, his black silhouette like a shadow against all the other shadows swirling in every corner of that place.

When she could no longer see him anymore, she turned and stalked off down a side hall. Her mind was numb, leaving her body to retrace the steps she had taken so many times, to the place she had once called home.

She slammed the door shut behind her and fell into the white futon.

The buckling dam finally burst open, and she began to sob with a kind of bottomless sorrow she had never known before. She cried for hours, until her eyes were raw and her nostrils stung, and when she could not cry anymore, sleep mercifully took her.

CHAPTER 30

Dahlia was not sure how long she had laid there on the futon, unmoving and clinging to emptiness, the same sort of emptiness she felt after she had cried all she could cry and waited for the world to crumble around her.

She was numb, just as she'd been right after her death and before she imbibed the waters of life, but this time she welcomed the numbness. No sensation was far better than the tug-of-war fought between regret and resentment, which threatened to pull her apart with far more strength than she had to keep herself together. She was not sure if she hated Seth or herself more, and that fact was enough to make her crave the sweet oblivion she knew she could never find.

Even if there was no heaven for mankind; even if people just floated in nothingness after they died, they were the lucky ones. Without the threat of death, what was the purpose of life? Without the shadow of death looming somewhere in the indeterminable future, there was no immediacy, no drive to do anything but exist. What was there to enjoy about a world that was no better than a prison?

She had considered a couple times seeking out Raphael to ask him all about these things – heaven, earth, and the chaos swirling in between. But something held her back. Perhaps it was the fact that no matter how wonderful the afterlife seemed, she would be forever sealed out of it. There was not much pleasure in reading a travel brochure for a destination she could never enjoy.

When a light knock on the door alerted her ears, she first thought she had imagined it. Part of her transformed the knock into a heavier pounding, like the sound of Seth's solid fist against the wood, demanding entrance just as he would demand forgiveness, and she would give it to him because she herself could not decide whether regret or resentment would win out after all.

But when the door creaked open, the foot wedged beside it was narrow and soft and light brown, and Dahlia recognized the little bells on her silver anklet.

"Dahlia," Nomi said, nudging herself into the room just slowly enough that her presence did not seem like an intrusion, as if she had been there all along.

Dahlia strained her eyes to look up at Nomi without moving her head, but she could hardly see past the colorful bodice of her dress. She did not need to look at her to know the empathy in her soft face.

"I'm so sorry for what you have been through," Nomi said, taking a seat on the corner of the futon. She smelled faintly of spices and fresh, like the wet sap of a pine tree. Dahlia breathed in deeply, and her nostrils tingled as if she had just inhaled a breath of menthol.

"I'm stupid," Dahlia said into the blankets, feeling Nomi's fingers raking their way through her hair.

"You're human," Nomi said, and for once the statement did not seem like a redundant reminder.

Dahlia buried her face farther into the sheets and groaned.

"Nik was the first person Seth met when he awoke in the Underground," Nomi said. "Their bond was immediate; they shared the same sort of disenchantment, I guess you could say."

Dahlia furrowed her brows but found herself listening intently to each word, unsure of where Nomi was going.

"They are two loners who have found solace together, and of course they grate at each other and their relationship comes in waves, but they are more than

brothers. When Nik told you about what Seth did, he did so at the cost of his friendship with Seth.”

“But why would he do that?” Dahlia said, sitting up slowly to keep the spinning in her head at bay. She closed her eyes, but it only heightened the sensation.

“Because he knows you have an important role in all this,” Nomi said. “He doesn’t know what it is, but he can feel it. The gravitation of your fate is what keeps pulling him in to you. The same with Seth.”

“Oh, I thought maybe it was just my pretty face,” Dahlia couldn’t help adding. She was beginning to feel hints of herself seeping back into her body, permeating the membrane of numbness.

“I’m not trivializing what you and Seth feel for each other,” Nomi said quickly, and Dahlia wondered if she had much understanding of sarcasm. “I know you love him, and I know he loves you. Bonds like yours are precious and few.”

“Like you and Nik?” Dahlia said, and immediately regretted the words. She hid her face in her knees, expecting to hear the rustle of Nomi’s skirts as she got up to leave.

Instead she heard a soft sigh pass through Nomi’s lips. “I am in love with Nik, and I know he loves me,” she admitted, “but he is a creature seeking the sort of pleasure he will never find. He’s scratching an impossible itch.”

“So he’s led by desire?” Dahlia offered.

“All humans are led by desire,” Nomi said. “But Nik subsists on nothing but. He hurts me over and over again, although I know he doesn’t mean to.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Dahlia said gently, “then why are you in love with him?”

“I didn’t choose to be,” Nomi said. “When I was incarnated in this human body, I was given an influx of human feelings – confusing things, irrational things I had never felt before. At first I tried to find a rule or natural order, but I gave up. Human beings have a natural shell but inside you are made of the sort of chaos that predates nature. That’s what makes you so destructive to the world around you. That’s why you seek your own deaths, whether you realize it or not, so that your inner chaos can escape to the cosmos.”

“Really? I always thought nature was so chaotic. I mean, all those predators running around chasing other animals and stuff. I’m not the most outdoorsy person, if you can guess.”

Nomi shook her head to a tinkling of bells. “There’s an order to it all, a logic. Predators hunt prey because they are prey; they don’t sit there and ask themselves why they do it. Occasional conflicts sort themselves out through natural selection. Humans might have organic bodies, but your souls are not of my realm. You are like the Creator.”

“The Creator?”

“Whatever you call him or her or it. The Creator is genderless, formless, and made of the same sort of chaos that envelops the universe.”

Dahlia bit her lower lip, feeling like she was watching the titans of theology and empiricism clash before her. “But I thought the Creator made everything, including that chaos.”

“It’s beyond my ability to conceptualize the infinite universe,” Nomi said. “If the Creator created everything, what created him? Was the Creator the product of the same random chance your scientists attribute the creation of the universe to?”

“So you think the Big Bang might have been the Creator’s birth?”

“I don’t claim to think anything,” Nomi said. “There are infinite possibilities just like the universe is infinite. All I know is the earth and the lives of the creatures on earth. I was created just as you were created to nurture you, long before I ever became incarnated as human.”

Dahlia shook her head, as if forcing her mind to reset itself. She could practically feel the clutter of infinite strings of questions like lines in an equation building up in her head, beginning to overwhelm her senses.

“This is ridiculous,” Dahlia said. “I don’t think people were meant to have all the answers, even if we could.”

“Of course not,” Nomi said, gently covering Dahlia’s hand with her own. “But the chaos inside you won’t stop asking. Everyone is in relentless pursuit for the unattainable, just like Nik. If it’s not pleasure, it’s something else.”

“Well, whoop de doo,” Dahlia said, rolling her eyes. “Makes you sort of wonder what kind of fellow the Creator is anyway, to make us like this.”

“I think you’d be surprised,” Nomi said with a smile.

Dahlia was going to ask something else, but the question dissolved on her lips when Nomi stood up.

“Come on, let’s get you up and about. I think you ought to make amends with Nik.”

Dahlia stared up at her, gaping. “Are you kidding me? He ruined my life; he should be crawling on his hands and knees to me.”

“You and I both know he’s not the type to swallow his pride,” Nomi said with a frown, tugging at Dahlia’s hand. “But you need each other if you’re going to fight the Vigil. You’re each other’s best allies.”

“What about Seth?”

“Seth’s gone, remember? You told him to leave, and he does not break his promises.”

“I could go find him,” Dahlia began to argue, but Nomi cut her off with a stern look.

“Besides, he’s the Vigil’s target. Right now he’s working on borrowed time.”

“I’m not forgiving Nik. Not now, not ever,” Dahlia said, yanking her hand away from Nomi and crossing her arms over her chest, pouting.

“You’re cutting off your nose despite your face,” Nomi said gently, though Dahlia could see the disappointment clouding her brown eyes.

“I don’t care. Nik murdered my sister. He raped my childhood. That’s not something you can forgive.”

“Nik and Seth were foolish; that’s not up for debate,” Nomi said with an impatient sigh. “The two of them did some awful things while they were chasing themselves, and I’m not defending their actions. I’m just saying that you need to

see beyond what has personally affected you, Dahlia. You've been there yourself-
”

“How did you know?” Dahlia demanded, stumbling to her feet. “Who told you about that night in the club? Was it Raven?”

“No one told me,” Nomi said simply. “It was obvious. You hate yourself for what you've become, because you know exactly what you're capable of. Just as Nik does, just as Seth does.”

“I never killed anyone,” Dahlia said through clenched teeth.

“Oh yeah? What about those men at the arena? With Eddie?”

“I was defending him!” she protested, though she felt herself shuddering at the memory. “It was either them or Eddie,” she added quietly, her voice beginning to warble. “It was wrong, but it was all I could do.”

“I'm just trying to show you that no one's hands are clean,” Nomi said, taking Dahlia by the shoulders and staring up into her face in a way her mother had done so many times. “You are not alone in this, Dahlia. Holing yourself up here, hiding from what you know is coming isn't going to help. You need to face this headlong.”

“This sucks,” Dahlia said weakly, biting her lip as she felt her eyes growing heavier and hotter with tears.

“No one said it would be easy,” Nomi said. “Do you think it was easy for the man you called the Son to undergo torture at the hands of his own? To die for people who didn't deserve his mercy?”

Dahlia shook her head.

“It's frustrating that you cannot see the strength inside yourself. You are your own biggest stumbling block – don't you realize that?”

“That's what everybody tells me.”

“Stop running,” Nomi said, holding Dahlia's eyes with a long, hard look. “And go see Nik, okay?”

“Alright,” Dahlia said. “I'll talk to Nik. But will you give me a day or two, please? There's something I need to do first.”

Nomi nodded and kissed her on the top of the head, an intimate gesture that surprised Dahlia at first. She could practically feel the warmth radiating through her body from that one point on her head where Nomi's lips had been, like the gentle waters of the basin lapping against her skin.

“You will save us all,” Nomi whispered, so softly Dahlia barely heard it.

Dahlia wished she could have believed her.

“Are you ready?” Nate said, watching as Law ran a comb through his hair with trembling fingers.

“Yeah,” Law said, straightening his part with one last flick of his wrist.

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

He set the comb down on his dresser and turned back to Nate, who was holding his tan trench coat open. Law backed himself against the coat, putting his arms into the sleeves as Nate pulled the cloth around his shoulders.

Ever since Nate had announced that morning that their plans would be set into motion in the evening, he had been uncharacteristically generous and nurturing towards Law.

He had even gone as far as to cook him dinner, a feat that Law did not even think he was capable of. Law had come running when he smelled the natural gas from the stove, afraid that there was a gas leak in the apartment.

“You could’ve just taken my body to cook it,” Law had offered as he was eating.

“Then it wouldn’t have been a surprise,” Nate had replied with an exaggerated smile, which made every bite from that point on refuse to settle in Law’s stomach.

He could not shake the feeling that he was a prisoner on death row eating his last meal.

Now he stood in the bedroom, combing his hair as he experienced the same sensation of impending doom. He realized he had little reason to feel the way he did; after all, he and Nate were going to banish the nephilim and save the world in doing so. But the hackles on the back of his neck would not relax.

“Let’s go then,” Nate said, gesturing towards the front door.

Law swallowed hard and threw open the door, taking one last look around his apartment before following Nate outside into the chill.

“So you know where we’re going?” Law asked once he’d locked up, though he had momentarily considered not even bothering.

“Yep,” Nate said, his head bobbing up and down. Not a single golden hair was displaced by the motion.

“Okay,” Law said, fidgeting with his keychain.

Law tried to keep himself distracted on the walk by watching the light gleam from the surface of his keys – the way he might have tried to distract an infant. It worked well enough that when Nate finally stopped and motioned for Law to be quiet with a finger over his lips, Law had no idea where they were.

The streets were vacant, as they should have been at that hour, and the block was lined with older buildings, brick with dirty mortar, buildings that hadn’t been given the proper upkeep. Some windows were broken and patched with black trash bags, and most facades were colored with spray painted obscenities.

It could’ve been a historical district, Law mused sadly as they crept towards the stoop of a tall apartment building.

Law took a shallow breath and pulled the handle of the front door. It swung forward without resistance, welcoming them into a pitch-black hallway. The air that poured forth from the doorframe was cold and stale and smelled overwhelmingly like mildew.

“Are you sure this is it?” Law asked, unable to keep from cringing at the stench.

Nate nodded, pointing toward the ceiling. “We need to go upstairs a few floors, but he’s there. I can see him now.”

“Lead the way,” Law said numbly, regretting every foot he placed in front of the other. The door swung shut behind them, sealing them into the darkness, and Law had to fight the rush of panic in his chest.

“A little jumpy, are we?” Nate chided, scanning the hallway as if the darkness hardly obscured his sight at all.

Law was still blinking and straining his eyes in order to even see the outline of Nate’s body moving through the damp air. He mostly listened for the angel’s light footsteps in order to navigate, and even then he had trouble hearing them over the hammering of his heart.

They finally found the door to the stairwell, and Nate waved his arms above his head like he was signaling an airplane to land. Law shoved the door open with his body, groaning under its surprising weight, and let them both inside.

They silently ascended. Law lost count of the flights before Nate whispered to him: “Hang a right here.”

“Which door?” Law said when they were in the hallway.

Nate paused, letting his eyes track across the doors and the homes hidden behind them. Law was stricken with discomfort every time he knowingly watched Nate invading the lives of others with his penetrating sight. Nothing was private, nothing sacred to the ultimate peeping tom. Not even Law’s own vices.

Law shuddered, feeling the gauze on his back rustling against his shirt. The wounds were fresh and still weeping, even though he’d rubbed antibiotic ointment on them as he always did. He must have flayed himself harder than usual. The gashes had taken hours to stop bleeding.

“This door,” Nate said, stopping to point at one of a dozen identical wooden doors, and Law had the odd sensation that he was on some sort of game show. What’s behind door number one? A car? A goat?

He knew just what, and the very thought made his stomach churn.

“Okay, okay,” Law stammered, leaning against the wall to support himself. “I just need a second, okay? This is kind of, I mean...”

“Take your time,” Nate said with a smile that Law found far too reassuring.

There was no sign of his usual impatience or impulsive anger, which worried Law even more. Something powerful enough to effectuate that sort of change in Nate was something beyond Law’s comprehension. He was playing with the big boys, when he himself was hardly able to see over the edge of the dugout.

Law tried to calm himself with slow, soothing breaths, but that only made him feel like he was hyperventilating. Nothing was going to calm him down; nothing was going to make this okay, or even sort of okay, or at least the kind of okay that wouldn’t leave him with the most horrific nightmares for the rest of his waking life.

Jamming pills down the monsignor’s throat while he slept had been a cakewalk compared to this.

“Fine,” Law said, mentally steeling himself. “Let’s just do it now.”

Nate smiled. “You first.”

Law tried the door, only to find it was locked. Luckily the mechanism was crude, far from a deadbolt, and it only took a few turns of one of Dahlia’s bobby pins for it to succumb with a tiny click.

With trembling hands, he turned the handle, forcing the door open just quietly enough that the hinges wouldn't squeal.

Nate stalked inside like a cheetah, whipping past Law who hesitated in the doorframe. No matter how he swallowed, he could not shake the sensation that his throat was closing in.

There was a muffled groan in the other room, and Law realized Nate had found him.

Law rushed inside the apartment, nearly stumbling into the kitchen table in the dark, and managed to awkwardly navigate with his arms outstretched to the source of the sound.

The young man was writhing on the bed with Nate's hands clamped to his forehead, his face screwed up in the sort of agony that almost made Law's knees give out.

"Come on," Nate called to Law. "I got the jump on him, but I can only subdue him for so long."

Raphael thrashed on the bed, whose rusted springs lurched and shrieked under him. His wings fanned out behind him and flailed just like his limbs, desperate to fight away Nate's grip.

"Nathaniel, you bastard," Raphael gasped between cries of pain. "I always knew you should've fallen like Lucifer."

"Shut up," Nate said, practically beaming at the sight of Raphael's torment. "You always were such an uppity little shit. You and the rest of your daisy chain."

"You belong in the infernal prison too," Raphael spat.

"How cute," Nate said with a chuckle, looking up over the writhing angel to meet Law's eyes. "Lawrence, I believe it's your move."

"I'm sorry," Law said to Raphael, who had yet to look at the man standing in the doorway of the bedroom, the dagger held limply by his side. "I don't want to do this."

"Sure he does," Nate snickered. "Come on, Law!"

Law shook his head vigorously, as if trying to force his mind not to record the events to come, but he knew he did not deserve that kind of mercy.

He stepped over to the bed, gripping the dagger tighter until his fist felt numb. "I'm sorry," he said again, but Raphael did not even look at him. "I have to do this. I'm so sorry."

Raphael howled in terrible pain, with such sorrow that Law felt tears springing up from his eyes, blurring the sight of the feathers matted with blood so dark it was nearly black. He sawed the dagger through the thick muscle, which gave way easily under the blade like string cheese, as Raphael cried.

Law was not sure how long the horrible deed had taken; each swipe of the knife released a million little horrors into his mind, threatening to drive him past the brink of madness. The longer he cut, he found himself crying out as well, and eventually he could not distinguish between Raphael's screams and his own.

When the wings were finally severed, he stepped back from the bed still clutching the dagger, which was spurting blood as though the blade itself were bleeding.

Raphael lie broken in the red stew of flesh and feathers, and Nate finally removed his hands from his temples. He wiped them together, though there was not a drop of blood on them.

Law's on the other hand were completely drenched.

"He'll stop bleeding," Nate said, "but it'll be an awful mess until then."

"I can't believe I'm killing an angel," Law muttered, wiggling his fingers together and gagging at the slickness he felt between them.

"You didn't kill him, you dumbass," Nate said, gasping with exasperation. "How many times do we have to go over this? He's not going to die. We had to cut off his wings to dampen his power."

"Well tonight, tomorrow – doesn't really matter. We're going to kill him eventually."

Nate rolled his eyes as though Law were the stupidest human being he had ever laid eyes on. "I don't know how you got so far in life without learning how to listen. He's not going to die, okay? His mortal form will perish, yes, but he'll just go back to the Empyrean like the stupid little bundle of energy he is until the Creator gives him another human shell to walk around in with his gay buddies. Got it?"

"Fine," Law said, throwing his hands up and dripping blood all over his coat. "I got it. Let's go, please?"

"We have to wait for junior here to quit bleeding first," Nate said, shaking his head with disdain, as if Raphael had the nerve to bleed in response to their attack. "Can't exactly attract attention by dragging a guy gushing blood down the street."

"I guess so," Law said, setting the dagger down on the nightstand. "I'm going to go wash my hands, though, before I puke."

"Softie," Nate chided. "Bathroom's the first door to the left."

"Thanks."

Shoulders hunched, Law skulked into the bathroom and did not even bother turning on the light. He nudged the faucet on with his elbow and began to scrub his hands under the stream of cold water.

No matter how hard he scrubbed, he felt like there was not enough water in the world to remove the blood on his hands. It had gotten under his skin, dyed his body with a permanent tattoo of his transgression. Everyone would know what he had done.

After scouring his hands until they were raw and pruned, he finally turned off the water and dried them off on a threadbare towel from the rack.

As he made his way back towards the room, he caught a glimmer of moonlight from the windowsill, which illuminated his body for a moment. He looked down at his hands to find that they were clean and unblemished, white as they'd ever been.

CHAPTER 31

Dahlia tried her best not to think about what she was doing, for fear she would turn around with every step, but the more she tried to avoid her thoughts, the more they entangled her.

Was she being selfish? She wasn't sure; she probably was, but she needed the kind of comfort she knew she could not get anywhere else. She had kept herself away for as long as she could stand to protect them, but she was quickly realizing that she was the one who needed protection, even if it was only momentary.

When she made her way up the drive, she did not bother ducking behind the ivy-covered trellises as she had the first time she came back to the house. Shameless and uncaring, she let herself in the front gate and crossed through the garden in plain sunlight, knowing the informal neighborhood watch of bored housewives was watching her every step.

Even if she did not go inside, it would not take long for her mother to know she had been there.

She gave three hard raps on the door, unsure if the doorbell still worked or not. The light was no longer lit on the cracked button.

"I'm coming," she heard her mother call from behind the door. "Just a second."

Rosalind was the kind who never looked through the peephole, but carelessly flung the door open no matter who met her at the other side. It was a habit that had always made Dahlia nervous, but it seemed only right that Rosalind was more trusting by nature than her daughter.

"Hello?" Rosalind said as the door flew open.

It took a second for the shock to register on Rosalind's face, and Dahlia could see her eyes straining, as if they were attempting to reject what they saw. She could only imagine the way her mother's senses howled and burned at the sight of her daughter's corpse standing at the door, animated and rosy-cheeked but unmistakably dead.

Dahlia was another one of those contradictions, the illusions that teased the eye like an M. C. Escher painting, but with the kind of subtlety that made the onlooker feel like he or she was the one who was wrong. She was just a tiny bit off, like a picture whose coloring was misaligned by a mere pixel.

Rosalind burst into tears.

She threw herself forward, flinging her thin freckled arms around Dahlia as if she were a life raft. "My baby! I can't tell you how much I've prayed, Dahlia, every day I've prayed."

"I'm here, Mom," Dahlia said, squeezing her mom's shoulders, which were so bony that Dahlia lightened her grip for fear she would break them.

The last month, Dahlia realized, had aged her mother in dog years. The woman in her arms was hardly the housewife just rounding the big 5-0. Instead, Rosalind had become her own mother: a hollow, bent woman with frosted hair piled too high on a head that looked too heavy for her body.

She could have stopped it; she could have given her mother those years back if she'd only had the balls to walk up to the front door the first time. Instead

she had robbed her mother of life, whether she wanted to or not. She had drained her just as she had drained the man from the Bat Cave.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," she said over and over again, feeling her mom's shoulder growing wet with her tears. "I never meant for this to happen."

"I always worried about you," Rosalind said softly. "With that organization and all, I knew this day would come. In a way I've been preparing myself for it since you first joined."

"Why didn't you try to stop me from participating?" Dahlia couldn't help but ask.

"I've spent the last month asking myself the same question," Rosalind said, kissing her hair. "I failed you as a mother. I can only blame myself for not having stepped in, but I've spent a lifetime watching you carry around grief that was too heavy for you. I thought maybe, just maybe if you did this, you could start to let some of it go, but..." She decomposed into sobs, clinging to her daughter's shoulders as if she were her only support left in this world.

Dahlia had come home for comfort and yet she found herself comforting her mother, which should have discouraged her, but holding her mother as she cried was strangely soothing in and of itself. She had grown up as the survivor, the one who kept the family together when her mother dissolved into tears and glasses of red wine, and her father locked himself in the office with a stack of charts, and her brother took hammers to the walls and tried to set his homework on fire.

She was the eternal scaffolding to their crumbling monuments – it was the role she had inherited from birth, and the role she now needed to assume on the grandest scale yet, for something far bigger than her family's penchant for self-destruction.

"Can we go inside?" Dahlia asked, once Rosalind's crying had slowed to soft snuffles through a clogged nose.

"Yes, of course," Rosalind said, stepping back and taking Dahlia by the hand. She let it drop with a gasp. "You're warm," she said. "Your skin, all of it."

"It's a long story," Dahlia said, "but suffice it to say I'm not your garden variety zombie anymore."

She pictured Raven cringing dramatically at her use of a word that was so utterly *déclassé*, and she had to force herself to keep from smiling.

"I was just fixing a little lunch. Can I get you something to eat?" Rosalind asked as she led her towards the kitchen.

Dahlia shook her head with a sad smile, and Rosalind let out another little gasp as the implication of her question set in. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean--"

"It's cool, Mom," Dahlia said, taking a seat at the island bar top. "I know it's a rough adjustment, believe me."

"So Lawrence, does he know what's happened to you? I never heard from him after you disappeared," Rosalind said, cracking open the oven to peer down at the spanakopita she had cooking. Dahlia closed her eyes and basked in the savory smell of flaky, buttery pastry and spinach and feta cheese.

"Yeah, he knows," Dahlia said. She didn't add that he was the one who'd sent her to an early grave, or that he seemed to have become possessed by

something that was practically eating him from the inside out. Seeing him so frail and lethargic was a shock that haunted her. She could still picture his eyes sunken back into his skull, angry with blood vessels and cocooned in folds of bruised skin.

"I, uh, I haven't really heard from him either," Dahlia said. "We broke up just before, you know..."

"I see," Rosalind said. Her fingers shook as she pulled one cabinet open, scanned its contents, and closed it again. She repeated this gesture a couple times, as if she could not find what she was looking for, if she even knew what that was.

Dahlia felt her skin crawl just watching her mother amble; Rosalind knew that kitchen like the freckled constellations on her own hands, and she had always glided so gracefully from one end to another, summoning exactly what she needed from the shelves and drawers with no step wasted in between.

"What are you looking for?"

"Oh," Rosalind said, closing the cabinet. Her face was flushed with embarrassment. "A mug for tea. I was going to put the kettle on."

"Cabinet over the knife block," Dahlia reminded her gently.

Rosalind murmured a thanks and withdrew a mug so swiftly that Dahlia was afraid it would fly out of her hands.

"Your brother's been doing better in school," Rosalind said, filling the teapot at the sink. Dahlia realized she had the cold water on instead of the hot.

"His grades dropped at first, you know, when you first went missing. But the last couple weeks have been an upswing for him. I'm impressed."

"He's been through a lot," Dahlia said, feeling another surge of guilt. When would she learn to consider the chain reactions her decisions set off? When would her family become more than just collateral damage?

"He's a resilient kid," Rosalind said. "He's stopped acting out for the most part, doesn't do that destructive stuff anymore. I think it might be good old fashioned maturity, at least that's what Dr. Warner thinks."

"He's got a good heart," Dahlia said.

"Yes. It's just too bad he looks so much like your father. He's inherited so many of his mannerisms too, it's like... I can't stop seeing Jude in him."

"He's not like Dad."

"No, he's a good person. I just wish I'd taken him away from your father sooner."

"Mom," Dahlia said, looking up at her with her best attempt at a smile. "You did the best you could. Really."

A hint of the smile reflected on Rosalind's face, but heavier sorrow quickly weighed her lips back down. She peeled her eyes away from Dahlia's, as if she still could not stand to look into them for too long. "I just remember lying in bed when I was pregnant with Lucy thinking, 'Oh Creator, please do not let me screw up this child.' But I was terrified, you know? I had no idea how to take care of a little person – to do her hair, dress her, protect her. Obviously I failed at the last one. I failed with all of you..."

“Stop it, Mom. You know what happened at the mall was a freak accident. No one could’ve prevented that.” Maybe not even Seth, she silently added with a grimace.

“I know,” Rosalind said, wiping her face with a rag from the counter. “I know that; that’s what my brain is saying. But the mother inside me is furious for taking my eyes off you for even a minute. For letting you join that Vigil. For letting your dad beat up on your brother for all these years.”

“Life’s not one of those ‘Choose Your Own Mystery’ novels, Mom,” Dahlia said, feeling conviction beginning to build up in her again, in the hollowed place where regret and resentment had duked it out for days before. “I mean, when I was a kid I used to cheat at those and stick my fingers in the pages and check out all the options before I made the choice, just to make sure I didn’t hit any dead ends. But you can’t do that with life, okay? All you have is hindsight, and hindsight is cruel and 20-20, or at least that’s what they say.”

“You’re right.”

“So why would you keep punishing yourself for being human, when you can’t be anything else? Yeah, I wish I could’ve known not to step into that alley with Law the night he killed me, but-”

“Law was the one who killed you?” Rosalind said, jaw slack with disbelief.

Dahlia cursed under her breath as she saw the rage straightening her mother’s frame.

“That son of a bitch,” Rosalind spat, fury flushing her cheeks even redder than before. “I’ll fucking kill him. I’ll shoot him in the face. I still have your father’s antique shotgun collection, you know.”

“Stop it Mom,” Dahlia said, throwing up her hands. “Please. Come on, he’s not worth the time in jail.”

“I could make it look like an accident,” Rosalind continued, eyes smoldering like the bullet holes she imagined in Law’s head.

“Come on, Mom, seriously,” Dahlia said louder. “Stop it. This isn’t you.”

“You’re right,” Rosalind admitted with a sigh. “But that bastard took my baby away from me. He’s got to pay.”

“He has,” Dahlia said, “believe me, he already has. He’s gotten sick, I think. A bad mental condition. He’s starting to waste away.”

“Good,” Rosalind said. “I hope he rots in hell.”

As if on cue, the teakettle began to spit and howl from the stove. Rosalind shook her head and turned back to switch off the burner.

The whistle of the teakettle reminded Dahlia for a moment of the shrill whistle she could not forget, the whistle that Seth’s calloused palms muffled just well enough to spare her from its fatal vibrations.

“Shit, Seth,” Dahlia groaned. “What have I done?”

“Who’s Seth?” Rosalind piped up from the stove, attempting to sip from her steaming mug.

“Oh, um,” Dahlia stammered, taken off guard by the way her two worlds had just unceremoniously collided by a slip of the tongue. But she had nothing

left to lose, she decided, and therefore nothing left to hide. Secrecy was a privilege – or perhaps a burden – of the living.

“He’s the reason I survived when I was a little kid at the mall,” Dahlia said. “He saved my life when Lucy died. I just found out recently.”

“No way,” Rosalind said, nearly spilling her tea. “Where is he so I can hug him to death?”

“I was really pissed when I found out,” Dahlia said with a frown, staring down at the counter as she traced the patterns in the granite with a lazy fingertip. “I told him I never wanted to see him again. But he didn’t tell me about what he did even though he knew who I was; he basically lied by omission.”

“Well, he should’ve told you,” Rosalind said. “Though I can imagine it was a difficult thing to keep to himself.”

“I just feel bad, though,” Dahlia said, folding her arms down on the counter and resting her face against her elbows. “I mean, part of me is still pissed at him for what he did, for being part of that night and knowing he was a part and never saying a word. But at the same time, he saved my life. And that wasn’t the only time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I, I don’t know, it was stupid. I had a run-in with a big group of nephilim that I shouldn’t have poked my nose into. But that was after Dad stood me up and I was pissed at him, so I wasn’t really thinking clearly. Seth saved my life.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He is.”

“Well, do you love him?” Rosalind asked. The question startled Dahlia even though she had been turning it over for months in her mind, and it took her a few seconds to compose a coherent response.

“I mean, I thought I did.”

“You can’t think you love someone,” Rosalind said. “You either do or you don’t.”

“I do,” Dahlia said, feeling a rush of warmth spreading through her chest as she made the admission. “You know what? I do love him, Mom. If it’d been me in his place, I wouldn’t have hesitated to save his life.”

“Then maybe you can forgive him? Life is too short to hold onto grief.”

“I don’t know,” Dahlia said. “I mean, it’s hard.”

“Come on, honey; you know nothing in this world is easy. Life sucks and then you die, right? But if you can find someone worth holding onto – basically if you can do yet another thing I failed to do – you can make it out okay. At least, that’s the stupid thing I believe.”

Dahlia sat up on her stool, staring into her mother’s drooping green eyes. “It’s not stupid, Mom.”

“I sure hope not.”

“I just feel like I screwed up big this time,” Dahlia said. “Seth left the Underground when we had that fight, even though he knows it’s not safe up there. Hell, I don’t know how much longer even the Underground will be safe. Or at least feel safe.”

“Well, do you know where else he could be?” Rosalind offered, setting the mug of tea on the counter.

“Actually, I do,” Dahlia said, standing up from the stool whose legs groaned against the wood floor. “I’ve been to his apartment before.”

“Then what’s keeping you?”

“Really? You think I should go look for him just like that?”

“Unless he carries a cell phone. Do the unde- I mean, you guys – have cell phones?”

“I don’t think he’s much of a fan; cell phones and all sort of came after his time. But that’s okay.” Dahlia walked around the island and pulled her mother into a long hug. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, sweetie,” Rosalind said, stroking her hair with her acrylic nails. “Dead, alive, or in between, I will always love you.”

When Dahlia finally pulled away, she looked back to find her mother watching her with a new vibrancy in her eyes. Though death had destroyed Dahlia’s mortal body, she was still the same headstrong, impatient Dahlia. And that was the only reassurance a mother had to hold onto.

“Can I tell Chris you’re back?” Rosalind asked.

“Only if he promises to still keep his grades up,” Dahlia answered with a smile.

Dahlia tore through the afternoon streets and made such good time to Seth’s apartment that she hardly remembered having traveled the twelve blocks at all.

When she arrived outside Seth’s building she saw that the front door was currently propped open with a paint can to allow a team of movers to haul out a collection of musty cabinets littered with doilies and Precious Moments figurines and faded burlap couches that looked like they had come from a 1980’s office building. The truck was crammed so full with brightly colored plastic knick-knacks that it looked like a shrine constructed to late-night infomercials.

Dahlia couldn’t imagine that the owner of these artifacts was moving anywhere besides a six-foot-long wooden box. The first thought that came to mind was that the little old lady in the stairwell had finally met her buddies for one final sit – or perhaps lie – down.

She found herself a little too amused by the thought and its corresponding mental image, but for once she was hardly ashamed.

Instead of bothering with the buzzer she slipped past the movers so quickly that they had probably not taken her for anything more than the stirring of dust in the shadows. Taking the stairs two at a time, she raced up to Seth’s apartment and was pleasantly relieved to find no troll lurking in the stairwell on the way. Maybe the old bag really did kick it.

“Seth?” she called, pounding on his door with her fists so hard even the adjacent doors rattled. “Seth, it’s me; please let me in!”

Despite her banging and calling and pleading, nothing roused inside the apartment. She pressed an ear against the wood and strained for any hint of

movement or even just the step of a toe, but she knew he was not there. She could not feel him.

She groaned and slammed her fist against the door one more time, and to her surprise it lurched open with a squeal, slamming hard against the doorstop and nearly ricocheting back closed. She caught the door before it could close again and darted inside, and when she looked around she felt a stab of panic so sharp she could hardly think.

The little apartment that had once been so tidy and Spartan had been completely torn apart; even the mattress was shredded, and deformed springs poked like rebar out of the mess of bedding. The drawers were turned out, their contents strewn out across the floor along with reams of newspapers. Broken shards of mugs and plates carpeted the kitchen.

“What happened in here?” Dahlia murmured as she turned to gape at every inch of the startling panorama. There was no place the destruction had not penetrated. Even the fridge’s shelves had been yanked out and bent in half against the counter.

That was when she saw it. It was so light a contrast to the white walls that it was almost invisible, but when she stepped closer she could definitely see the strokes of a brush, probably one of the ones spilled out across the living room floor in a Technicolor puddle of paint.

Painted in silver on the wall above the bed was the Vigil’s trademark V.

CHAPTER 32

Dahlia hardly remembered going back to the Underground; the whole way back the streets swam by to either side of her like colored streams, and she remembered no sign or face of a passerby. Frantic energy crackled in her veins, coursing through her adrenal system where the hormones should have been. She had not been expecting such a violent physical reaction to anything anymore, or how her body moved almost of its own accord, shoving her through the streets as if she were riding a moving walkway.

But there she was standing in the end of the pipe that poured out into Nik’s chamber, hands clenched in fists by her sides, hydras lashing their tails back and forth beneath her skin.

“They’ve got him,” Dahlia said from the shadows.

Nik looked up at her over the newspaper he had propped open on one folded knee. It was browned with age, and the typeface was too fancy to be anything of the last century.

“It was only a matter of time,” he said, but his brows were stitched heavily together, casting a shadow down over his bent nose.

“Save it,” Dahlia said. “I don’t need an ‘I told you so.’”

“So what are you going to do?” Nik asked, calmly folding the paper and taking a moment to gently stroke the paper before setting it aside.

“Do you even have to ask?”

“I suppose you want my help.”

"I can't do this alone," Dahlia said, taking a step forward until she was partially illuminated by the Chinese lantern overhead. She noticed for the first time just how sallow the light looked and how the paper had faded. Designs in cheery reds had dulled to pinks, like blood diluted in water.

"Come on," she said again, more desperately this time. "There's a hundred of them, and they know how to destroy us. If they overpowered Seth so easily, I stand no chance."

"And what? Suppose I do come along. You think we'll just waltz in there and they'll cower in fear of us, and we'll grab Seth and run? You don't even know where they've got him."

Dahlia frowned, jutting her jaw as far out as it would go. He had her. Why would they abduct Seth only to take him to the Cathedral, when that was the first place she would look? Then again, why had they left her a sign of their presence in the first place if they did not expect her to follow? "I, I don't know," she began to say.

"I do," said a coarse whisper behind her.

She turned on her heel to watch as Father Pierre emerged from the shadows, bent over and clutching his chest. His left foot dragged behind him.

Dahlia looked into his face to find his eyes were nearly swollen shut, and blood dribbled from both corners of his mouth. Clotted blood streaked his forehead, where a recent gash had just recently patched itself awkwardly with a fresh scab. His black cassock was shredded and seamed with blood, and redness pooled between his fingers where he clutched his chest.

"Oh shit," Dahlia cried with a start, holding Pierre upright by the shoulders. She felt his body sag into her, as his legs finally gave up the burden of holding him upright. "Pierre, I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," he said, but his voice was punctuated with little chokes and gasps of pain. "You are not responsible for what that hellion did to me."

"Law?" she asked, and he nodded with a grimace.

"I'll kill him," she spat, looking gravely up at Nik. Nik looked away. "I'll tear him apart nerve by nerve until he's begging for death."

"You don't have time for revenge fantasies I'm afraid," Pierre said. A cough shook his body, and a new line of blood bubbled up at his lips. "Their ceremony begins at sundown."

"At the cathedral?" Dahlia asked.

He shook his head and wheezed out another wet breath. "They're in the monastery north of town, the one that used to house the archdiocese before they moved. At least that's what they were planning before they kicked me out." He coughed again, and this time almost collapsed entirely onto Dahlia.

"Let me sit you down," she said, moving him gently over to Nik's armchair.

"Thank you," he said.

Nik took a step back from the chair. His face was dark, his expression difficult to read. For all she knew, he was mostly concerned with having to wipe the flecks of blood from his chair.

Dahlia guided Pierre down into the chair, and laid him out like a damp rag against the backrest. "I'll call for Nomi," she said, looking up at Nik. "She can heal you, Pierre."

"I already have," Nik said quietly, fiddling with the cuffs of his poet's shirt.

Dahlia swore she never heard him call to Nomi, but she decided against asking for the particulars of their intimate communication. She tried not to look surprised by his omission.

"Why did they do this?" she asked Pierre, resting a hand on his shoulder gently enough not to hurt him.

"Someone saw me talking to Eddie."

"Of course," Nik scoffed. Dahlia shot him a threatening look.

"What did they do to you?"

Pierre closed his eyes and shuddered before answering, as if the memory itself renewed the pain he felt. "When I got back to my apartment, Herbert and Donne ambushed me. They brought me in front of Law, whose taken over the Vigil as you know. Law had me tied to the cross, same as you, and they interrogated me for, I don't know, it felt like hours. They... well, at first they just sort of slapped me around, but then they..."

"It's okay," Dahlia said, stroking his shoulder. "You don't have to finish. I got the gist of it."

"But that's not the worst part," Pierre said, holding up his arms. When his sleeves fell to his elbows, Dahlia saw the fresh brands, red and angry on his thin wrists. Anger surged through her chest, filling her with the unrelenting thirst for blood and carnage, to tear through the sea of men leaving only mangled bodies in her wake.

"Branded as a traitor," Nik remarked. "How ironic."

"They're the traitors," Dahlia spat. "There's no way the Creator could ever want this, this sort of cruelty."

"Since the beginning of time man has drawn blood in the name of the Creator."

"Yeah, well this time it's my blood, and the blood of my friends and family. It's personal."

Dahlia turned towards Nik, taking a step in closer to him. "Come on, Nik. Doesn't this bother you, even just a little? They've tortured Pierre like they tortured me, and now they've got Seth..." She felt her voice crack, and she swallowed hard before the emotion could begin to escape. "Come on, Nik. I can't do this alone."

"I just don't understand. Even after what he's done to you? You'd still go back for him?"

"Love makes you do crazy things," Dahlia said.

"Apparently so."

"Come on, Nik. After all those decades of friendship, you're going to condemn him to eternity with the fallen?"

Nik stood there by his desk like one of the stone pillars, shoulders tense and face bowed, mouth cutting a sharp line across his face.

“Oh, forget it,” Dahlia said after a moment, groaning with frustration. “I’ll just have to ask people who actually give a shit.”

She bent down and kissed Pierre lightly at the corner of his forehead, and her lips tingled at the salty taste of his blood. “I’ll be back,” she said, “with Seth. Nomi won’t be long, and she’ll get you healed up, okay?”

“Be careful,” Pierre said, looking her up and down with jaundiced eyes.

“I’m not coming back alone,” she said.

“*Dominus pascit me*,” Law said, raising his arms to the congregation.

“*Et nihil mihi deerit*,” they thundered in response.

The robe was itchy and a little too big, and he had to take care not to trip over its hem as he walked. It was some old priest’s garment he’d found lying around in the rectory, and though it was missing the white Roman collar, it seemed only fitting for the occasion. Moreover, Nate had insisted he wear it.

Tied to one of the pillars of the altar was the dark-skinned man whose scarred face infiltrated far too many of his nightmares. His arms flopped uselessly at his sides, not even attempting to pry at the cords around his thick chest. His eyes were closed and lips slightly parted, head tilted up towards the ceiling in resignation. He was nothing now; gone was the power or the grace or the liveness in his step.

Nate was right. Those old runic charms really did wonders.

On the other side of the pillar, Raphael sat in similar surrender. He was silent, but the sorrow in his eyes was more than Law could handle, so he decidedly avoided looking at him. His head was bowed, his curly mop of blonde hair falling in front of his face like the canopy of a rainforest. The stubs of white muscle on his shoulders had not stopped bleeding, but the gushing had slowed to a small trickle, manageable but still enough to make vomit well up in the back of Law’s throat. He must’ve lost gallons upon gallons of blood by now.

The altar was carved with them now – it had only taken a chisel and a few hours to accomplish the task earlier that day – and little carved stones stood in piles by the altar and lectern.

This cathedral was not particularly special; the stained glass was dirty and particularly faded on the east-facing windows, and the paint on the plaster walls was beginning to peel and chip away. The white marble floor was grey with dust.

It had not been used as an actual chapel in a number of years. The Avington archdiocese had set up an office in the building a decade or so ago, but maintenance had been sparse since then. It showed.

Of course Nate had insisted on sprucing the place up just a bit, mopping the floor around the altar and dusting the marble altar and lectern and polishing the gold instruments. He and Law had rooted around in the basement until they came upon the backup stash of votive candles. Hundreds of candles lined the steps of the altar, forming little clusters of flames.

Nate had chuckled and said it was a fitting send-off, given where Seth was headed.

He checked his watch again, and Nate jabbed him in the ribs.

“Stop that. You’ve looked at the sunset in the paper about twenty times today.”

“Just nervous,” Law muttered, watching as the congregation took out the binders he and Nate had placed in the pockets of the pews. Photocopied in each binder was the text and liturgy of the banishment ritual, as it had been original written in the Book of Nathaniel.

Nate was clearly beaming as they turned to the first page.

“We gather today to do what was once thought to be impossible,” Law began, anxiously clearing his throat mid-sentence as Nate rolled his eyes.

“Over the past couple centuries, man has been plagued by the existence of what we have come to call ‘the nephilim,’ demonic creatures so sadistic they hunt us as sport. For decades we have striven to keep them away from our homes and families, yet they still walk the streets among us, preying on our youngest and most defenseless. We have done the best we can to force them back Underground, but it’s clear we are in need of a more permanent solution.

“Well, my friends, I am happy to announce to you that we have found that solution. We finally know how to destroy the nephilim once and for all.”

His words were met by whoops and cheers from the crowd, which despite Law’s pleas did not silence for a good minute or so. The excitement in the room was infectious. They were on the verge of making history, of advancing man to the point where the nephilim were no longer any concern. With the nephilim out of their way, who knew what scientific advancements would flourish, or what cities in the wake of renewed nightlife would become cultural epicenters for the centuries to come?

The world was theirs, and Law was like Moses ushering them to their new promised land. All that stood in their way was the woman he loved, and the man he knew she loved even more.

“You’ve got to get over those feelings,” Nate whispered, sensing the way Law’s back went rigid. “We’ve talked about this. She has been reduced to demon spawn herself.”

Law nodded subtly, without breaking the cadence of his speech. Nate had written it all himself, of course, in perfect penmanship. Each letter had a little flounce or a curl of the fountain pen.

“And now we have come to the time of trial, when we must invoke the power of the Creator and all that is good to destroy our naphil foe,” Law read, as he neared the end of the paragraph. “But first let us join hands and pray for guidance on this treacherous path.”

“Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo.”

“World without end,” Nate said in his ear. Law felt his body stiffen, as Nate slipped inside him, and he was once again banished to the back of his head.

At first he was irritated that Nate was taking the reigns, but the more he thought about it, the more he became resigned to the idea. It was his ritual, his canon. He was only a vessel, after all; that was all he had ever been.

“Amen.”

“Dahlia,” Pierre called just as she was about to climb into the pipe.

“Yes?” she said, moving back towards the light at the end of the room.

“I forgot to tell you,” he said shakily. “The cathedral’s sealed up top-to-bottom with some weird runic seal Law says will keep all nephilim out. It’s another thing he pulled out of nowhere, just like that book of Nathaniel. If that’s true, there’s no way for you to get inside. He’s even marked the windows.”

Dahlia heaved a disappointed sigh, but shook her head with resolve. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll find a way. Thanks for the heads up, though.”

“Of course,” Pierre said weakly, settling back into the chair.

As Dahlia made her way through the pipe, she crossed paths with Nomi, who was carrying a basket stacked with bundles of linens and what looked like jars of salve.

“How bad is he?” she asked Dahlia, pausing just long enough to draw her hand gently across Dahlia’s cheek.

“Really banged up, bleeding pretty freely. I think you can save him.”

“I think so too,” she said. “I feel his force, and I know it’s not his time.”

“I have to do this,” Dahlia said, clenching her fists. “I just have to.”

“I know you do,” Nomi said with a gentle nod of her head. “And you are not alone.”

“Huh?” Dahlia began to ask, but Nomi had turned and was already halfway to the other end.

As soon as she stepped out of the hallway, she realized what Nomi had meant.

The vestibule was packed with men, women, and young people to the point where Dahlia wondered how they could even move in such tight formation.

“I got you an army, mum,” Eddie beamed, stepping forward from the crowd and putting his arms around Dahlia.

She recognized some of the faces in the front: Anusha with her thin, hollow cheeks, Ellen’s kind eyes, even Keitaro stood among them, staring at her with a tightlipped scowl, but still there nonetheless.

“We’re at your command,” Ellen said, and the sea of faces nodded like bobble heads in a bunch.

Dahlia was taken aback, and it took her a good minute to swallow her blush long enough to come up with something to say. “No way,” she said, staring from face to face in amazement. “You’re really going to do this with me.”

“Of course, mum,” Eddie said, grinning so hard that the threads patching his mouth began to strain. “Did you think we’d make you go in there alone?”

“Besides, we can’t let them have Seth,” Anusha spoke up, face flushing as she mentioned his name.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” Dahlia stammered.

“Just tell us what to do and we’ll do it,” Ellen said. “We’re more than ready to reclaim the world that’s been stolen from us.”

“Okay,” Dahlia said, swallowing again and nodding. “Okay. So we need to storm the cathedral, I guess. It’s the old monastery north of town.”

Dahlia paused to allow for commentary, but no one said anything either in objection or affirmation. She shrugged and continued.

“We’ve got a problem, though. According to Pierre they’ve sealed the place up tight, and there’s no way we can get in through the doors or windows.”

“Oh that’s no problem, mum,” Eddie said, bending down to pick up Miss Annabelle and nuzzle her to his chest. “We can just go in the basement, I reckon.”

“Basement?”

“Yeah, the basement catacombs connect to the sewers. Discovered that I did while I was out ‘splorin in the 80’s I think it was.”

“Are you sure?”

“Dead sure, mum,” Eddie said, and Miss Annabelle growled for emphasis.

“Okay,” Dahlia said. “Then that’s what we’ll do. Eddie, I put you in charge of navigation. Can you get us to there from here?”

“I think so,” he said.

“I need you to know so.”

“Right, right,” he said, closing his eyes and formulating a quick mental map. “Yep. Definitely that ways. I remember.”

“Good,” Dahlia said. “Anyone else have any suggestions? Plans of attack?”

“We don’t have time for plans,” Keitaro said. “The sun goes down like an hour.”

“Shit, okay,” she replied. “You’re right. Then I guess the plan is to just get in there and go wild. Maul them if you have to, if it means getting in and getting Seth. Sound good?”

Her question was met by a chorus of cheers, and Dahlia could not help smiling. The people she had once tried so hard to make disappear were ultimately the only real support she had. Even if they were only joining her for something to do, they were there, and together they were one.

Dahlia wiped the sentimentality from the corners of her eyes and set her mouth into a fierce frown. “We can do this, alright? It’s probably going to get pretty messy and ugly out there, but just remember that we got this. This is our revolution.”

“To revolution!” Ellen rallied, thrusting her fist in the air.

“To revolution!” the crowd echoed.

CHAPTER 33

The battle cry of the nephilim resounded through the sewers and subway tunnels that night, as Dahlia and Eddie led the phalanx of nephilim north of the city. Spirits were higher than Dahlia could ever have imagined.

The image of her body exploding in flames on the altar steps choked her mind like a thick cobweb, too thick to simply brush away. *This is it*, her gut told her. This was the fate she had been marching towards ever since she’d turned around at the Massachusetts-New York border.

But whenever she felt her steps beginning to falter, all she had to do was turn around and see the focus in those narrowed eyes and the jaws that jutted out

defiantly just like hers, and she was set back on course. This was not just for her, she remembered, or even Seth. Tonight she was freeing a whole people – well, really they were freeing themselves. She was just the banner chosen to lead them towards their own redemption.

“Almost there?” she asked Eddie, as he brought them past another fork after a moment’s deliberation.

The tunnel had begun to narrow, and now they could only walk two by two at most. She imagined they must’ve looked like a long snake slithering its way through the city’s pipes.

“Yeah, almost,” Eddie said. “We’re just a couple turns now. Miss Annabelle and I’s walked this path plenty of times.”

Miss Annabelle was slung over his shoulder and stared back at her with her intense yellow eyes; she was the only one who still seemed skeptical, even mistrustful of Dahlia. Just one look into her eyes was enough to make Dahlia shudder, perhaps for fear of the self-examination the cat was demanding of her. She didn’t have time for that, she told herself. There was no time to ask questions or seek affirmation. There was only hindsight for that.

Everything was hindsight when you had no future.

It felt like they had been walking for hours and miles, and she had expected some sort of complaint or second guessing from the crowd, but the faces were as patient as they were determined. Some had waited centuries for a moment like this, she realized. Whether or not they would ultimately be successful did not matter to them; these people existed solely in the present because they had to. Their pasts and futures were infinite and formless, and there was no place for them there.

“We’re very close, mum,” Eddie announced, though the tunnel grew narrower and darker before them. Dahlia could not see to the end and had to keep a hand on the wall just to make sure she could follow the twists and turns in the pipes.

“I sure hope so.”

“Yep,” he said with a vigorous nod. “Just around this corner, and...”

He must have stopped still in his tracks just ahead of her, because Dahlia could no longer hear his heels clicking against the metal pipe, but it wasn’t until she rounded the corner that she too came to an abrupt halt.

“Oh shit.”

Sure enough, the pipe ended just a few feet from the bend, dumping out into what looked like any stone cellar – most likely the church catacombs. However, what she had not been expecting was the heavy grate that had been bolted into the end of the pipe, or the silver runic symbol painted across the grate, which shimmered warningly in the darkness.

“Oh no,” Ellen said as she approached behind Dahlia. She turned over her shoulder and shouted back to the crowd: “Hold up, everybody! Hold up! We’ve hit a snag!”

The crowd of nephilim stopped still at the same time, like one massive body, and just like that the tunnel went completely and eerily silent.

“So what are we going to do?” Eddie asked Dahlia, who was extending a trembling finger towards the grate.

Every cell in her body resisted violently to the symbol; she had not ever seen it before, but she knew down to the marrow in her bones that it was something that had the power to destroy her. She had never felt such a visceral reaction to something before without any explanation as to why, other than she just *knew* it was bad. It reminded her in some ways of how she had felt when her naphil ears had first heard Nathaniel’s name spoken.

Her finger was beginning to shake violently, trying desperately to resist the command her brain gave it to move forward. She did not want to touch this grate, but something more powerful than fear was thrusting her toward it. It stood between Seth and her, between enslavement and freedom, damnation and redemption.

She barely grazed the surface of the grate, but the pain was so overwhelming she almost lost consciousness. It was like a barb had been yanked through her skin, like a thread pulled from the center of a sweater. The resulting pain was red and angry and irritated like scar tissue. Even just the slightest touch had left her feeling mangled inside.

“I can’t,” Dahlia barely managed to mumble through the pain, doubling forward and clutching her knees.

“Holy hell,” Ellen said. “Look through the bars.”

Dahlia peered through the grate to the catacombs beyond and for a second she was not sure what Ellen had seen. But a pulse of light like the blinking beacon of a lighthouse illuminated the hallway, and for a split second she was able to see what lay inside. Literally every stone – walls, ceiling, and floor – had been painted with one of those horrible runes.

Dahlia felt her head swoon dizzily.

“We can’t continue,” Ellen said. “I’m sorry.”

“No offense, mum,” Eddie said, soothing the hackles that stood up across Miss Annabelle’s fluffy back. “It’s just, we’d die if we tried to go through all that mess.”

“We’re already dead, aren’t we?” Dahlia said, clutching her knees again to keep from falling forward.

“Well, yeah, but you know what I mean. I never felt pain, not in all the years I been dead, but I can feel it now just looking at that symbol on the grate. I don’t wanna imagine touching it.”

“It’s hopeless,” Keitaro said. “A dead end.”

“No,” Dahlia said, straightening up once the world had slowed its spinning. “No, we can get past it. Look.”

She gritted her teeth, closing her eyes and focusing as hard as she could toward the runic grate. She pictured it as the last fence holding her back from the man she loved, and in doing so channeled all the hatred she had ever felt towards it. All the anger, the frustration at her father for having left her, for having taken her place so carelessly in the Vigil. He was inside now, surely sitting there in the cathedral with the others, and he would watch as they destroyed her again, and her body was consumed by the hellish flames.

The death energy began to rise in her, tingling at first in her core, begging to escape from the constraints of her body. It did not take long before it coursed through her limbs, seeking an outlet through her hands and at last the tips of her fingers.

With a spectacular crackle of energy, the deathly flame burst forth from her fingers and into the grate. It should have been more than enough to destroy it; energy of that concentration should have destroyed a small village, in fact. But when the smoke cleared, the grate stood unblemished. The paint was not even chipped.

“Oh fuck,” Dahlia said, feeling her stomach drop away from her. “We really are screwed.”

“So what do you have to say for yourself?” Nate asked through Law’s mouth, as he slowly circled around the altar pillar.

Over the course of the last hour, Seth had roused slightly, hardly enough to stand, but his eyes were open and his lips moved clumsily to form slurred, only slightly coherent sentences.

“Fuck off,” Seth muttered, wincing against the cords that bound him. Each had been painted silver like the grate in the basement, and was etched with tiny little runic figures, not quite as powerful as those downstairs but more than enough to hold him in place.

“What was that?” Nate asked as though he hadn’t heard, stepping in closer towards the naphil.

“Fuck off,” Seth said again to a hard slap across the face.

“You’re in a house of the Creator, man,” Nate said reproachfully, puffing his chest out like the hood of a cobra.

“Well you asked me what I had to say,” Seth said with a little smile. Unable to support his head for much longer, his neck went limp, and his chin slumped down to his chest.

“A naphil. Hardly better than the excrement pumping through the city pipes,” Nate said, shaking his head. “You see what we are up against?” he called to the crowd, to a sea of murmurs.

“He’s nothing more than a high school punk with his tattoos and ‘fuck offs,’ and its sort of pathetic, really, when you think about how frightened you’ve been of these little shits for so long.”

A “here, here!” rose from the crowd, and the men erupted in a chorus of jeers.

Nate allowed the raucous jeering to continue for a few moments before holding up a hand to demand silence. “And to think Dahlia has such a thing for you. Well, I guess there’s no accounting for taste these days.”

“Yeah you’re a mystery to me too,” Seth said.

Nate pretended to ignore the remark and stepped back towards the altar. “The sun is near setting; we have only a few minutes to go before we start the proper ritual. Before we do, let us bow our heads in cleansing silence and pray for the Lord’s strength to banish this fiend once and for all.”

The men followed suit, bowing their heads, though many could not keep their eyes from Seth's dark, bloodied form. A smile still lingered on his bruised lips, one last gesture of defiance worn with the pride of a medal. But it was not difficult to see the terror also welling inside him, the mortal fear that maybe they were actually onto something. If this ritual worked half as well as these damn runes, they'd be scraping pieces of him off the cathedral floor with a chisel.

He wasn't much of a fan of this world, but he certainly wasn't game for eternity spent caged with Lucifer.

For the first time since he could remember, Seth closed his eyes and moved his lips in prayer.

"I'm really sorry, Dahlia," Ellen said, wrapping an arm around Dahlia's trembling shoulders. "We have to turn back. There's just no choice."

"Please," Dahlia plead, smearing the tears of frustration across her face. "Please, just give me a little time. I can figure something out."

"Time," Keitaro said with a snort. "Sure, we have a whole lot of that. But this is a dead end, Dahlia. Just face it."

"No," Dahlia said. "No, I can't. Maybe we can go above ground, walk around to the doors. There's gotta be something open."

"If they took this care to seal up the sewer entrance, you better believe the doors and windows are ten times as bad," Keitaro said.

"He does have a point," Ellen suggested gently.

"No," Dahlia said, standing up straighter and trying to force a commanding edge into her voice. "We're a community, and we're not going to just turn our back on one of us. If we start abandoning each other, how the hell can we possibly expect to survive adversity from the Vigil or worse?"

She looked from face to face, but as each person caught her eyes, they hung their heads in shame and stared towards their shoes.

"Come on guys," Dahlia said in more of a whine than a command. Even she was quickly losing steam. "Please, let's just give it another try. Look! The screws they drilled into this thing look kinda flimsy. Maybe if we shove it hard enough, the grate will just fall off."

"And then what?" Keitaro asked, gesturing towards the catacombs. "We levitate our way through a hallway filled with runes and the Creator knows what else?"

"No, I mean, we can figure something out. Please, guys. I need your support. We're an army, remember?"

She looked desperately at Eddie, but even he was burying his face in the grey scruff of Miss Annabelle's neck. "I'm sorry, mum," he muttered.

"So that's it? You've all come this far just to give up?"

The only response she heard was the shuffling of feet against the pipe as the people at the farthest end of the snakelike crowd began turning around.

"Come on!" Dahlia was growing more frantic with each shuffling of feet. "Please! I need your help! We can't just give up at the first sign of resistance."

"I'm sorry," Ellen said, shaking her head. "It was worth a try."

One by one, the nephilim turned and funneled back out towards the Underground. The longest to linger was Eddie, who kept opening and closing his mouth awkwardly as if he wanted to say something to Dahlia but couldn't find the words. Finally he gave her one last regretful glance and scurried off to join the group.

Dahlia was alone. In the darkness of the pipe, she felt truly isolated from the world, as if she had entered some weird parallel dimension where only she existed.

Who were they to abandon her like that? She had felt such hope, such pride in her breast as they'd marched together, step by step like a real army, towards a foe that they would vanquish together. What had happened to community? To being one?

The painful reality was that deep down she wondered if the nephilim were a group even worth saving. They wailed and bemoaned the endless purgatory of numbness, but at the least pinprick of pain they turned and fled like whipped pups with their tails tucked between their legs. Even if she did continue forward and miraculously break through the cathedral's vanguard and give her soul for the nephilim, what would that accomplish? Would they as mortals still hole themselves up like cowards in the little nests they'd grown so accustomed to?

Maybe they would, but Seth wouldn't. Seth's soul, not theirs, was ultimately on the line anyway. Seth would never abandon her like that. How many times had he come to her rescue at the price of his own safety? And if the situation were reversed, she knew without a doubt he would find a way, even if it meant crawling on his hands and knees through a tunnel of hexes.

And that's what she would do.

"It's my turn now," she said, tilting her head towards the earth above. "Just hold on a little longer, baby. I'm coming."

Closing her eyes and crossing herself, she stepped back a few feet from the grate and crouched down like a runner on the starting block, foot anxiously swiping against the metal floor. A silent count of three and she hurtled forward, tackling the grate like a linesman on a wide receiver.

She hit the grate with such force that she felt it buckle and heave underneath her, but the pain of the contact was immediate and worse than anything she could ever have imagined. Never before had ever pore of her body been aflame like that, as if someone had replaced all her blood with sulphuric acid, and she was being eaten away from the inside out.

With a scream, she fell back onto the floor, clutching her chest and writhing in pain as she urged the fires inside her to go out. But the pain showed no sign of subsisting, and she felt her very consciousness beginning to waver.

No, she screamed inside her head. Not now. There was no time to fall to weakness. She already could be too late.

Just as she felt she could no longer sustain the agony, the flames inside her began to finally subside into a painful, aching tingle. It still hurt more than just about anything she had experienced, but the pain was no longer white-hot. She could deal with this. She had no choice.

Dahlia pulled herself to her feet again, more gently this time. She had to hold onto the wall of the pipe until she was sure her knees would not buckle beneath her.

Once she was up, she closed her eyes and steeled herself for another explosion of pain. It was like willingly throwing herself into the blades of an industrial fan, and yet she would do it over and over again if it meant saving Seth from an eternity of even more unspeakable torment.

She bent over again, crouching to spring forward. Just as she was counting down in her head, she heard a rustling behind her and was so startled she almost lost her balance and toppled over sideways like an upset lawn statue.

“Who’s there?” she called into the darkness.

She heard the footsteps long before she saw the shadows stir. The first thing to emerge from the blackness was a tiny set of paws and a little pointed face topped with shining red eyes. Santino shook his silver head at her haughtily.

A few steps behind was Nik, whose strides were so somber and deliberate that Dahlia hardly recognized him. There was no saunter in the way he walked; the cockiness he usually exuded had left him completely. He’d pulled his long hair up into a ponytail, and he was wearing a simple pair of black pants and a black leather jacket.

“You’re never going to pry that thing off by yourself, you know,” he said, sliding his hands out of his pockets. “Let me help you.”

“What?” Dahlia gaped, momentarily unsure of whether or not she had hallucinated his presence.

“Stupid girl,” he said, and she could swear she saw a flash of admiration light up the pits of his black eyes. “You’re not heavy enough to shove that thing away. But you and I can both do it. It’s just going to hurt.”

“Oh I’m aware,” Dahlia said, rubbing her stinging arms. The flesh felt like plastic under her fingertips, and she realized that the grate had lashed her with burns where it touched her skin. The burns had already hardened over with scar tissue.

“If we run at it hard enough, I think we can topple it in one shot. Just don’t hesitate, understand?”

“I do,” she said, arching her back and assuming the sprinter’s stance.

Nik crouched down beside her. Even Santino stood at the imaginary starting line, tense and poised as if he too planned to fling himself towards the grate.

“Alright,” Nik said. “Don’t think. Just hit it as hard as you can.”

“Yep.”

“Count of three then. One. Two.”

He had hardly announced the “th” of “three” before Dahlia, overwhelmed by the fury inside her, pushed off the ground as hard as she could and hurtled forward without the slightest hesitation.

She and Nik hit the grate almost instantaneously. The metal bars danced and warped against the shockwave of energy, but it was too much for them. The bolts had been driven out, and the weight of the metal was working against it.

From that point, gravity took over. The grate clattered the foot or so to the ground as Dahlia and Nik lay at the rim of the pipe, bodies seizing in agony.

The pain was so overwhelming that Dahlia hardly realized that the grate had fallen until after she managed to sit up and look over the pipe's edge. Sure enough the way was unobstructed, but the hallway shining with merciless silver runes still stretched before them.

How much of that pain could their bodies take before they collapsed for good?

"Get on my back," Nik said after a second, sitting up and rubbing his face. His cheeks were latticed with thick, oozing burns.

"What?"

"I said get on my back. I'm going to carry you as far as I can."

"Wait, Nik, if you carry me you'll be putting almost twice the weight on the runes. It'll destroy you."

"You heard what I said," he snapped, and it was obvious he was not accepting anything but her compliance. "Now get on my back, or I'll put you there myself, and it won't be pretty."

"Okay, okay," Dahlia said. "I got it."

"We don't have time to argue."

She sighed and stood up carefully alongside Nik. He crouched down just low enough so that his back was about the level of her waist. She peered down at Santino, but he too was glaring at her, urging her to follow Nik's instruction.

Shaking her head, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and locked her legs around his waist. He seemed hardly fazed by the extra 130 pounds and tucked his arms around her shins to latch her tighter onto him.

"Alright," he said. "I'm gonna lower down into the hallway in a second. Try not to fall off."

She nodded, reckoning he could feel the movement of her head against the back of his neck.

He took a loud breath and stepped forward to the lip of the pipe. "Here we go. Creator help us."

She felt the bounce as Nik jumped off the edge of the pipe and landed a foot or so below on the stone floor with a grunt. He raced forward as quickly as he could, not allowing himself any time to process the pain that was surely coursing up his legs and pulsating through the rest of his body.

She could feel his muscles tightening with strain, but he let out no cry, or any other sign of the excruciating pain she knew he had to be feeling.

Nik's pace was rapid at first, and they easily cleared a good hundred feet, but the hallway seemed endless, and before long the pain was overwhelming even Nik's resolve. He began to slow to a walk; his paces grew more labored, and his feet dragged on the ground.

"I can't walk much further," he groaned to Dahlia. "I need to crawl. Can you hold tight?"

"Yes," she said, clinging even tighter to his shoulders.

He stumbled forward onto his knees, and Dahlia wondered whether he'd lost his footing or deliberately fallen then. His bare hands sizzled against the stones, and Dahlia felt her stomach lurch just hearing how the skin burned away.

She adjusted her position and sat up in the center of his back, and like that he had become a four-legged mount, and he was literally dragging himself across the floor with every last ounce of strength he had.

His pace was slow but steady, and he showed no sign of wavering despite his hands having been burned nearly to nubs, and his legs scraped raw since his pants had worn away against the rough stone. Beside him Santino trotted painlessly along like a little coach, and she supposed it was he that was ultimately keeping Nik going. If she could reach out and kiss the top of the rat's head, she would have.

And then she saw it, the end of the tunnel. A tiny light on a string swung overhead, so dim they could not have seen it from very far away, illuminating a set of creaky-looking wooden stairs. The stairs were unmarked, though, and gave Dahlia hope that perhaps the Vigil had not placed any more runes after that point. They had not expected anyone to come so far.

The stairs lurked only another fifty feet or so in the distance, taunting them like a mirage. "Look, Nik," Dahlia said gently, pointing forward. "We're almost there."

He rasped something in response, but Dahlia realized that he knew he wasn't going to make it that far. He had slowed so much that each step was painful for Dahlia to watch, as he groaned and picked up one stumpy hand and placed it out onto the next rune.

Only twenty feet from the stairs, Nik collapsed. Dahlia could hear his face searing against the stones, but he did not stir.

Panic-stricken, she jumped off his back and immediately regretted it as soon as her bare feet met the runes on the floor. She howled at the shock of the pain, but like an animal trapped in the oncoming headlights of a truck, she could not will herself to move.

Finally she broke through the stupor and regained enough of her senses to grab Nik around the collar of his jacket and drag him forward across the floor with her as she sprinted forward like a dancer over hot coals. She tried to put as little pressure as possible on the ground underneath her, but with Nik in tow that was nearly impossible, and the bottoms of her feet were completely charred by the time she reached the end of the runes.

Exhausted, she fell forward against Nik, who lay on the floor where she'd moved him, just outside the range of the runes. His body was malformed, and smoke still rose in tiny spirals from the points that had had the most contact with the ground. Half of his face had been burned away, and the eyeball lolled lazily in the socket, barely attached by the retina behind it.

"Oh Nik," Dahlia cried, kissing his hair again and again. "I'm sorry. You didn't have to do this for me."

The scar tissue on his face shifted slightly, like he was trying to smile, but the gesture elicited so much pain that Nik cried out through a partially lipless mouth. "I did," he rasped, so quietly that Dahlia had to bring her head in close to

him just to understand what he was saying. “What I did to you... it was my penance.”

Dahlia cradled his head in her lap, stroking what was left of his black hair. With his face charred that way, he reminded her a little of Lucy’s corpse, whose eyes had been reduced to lumps of charcoal.

“Please, Dahlia,” Nik said. “It hurts, everything.”

She soothed him by bringing a finger to her lips. “It’s okay, Nik. I understand.”

Santino stood up on his hind legs, resting his front paws on Nik’s shoulder. Nik shrugged affectionately, cuddling the animal into the crook of his neck. “See you later, buddy.”

Tears blurred his face below her as Dahlia took his cheeks in her hands. “I love you, Nik,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Give them a lot of hell,” he said.

“I promise I will.”

She turned his head with a hard yank and snapped his neck, and it only took a second for his body to erupt in black flame. Nomi would be waiting for him; she was probably already preparing the chamber for whenever he was to come back, but for now he would rest in cool black nothingness – whatever that was, wherever it was.

She did not have time to stand reverently and ponder this, however, and she quickly pulled herself to her feet. Santino whined at her ankles, and she picked him up and set him on her shoulder. “You ready, buddy?”

The rat dug his little fingers into her flesh as if signaling that he was.

“Alrighty, then. Here goes nothing.”

She let out a deep breath, took one final glance back at the hall of runes, and sprinted upstairs. The wooden stairs shrieked beneath her every step.

CHAPTER 34

At the top of the stairs was a crude wooden door, but it was unlocked and did not necessitate removal by force. Judging by the way Santino was trembling on her shoulder, he probably would’ve been appreciative of that fact had he known.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Dahlia said, somewhat surprised to find herself soothing the creature she had always found so off-putting. She let her hand linger a few inches above him, and he nuzzled his face into her fingers like a cat.

Beyond the door was a musty hallway carpeted in old burgundy shag. A swarm of dust picked up as she took a step onto it, and Santino gave a tiny high-pitched sneeze.

“Sorry,” Dahlia said to the rat. “I’ll tread carefully.”

The hallway seemed to dead-end not much further to the right, so instead Dahlia chose left and pressed forward, careful not to kick up too much dust. As she ran, she noticed no other runes or men standing guard. They really must have placed all their stake in the tunnel finishing her off.

It was like they knew the nephilim would give up, Dahlia realized. But what they hadn't counted on was Nik's penitence, which ultimately ended up shattering even his own defenses.

"Thank you Nik," Dahlia whispered, crossing herself. "Wherever you are."

Through another doorframe was the Narthex, a dimly lit entryway brushed with cobwebs. The stench of mildew was so overwhelming that Dahlia was momentarily glad that breathing for her was only a superficial activity. Poor Santino, however, had buried his face in her shoulder in an attempt to filter out some of the smell.

Solid double doors lurked at the other end of the room, both enticing and intimidating her by their massiveness. That was it: the final threshold. No rune or lock in sight, either.

Dahlia crept up to the door and pressed her ear against the wood, but she could hear nothing, which was perhaps a blessing given her current distress. He was in there, though. She could still feel him.

She brushed off the front of her dress, kissed the top of Santino's head, and shoved the massive doors open.

"Well, look who's joined us," Nate called from the altar. His hands were clasped behind his back, his chest puffed forward in a haughty stance that Dahlia knew was not Law's.

"Go to hell, Nathaniel," Dahlia said, as the doors slammed shut behind her.

He froze mid-stride. Law's face blanched for a split second, but the menace quickly returned to his slanted brows.

"So you've figured me out, sweetheart. Gold star for you."

"Not that it was hard," Dahlia said, feigning the same sort of arrogance with her eyes rolled and her hands shoved on her hips. She would play his game, if that's what it took. "I mean, not to be rude or anything, but Law doesn't really have his shit together to do something like this."

The light in the cathedral was blinding, so bright she had to raise an arm over her eyes as she walked closer to the altar. But as her eyes began to adjust, she realized what that black blotch on one of the marble pillars was.

"Seth," she said.

"Dahlia?" he said, straining to lift his face far enough to look at her. His eyes were bruised and swollen, and it looked like Nate had opened every scar on his face again. Dahlia had to fight the urge to run over to him and begin nursing his wounds.

"I'm here," she said. "I'm not leaving without you."

"Well that's good to know," Nate said with a smirk. "Because you're not leaving at all."

He clapped his hands, and suddenly the world around them froze.

It took Dahlia a second to realize what had happened, but when she looked back at the hundred hooded men in the pews, she realized that they were more statues than men now, sculpted with a handful of similar expressions: surprise, even disgust.

She recognized her father's face at the end of the first row; his hazel eyes were wide, but she could tell there was something else beyond sheer surprise in his expression. The tension in his lips, the lines at the corners of his mouth – they were all indicative of something heavier, something she was not sure she had ever seen on him before. She wanted to say it was concern, but that wasn't quite right. Not concern, no, more like regret. Remorse. That was it. Her father, for perhaps the first time ever, looked as though he felt remorseful for something. And while she could not tell what that something was, the expression itself was enough to catch her off guard.

"He feels bad he brought you into this world," Nate sneered from the altar. "Isn't that precious? He knows what's about to happen to you, and he wishes you were never born."

She blinked numbly at Nate, still fixated with the image of her father's remorse. "I... I mean, he's never been sorry for anything," she stammered, more to herself than the apostate angel. "He's never apologized."

"Well don't expect an apology now," Nate said. He shook his head, as if dismissing the subject. "Come on now, we have more important things to discuss than your daddy issues."

Dahlia narrowed her eyes at Nate, feeling her own focus return. "Yeah like me kicking your ass?"

"Ha," he said. "Yeah, okay. Not even going to touch that one."

Dahlia brought her fists up in front of her, popping each knuckle with a fierce crack.

"Look, sweetheart. Did you think I gave two shits about this emo piece of crap?" Nate gestured to Seth, who was frozen against the column. His eyes were still drooping but alight with a new frantic energy since Dahlia had walked in.

"You think he's the primal sacrifice? Honey, I think Lucifer would be offended if I made this one the key to opening his prison. He'd probably break up with me."

"Wait," Dahlia said, cocking her head as the pieces slid into place. "You mean-"

"This was a trap for you?" Nate asked with a snide laugh. "Someone give this girl another gold star!"

"But the runes," she said, shrinking backwards as she felt the reality of the situation crushing in on her. "No, you were going to banish him. I mean, Law was. He hated Seth."

"Yeah, he did, but I didn't give a crap. I let him think he was calling the shots until the last act."

"But the runes," Dahlia repeated desperately, clutching her cheeks. "My feet are burned. Nik- Nik was banished!"

"Yeah, and that's all super sad and all, but do you think I would just let you waltz in with no resistance?" Nate asked, rolling his eyes dramatically.

"Please! You're not a complete idiot – you would've known something was up. I figured I'd rough you up a little, you know, make this really fun for you."

"You're a bastard."

“Please! Tell me something I haven’t heard a jillion other times. But if we’re being technical here, your boyfriend’s the one who’s a bastard. I mean, technically speaking.”

“So what? Did you lure me here to talk me to death?”

“Not one for polite conversation, are you?”

Dahlia shook her head and in doing so nearly knocked Santino from her shoulder. He too had frozen in place like the others, with a spiteful glare towards Nate locked permanently onto his face. She gently picked him up and kissed the top of his head, setting him down beside the front row of pews.

“You know, your ex-boyfriend once accused me of the same thing,” Nate mused. “Nice body, by the way. He really took care of himself.”

“I rest my case.”

“Look, I was just being cordial, okay? You want to get straight to business? That’s fine. No sweat off Law’s back,” Nate said. He waved his hands in front of him, as if trying to calm her unreasonable anger.

“Let’s just all take a chill pill, okay? Fine. Just a second, then.”

Dahlia stood in puzzlement, watching as he disappeared around the back of the thick pillar. He did something quickly with his arms, and a layer of silver cord fell to the ground, though Seth remained bound in place.

There was a flutter of motion, and Nate returned dragging a pale, naked young man by the wrists. His backside was entirely red, matted with blood and stringy clumps of muscle, and his face was so contorted with sorrow that it took Dahlia a second to recognize him.

She wanted to cry out to him, but her voice had become lodged in the back of her throat.

“Dahlia?” he said weakly, as beads of sweat dripped down his feverish face. “That you?”

“Raphy,” she finally managed to spit out, staring with horror into his bloodshot eyes. “What did he do to you?”

“Nathaniel’s a fiend,” Raphy spat. “He cut off my wings to subdue me. He’s kept me captive here for a while.”

Once the shock had subsided somewhat, Dahlia took a furious step forward, but Nate put up a hand in warning. From his waistband he withdrew one of the silver Vigil daggers, pointing it towards the hollow of Raphy’s throat.

“Take another step and I slit him ear-to-ear like your little friend Eddie.”

“What do you want from me?” Dahlia cried with exasperation.

“A couple things, really. First, I want to watch you burn in the holy flame.”

“What is it with that holy flame bullshit!” she interrupted. “No one can even tell me what that means!”

“Will you be patient for once?”

Nate groaned, shoving Raphy forward so hard he toppled down the stairs, falling in a heap just short of Dahlia’s feet. She hurriedly knelt down next to him, but the moment she touched him, her hands were saturated with blood.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Nate said. “What, you didn’t know? You’re the key, sweetheart. You’re going to unlock the gates of the infernal prison

and let my beloved out, along with the others who were wrongfully imprisoned when the great tyrant cast them down.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Dahlia said.

“It’s not your decision, doll,” Nate replied, creeping closer to them one step at a time. He spread his arms out to either side of him, like a priest conducting hymns. “I am the authority! Don’t you get it? The Creator is too preoccupied with his other creations to give a shit about you down here. You think he did anything to stop me from cutting off the wings of one of his own angels?”

“The Creator doesn’t care about you! Get it through your dense little skull. He’s like your father there in that pew, watching as you walk towards the scaffold, and all he can do is wish you were never born just so he can clear his conscience. That’s the Creator for you. You’re just a little pawn to amuse him, a doll in his house. And now this world is going to go up in flames, and you know what? He’s just going to brush his hands off, say ‘oh well, there goes another one,’ and start over with some planet made of talking insects or something. Because that’s what the Creator does.”

“That’s not true,” Dahlia said, though she knew he had upset her deeper than she cared to admit. Her eyes were feeling hot again, and the corners of her mouth were twitching. “You’re wrong! You don’t know anything about the Creator.”

“And you think you do?” Nate scoffed. “For such puny creatures, you humans sure are stupidly proud. Hubris is a fatal flaw, love. Just look at your story of Oedipus.”

“You’re wrong,” Dahlia said again, rubbing her eyes until they hurt. “The Creator would never abandon us. He has a plan. I saw-”

“Yourself destroyed on these stairs? Yeah, me too. You’re not the only one who’s had a glimpse at the Akashic records, sweetheart. Except I didn’t have to fuck someone to see it. You’re going to fail, and the Creator couldn’t care less. You could spend eternity in hell getting butt fucked by the Adversary for all he cares.”

“No,” Dahlia said, taking a step back away from the bleeding angel in front of her. “No.”

“Oh come on,” Nate chided. “Just examine your conscience, I think you’ll see the truth is pretty obvious.”

“No,” Dahlia said. “That’s a lie.”

“It’s all settling in, isn’t it? Why bother prolonging the inevitable?”

“I can’t believe it,” Dahlia said, crouching down to her knees and covering her face with her hands. “I won’t.”

“Yeah, okay. Keep fighting it all you want, but the truth hurts, baby doll.”

When Dahlia looked up from her hands, she realized that Nate had bent down and was tracing some sort of pattern in oil with his finger on Raphael’s chest.

“I know you keep asking about the Holy Flame. You’ll be happy to know I’m about to let you in on the secret,” Nate said.

Dahlia froze, staring up at him with apprehension as he continued his intent tracing.

“Little primer first. You’re made of what now? Deathly matter!”

Nate examined his work with his head cocked. A little satisfied smirk appeared on his lips.

“And what is our wingless friend here made of?”

“Light matter,” Dahlia mumbled, beginning to catch on.

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner. Now, I won’t bother asking you what happens when a naphil like you imbibes life energy from say, a human being. I think you know far too well about that.”

Dahlia felt her face flush and turned away.

“But let’s say a naphil were to imbibe pure light energy, like that of our buddy Raphael here. He’s an archangel, let us not forget, so his light is one of the purest of all.”

Before Dahlia could react, Nate had lunged forward and grabbed her by the neck, dragging her like a ragdoll halfway up the stairs of the altar. His grip was adamant; each finger formed a shackle around her that she knew she could not break free of, even if she did manage to summon the requisite death energy. Like the rune on the sewer grate, Law’s hand would not even waver.

“Now you see? The Holy Flame isn’t even a flame at all, but the collision of light and death – light for its sheer power and death for its destruction. Against this power, the gates of Lucifer’s prison stand no chance. Everything will crumble to ruin.”

“If what you’re saying is true, you’ll take the world with you!” Dahlia interjected. “Everything will be destroyed.”

“Collateral damage,” Nate said. “At least you shits will finally be put out of your misery. And Law will get his wish after all, and the nephilim will be no more. Nor will the humans or animals or plants either, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“What about you? Do you really think you’ll survive the blast?”

“Please,” Nate said, wrinkling his nose in disdain. “We’re fucking angels. The Creator himself can’t even touch us.”

Nate closed his eyes and began chanting something that Dahlia did not understand, in a language that sounded somewhat like she imagined Aramaic would, but something told her what he spoke was no earthly tongue. The chant sounded more like a baroque hymn with its ornate notes and trills, and had Dahlia not known better, she might have thought it was strangely beautiful. But there was something off, a sinister thread that cast a shadow across the entire refrain. In fact, it was the exact opposite melody of what Raphy had whistled that one time in the car.

Nate’s voice rose to a crescendo, as the melody built up to the musical climax. As he hit the final grating note, Raphael began to shake violently, as if half his body were placed on one tectonic plate, and the other half on another.

Raphael flopped over from the force of the quake, and Dahlia realized that the figure that Nate had drawn on his chest, which looked a bit like a malformed heart, was glowing with a blinding white light.

Dahlia realized after a second, however, that the shape was not actually glowing itself. Rather, it was a place where Raphael's chest had been cut away, and the light she saw was actually radiating from inside him, and the hole was beginning to grow larger as Raphael's was literally torn apart from the center.

"Byebye, beautiful," Nate whispered in her ear.

He slashed her body over and over again with the dagger, until she was checkered with stab wounds. Instead of bleeding out, though, she felt something entering her body, something that seared even worse than the runes had. One last plunge of the dagger sent it through where her heart should have been, and Nate left the knife standing in her chest like the flag of a colony planted in virgin soil.

She glanced downwards to find that the white light from Raphael's chest was rushing in streams into her body where the knife had opened her up. It was too much too fast, though, and she felt her body straining just to contain so much extra energy.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, everything was white.

Nothing hurt anymore, but she could feel the presence of the pain to every side, rushing past her in blinding streaks. It was like she had entered the eye of the tornado; if she strayed too far in any direction the whirlwind would snatch her up, and she would suffer that agony again, perhaps for eternity.

In the center of the eye she saw her body lying on the steps just as she had seen it in her vision: blood leaked from the cuts that hatched her skin, pooling on the marble steps beneath her, but her eyelids were closed, smooth and unlined, and the corners of her mouth were tweaked up in one last peaceful smile.

"Why are you smiling?" Dahlia screamed, but her voice was stolen by the wind. "Get up, come on! Stand up! Damn you, Dahlia!"

"You're smiling because you're free of the pain, for now at least," Raphael spoke up behind her.

Dahlia turned around to find him standing as she remembered him, shirtless and wearing a pair of faded blue jeans. His wings were lush and unblemished, and he too was smiling.

"Raphy! You're okay."

"Well, okayish," he said with a shrug. "I've got to get another body eventually, which is sort of a pain in the neck."

"Where are we?"

"I know it doesn't look like it, but I guess you could say we're at a crossroads here," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've got some choices. And it's not going to be easy."

"Wait a second," Dahlia said, glancing around with eyes like saucers.

"Why aren't I in the infernal prison? I thought I was the Primal Sacrifice and all, and the Holy Fire would destroy me and throw open the gates of Lucifer's prison."

"Well here's the thing," Raphy said, crossing his arms over his bare chest and beaming at her with that same boyish smile of his that drove her crazy. "You remember what we did in that hotel room, yeah?"

“Well how could I forget?” she said, face reddening. “Do you really have to bring that up now?”

“No, I swear there’s a reason. Other than it being really hot.”

She said nothing, trying desperately to stave off the blush that was consuming her cheeks. Nice to know she could still be humiliated, even in the middle of the abyss.

“Look, the other angels and I arranged our little rendez vous for a reason. Let’s just say that what we, uh, did created a connection between us. Because I had commuted to you some light energy – such a tiny bit you had no idea it was even there – when you were turned you weren’t entirely a creature of death.”

“But those powers,” Dahlia said. “I made half a freaking mall explode.”

“I know that,” Raphy said, shaking his head slowly. “Let’s just say the light energy can be a little bit of a catalyst. But long story short, the explosion of my energy did not destroy you because you were immune to it. You already had the Holy Flame burning inside you, for all intents and purposes. Nathaniel’s hubris was that he did not stop long enough to realize that, which he would’ve if he’d just taken a closer look at you...”

“No kidding,” Dahlia said, biting her lower lip as she struggled to mash the puzzle pieces together in her head. “But what do I do now?”

“Well, that depends. You see, you’ve got some choices.”

“Choices?”

“Yeah. You always have choices. I hate to say it, but Nathaniel was right about some things. It’s true, the Creator is a busy creature and spends much of his time in the Empyrean working on his creations – other universes, dimensions, things you wouldn’t even be able to comprehend.

“But what Nathaniel is terribly wrong about is that the Creator does care. He loves you so much that he appointed his own angels to watch over you and protect you from the Adversary’s hatred. Yes, we’re creatures of the light and naturally oriented towards allegiance with the Creator and his creations, but that doesn’t mean we’re free of bad apples. Unfortunately angels like Lucifer are evidence of that.

“What I’m trying to say, Dahlia, is that even though the Creator cannot actively involve himself in everything that happens in your world, it does not mean he loves you any less. Your will is free, and your life uncharted. And as I said, now you have some choices.”

“Okay,” Dahlia said, straightening up. “So what are they?”

“Well, here are your options. Obviously Nathaniel’s plan is foiled for now, so you don’t have to worry about becoming the key to open Lucifer’s prison. That’s not to say he won’t try again, though.”

“Right,” Dahlia said.

“So for the first option, you can choose to let yourself move on. I’ll tell you right now that there’s no such thing as heaven and hell, at least not for mortal souls. Sure there’s the Empyrean where the Creator resides and the Adversary’s opposite sanctum, but there is no eternal happiness or punishment: there is simply entropy. The energy of your soul will disperse amongst the cosmos, and you will exist with everyone who has ever come before and will ever come after, together

as one massive body. Because of the Holy Flame burning within you, the Creator can cleanse your undeath, and you will be able to die as a mortal in peace.”

Peace. The mere word made her skin tremble. It was something she had spent her entire life seeking, something she wanted with her entire soul, and it was now within an arm’s reach. After these months of strife and despair, there seemed nothing sweeter – no eternal oasis more promising. The Heaven she had always imagined seemed to pale in comparison.

“And the other option?” Dahlia said, though it pained her to ask.

“Step back into the vortex,” Raphy said. “Accept the pain and return to your body and defeat the fiend Nathaniel. I do not know if you will be victorious or not, but if you are, you will redeem the souls of the nephilim. If you’re not, I’m afraid you will be eternally bound to your cursed naphil state.”

“But how? How do I defeat him?”

“You cannot destroy him,” Raphael said. “But you can remove his physical form like he has removed mine.”

“You mean Law.”

“Defeat his physical form, and his spirit will be sent back to the Empyrean to receive another shell. We’ll apprehend him there before he gets the chance to escape.”

“But you do not know if I will succeed?”

“No,” Raphy said regretfully. “All I can say is you will have the chance to fight. Whether you succeed or not ultimately is up to you.”

Dahlia sunk to the ground. “I just don’t know, Raphy. Can I have a few moments to think?”

“Of course,” he said. “But you have to make a decision soon. The hands of time can only be delayed for so long.”

“I understand,” she said, closing her eyes.

She had set out to redeem the nephilim, but now that the invitation of peace had been set out before her, she could not look away from it. What if the Creator took offense at her denial of eternal rest? What if he decided to condemn her to spend eternity as a naphil? Wasn’t peace the ultimate reward? Wasn’t that the “end” square on a board game?

And yet the thought of Seth bleeding and bound to the pillar of marble, of her mother watching forlornly as Gavin boarded the bus every day, of Raven gazing down at a photo of a stranger in a checkered suit, of Nik suspended in limbo until his body was spawned in the same purgatory, and even of Law forced out of his own body by an infernal parasite... These images haunted her just like the rippling chaos of eternity.

Nik did not suffer for her to die; none of them did.

For the first time it occurred to Dahlia that it might not only be her fate that she was deciding the course of.

“I’ve made my decision,” Dahlia said finally, standing up and looking Raphael in his blue eyes.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said.

She took a deep breath. “Please give the Creator my regards, and thank him for his kind offer. Unfortunately I have some business I have to take care of first.”

Dahlia closed her eyes and dove headfirst into the whirlwind of pain.

CHAPTER 35

The first thing Dahlia saw when her eyes blinked open was Nate inside Law’s body, which was crouched on the step just above her, watching intently and waiting for the explosion that was supposed to come.

He had not expected to see her open her eyes or sit up and look into his face.

“Nice try,” Dahlia said.

“What?” Nate cried, jumping back with alarm. “This isn’t possible! You were, I mean, it was- it was written, damn it!”

“Stupid boy,” Dahlia said, mocking his tone. She pulled herself to her feet as he stared up at her with a mixture of terror and awe in his slate grey eyes.

“You know what your fatal flaw is?” she said, yanking the dagger from her chest with a squish.

Nate did not say a word.

“You suffer from a real lack of creativity.”

He tried to squirm away from her, but she had him by the collar of his robe before he could get too far. Still hypnotized by shock, Nate hardly flinched as she drew the dagger up to the notch at the base of his throat. “I want to talk to Law,” she demanded.

He could have wriggled out of her grip if he’d wanted to, as inhumanly strong as it was, and with a little extra effort he could have flung her away from him. She would not have been all that difficult to overpower, as wounded as she was.

But something kept Nate still – perhaps it was the paralyzing realization that he had failed, that he had spent thousands of years preparing for an event that would not come.

“Damn, you’re pathetic,” Dahlia said. “You can’t handle a little disappointment? I hate to break it to you, Mister High and Mighty, but we ‘puny humans’ as you call us deal with disappointment on a daily basis.”

“Just leave me,” Nate whined. “Just go.”

“You don’t get off that easily.”

Law’s body twitched, and Dahlia realized some sort of transformation was occurring inside of him.

“Dahlia,” he spoke with a tenderness that she recognized immediately.

“Law.”

“He’s trying to get out,” he said. She could hear the immense strain in his voice, as he struggled with the spirit inside him. “I’m not going to let him, alright? But you have to be quick.”

“What do you-”

“You have to send him back to the Empyrean, and based on what I’ve gathered from him, the only way to do it is to get rid of his physical body. So listen to me: take that knife and stab me through the heart when I shove him back in place, okay?”

“But you’ll die!”

“Look, Dahlia, there are more important things than my life. I think you’ve proven time and time again the power of sacrifice. Now it’s my turn.”

“Law,” she said, but he shook his head vigorously.

“Just do it, Dahlia. Please. For me.”

The lump swelling in the back of her throat wouldn’t allow much more than a croak to escape. But what could she say, anyway? Law had chosen his path after all, and who was she to get in the way of that?

“Okay,” she said. “Just tell me when.”

“Hold on,” Law said, his voice fading in and out.

“Damn you!” Nate snapped, and Dahlia held the dagger at the ready at Law’s chest.

“Shit, almost got him,” Law said. “Just another second. Hold it. Hold it.”

“Law,” Dahlia pled.

“Now!”

“Let me go, you little shit!”

Dahlia closed her eyes and jammed the dagger in as hard as she could. It sunk effortlessly through the robes and into Law’s heart, and his body went rigid at first with shock. The pale mouth opened as if to scream but only blood bubbled up from the lips. Dahlia knew who it was she’d slain; the sheer hatred in those eyes was impossible to mistake, but eventually it too flickered out like a dying fluorescent bulb.

Blood dripped down the front of the black robe as Law’s body sunk to its knees, clutching the dagger in its chest. It twitched and struggled for a few minutes, but then it was still.

A screeching howl pierced the air, and Dahlia had to clap her hands over her ears. A black cloud of mist was expelled through the mouth of Law’s corpse and hovered in the air a few feet above the body.

“What have you done?” the spirit wailed. Dahlia could barely make out the form of a young man in the mist, with long light hair and a disturbingly childlike face. “You bitch!”

She watched as the spirit was cleaved apart in front of her, just as Raphael had been, as if chains were pulling it in every direction.

Nate cried out, but he could not hold on any longer. The forces upon him took over, and his spirit was rent in a million tiny pieces. There was an explosion of dark flame, like the one that should have claimed her own body, and the air cleared. Cleansing silence settled over the cathedral.

A few moments later, time seemed to click in again. The wax statues in the pews sprung to life, and a rumble of confused grunts filled the air. Herbert and Donne looked particularly baffled, blanching at the sight of Law’s dead body slumped on the altar floor.

Dahlia wasted no time in ripping the cords away from Seth's body. Without the infusion of Nathaniel's power, the runes were meaningless, and the binds were just regular ropes.

"Dahlia, what the fuck just happened?" Seth groaned, falling forward into her arms.

"He's gone," she said, stroking her fingers through his wet hair.

"What happens now?"

"I don't know," she admitted, frowning. What did happen now? She had defeated Nathaniel, but to what avail? Raphy had said the nephilim would be liberated, but were they? She and Seth were still there...

"Let's just get out of here," Dahlia said, helping Seth to his feet. Clutching her arm, he managed to limp down the stairs of the altar and across the aisle towards the back door.

"Everybody go home," Dahlia called to the puzzled crowd. "You'll get further instruction when it comes."

She expected at least some sort of protest, but the men only shrugged and did as they were told, quietly filing out of the pews and out the side doors. Although they fancied themselves wolves, the Vigil members were just as much sheep as the nephilim they hunted.

With their slow hobbling pace, Dahlia and Seth were the last ones out. Santino trotted at their heels at first but quickly grew impatient and scaled his way up Dahlia's dress, perching himself on her outside shoulder.

To Dahlia's surprise, when she opened the doors to the Narthex, she found a single figure waiting for her in the center of the room.

"Dad?" she asked, quirked an eyebrow.

"Hey, honey," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know what you did out there," Jude began, with words that Dahlia had never imagined he would say, "I'm not even going to begin to try to understand. But whatever it was, you made me proud."

Dahlia couldn't help but smile, but in doing so she felt herself steadily sinking back to her child height. She was the little kid once again looking up at Daddy, doing tricks and singing songs just for his rare moments of attention.

How many times did he have to brush her aside before she recognized the pattern?

"Look," she said, her smile fading. Jude cocked his head at her sharpened tone. "I'm glad you're proud of me, Dad, but I just want you to know my self-worth isn't tied to you anymore. I realize that you're never going to be the person I want you to be, and I'm stupid to sit around and wait for it. Fool me twice – or in your case like a million times – shame on me."

"Dahlia."

"I love you, Dad," she interrupted. "I'm always going to love you because you're my dad, but I don't trust you, and I probably never will. You've hurt me and the family so much I can't even say, and you don't deserve to get the best of us anymore."

“What are you saying?” he said, frowning and perching his hands on his hips.

“I’m saying that you should live your life and I’ll live mine, and if they intersect that’s fine. But I’m done chasing after you. If I let you make me feel bad about myself, I’m giving you my power, and I’m not willing to do that anymore. Sorry, Dad.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Jude said, his tone laced with spite. Dahlia cringed but mentally urged her eyes to stay dry.

“You’ve always been an ungrateful kid – you and your brother. Nobody ever thought about my feelings. But you know, that’s okay. Now I can start thinking about me. To hell with all of you.”

He turned away towards the doors, and Dahlia cleared her throat.

“Oh Dad? Before you go.”

“What?”

“I’d like you to meet Seth, the love of my life.” She gestured to the huge man under her arm who had been all but forgotten in their little tiff.

Jude rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. “You always did love the thugs. I swear to the Creator.”

He disappeared into the night air, still shaking his head.

Dahlia snickered. “Well that’s dear old Dad for you.”

“I can see why you like him so much,” Seth said, and she laughed, kissing him on the tip of the nose.

“So where are we going?” Dahlia said. “Should we check the Underground?”

“If it’s all the same to you, I think I need to take a rest. My apartment’s trashed, though.”

“Well it’s not like anybody’s gonna be at mine anymore,” she said, drawing a little sigh from her chest.

“Thank you,” she mouthed over her shoulder. In the morning she’d return for Law, and they’d give him a proper burial.

When Dahlia and Seth stepped outside, the first thing they noticed was the iridescent figure standing at the bottom of the steps, where the statue of the Mother with open arms usually stood.

“What’s that?” Seth asked, pointing down to the strange glow.

Dahlia squinted and stared, and the longer she looked the more she realized just what she was seeing. In the midst of the glow was the faint outline of a man with big, round eyes and a mop of curly hair.

Dahlia nearly sprinted down the rest of the stairs. “Raphy!”

“Easy there,” Seth cringed, trying his hardest to keep step with her.

Santino’s nails pierced her skin as he tried desperately to hang on.

“Sorry,” she said to both of them, slowing down again at the bottom of the steps.

“Hey,” Raphy spoke with a voice more musical than any human’s. To the passersby, it probably just sounded like a faint sprinkling of bells.

“I did it,” Dahlia beamed.

“I know. I was really proud.”

“Hi,” Seth said to the light, smoothing away the hair that was matted to his forehead. “Have we met?”

“Hello, Seth. Archangel Raphael at your service.” The light bowed delicately at the waist.

“No shit,” Seth said with wonderment. “You’re the same Raphael I met on the street that one time, aren’t you?”

Raphy nodded.

“Man,” Seth laughed, his face reddening. “I had no idea you were that Raphael. My bad.”

“It’s cool,” Raphy said with a grin. He turned towards Dahlia. “So you’ll be happy to know the Underground is empty tonight.”

“Really? You mean it?”

“You’ll have your chance to say your hellos in a little bit. But first, we managed to grab the Creator’s attention, and he wants to have a chat with you guys.”

Dahlia looked to Seth, whose eyes were equally wide with amazement.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yep,” he said. “You chose a path, and this is what’s come of it. He let me in on some stuff, and let me just say I think you’re gonna like the offer He’s planning on making you.”

“Wow, just... I don’t even know what to say,” Dahlia said.

“Don’t worry about that. Let’s just get going; don’t like to keep Him waiting, you know? He’s a busy guy.”

Raphael reached into a pouch at his hip and withdrew a handful of the same sort of shimmering light he himself was made of. He flung the handful out beside him, and the little bits of light hung in the air like stars and sort of reminded Dahlia of fiber optics the way they glittered.

The light ate away at the nighttime street, cutting a perfectly arched doorway through which golden light streamed.

Dahlia and Seth were dumbstruck.

“After you,” Raphael said, gesturing towards the door with another bow.

Dahlia hesitated a moment just long enough to cast Seth a look, who looked back at her with the same mixture of excitement and nervousness in his eyes. “You ready?” she whispered.

“Ready for anything with you,” he said with a lopsided grin.

Hand-in-hand, they stepped through the portal and into the light.

EPILOGUE

“How many?” Stephanie asked boredly, fishing the menus out of the podium without looking up.

“Just two.”

“Lunch okay for you guys?”

“Yeah, that works.”

“Come with me.” Clutching the menus to her chest, she led the couple past the crowded rows of tables to a back booth. Table 20.

“Your server will be with you shortly,” Stephanie said, setting the menus and the silverware down on the table. “Enjoy your lu-”

She let out a little yelp of surprise when she looked up into Dahlia’s face.

“You,” Stephanie said, as though she had just encountered the Loch Ness monster in the flesh. “We all thought you were dead or something. It was on the news.”

“Nope,” Dahlia said with a grin. “Just hit a rough spot, I guess you could say. I had to go find myself.”

With the mystique gone, Stephanie’s teenage interest had quickly fled. She straightened up, pinning back her bangs with a bright pink butterfly. “Well, that’s good for you. Enjoy your lunch.”

“What’s with her?” Seth asked with a chuckle.

“Been trying to figure that out for the last year.”

Dahlia and Seth were dressed similarly, wearing tight, dark jeans and short-cropped leather jackets. Two black Yamaha sport bikes were parked at the curb by the door. Dahlia had no idea how she had lived so long without experiencing the thrill of weaving through traffic at eighty miles an hour on a rumbling pair of rubber wheels.

Dahlia yawned, twirling the end of her ponytail around her finger. “Man, I used to practically live here. I can’t believe how long it’s been since I’ve been back.”

“I think you and Sal’s needed a healthy separation,” Seth said. “I see Monsieur ‘fat fuck’ is still happily employed.”

Dahlia looked over her shoulder to watch as Steve sauntered over towards the hostess station, rocking his hips back and forth like a supermodel walking the runway in Paris.

“Nope, some things definitely haven’t changed,” she said.

“Welcome to Sal’s, my name is Dwayne, and I will be your- holy shit! Dahlia!” Dwayne said, brushing his blonde mop far enough out of his eyes to take a good look at her.

Dahlia had never known his eyes were green before; she had honestly never really seen them.

“Dude! We all thought you were dead!”

“So everyone keeps saying,” Dahlia said. “What’s going on with you guys?”

“Oh shit I can’t believe how long it’s been. You quit like last winter, right?”

“That’s right,” Dahlia said. She could see Seth snickering out of the corner of her eye, and she stepped hard on the toe of his boot.

“How you doing, man? Honestly, may I say? You look great.”

“Aw, thanks Dwayne,” Dahlia grinned, elbowing Seth in the ribs. “Doing well. This is my husband, Seth Kratos.”

“Oh dude! Nice to meet you. Congrats on nabbing her,” Dwayne said, sticking a spindly hand out at Seth.

Seth took the hand and shook it with a smirk. “Thanks. It’s been a wild ride, what can I say?”

Dahlia laughed and elbowed him again, this time harder.

“Did I see Dahlia Ellis up in here?” Amanda squealed, practically bowling over a teenage busboy as she made her way to the table.

Without the baby bump, she was lean and had a nice athletic build to her body. She wore her height very well.

“Hey Manda!”

“Girl did I hear you say you have a husband now?”

“That would be me,” Seth piped up.

“No way!” Amanda giggled. “Me too! Come on, girl, let me see your ring!”

Dahlia laughed and held out her left hand, which Amanda leaned over the table to snatch up. It was certainly different as far as engagement rings went: a ruby in a silver setting with a hydra inscribed on the inside.

Amanda released Dahlia’s hand and waved her own in Dahlia’s face so quickly she could barely see the actual ring. It was princess cut, in a setting that could have been silver or even platinum. The stone was massive, probably a good three or four karats, and sparkled in Technicolor underneath the lamp.

“You know what? I’m telling you, the other girls are jealous. They keep saying it’s fake, but I’m like, please! He’s a professional gambler, can you believe that?”

“Does he treat you right?” Dahlia asked.

“Well, yeah,” Amanda said, bringing the ring back to her and kissing the stone. “He’s a prince to me and the kids. Oh, that’s another thing. I thought about what you said, and you know like hell if I have twenty screaming kids – how am I going to pay for college for twenty kids, cause if they’re smart you know they’re gonna want to go to college. So yeah, I got my tubes tied.”

“No way,” Dahlia said.

“Yep! Since my son was born I’ve been hitting the gym, running again like I did in school. I feel great.”

“You look great.”

“Thanks girl. You too.”

Dahlia glanced around the room, looking at the faces of the servers that bustled past. Some were familiar, but more were not – a testament to the ridiculous turnover rate of the restaurant business. She had a feeling Steve had something to do with their establishment’s particular revolving door.

“Where’s Krista?” Dahlia asked after a second.

“Oh, you know what? She quit the day after you. Said she was going back to school.”

Dahlia was stunned. “No kidding?”

“Totally serious, girl,” Amanda said, raising her eyebrows.

“She hasn’t been back since,” Dwayne said. “Wonder how she’s doing.”

“Yeah,” Dahlia mused. “I wonder...”

“Anyhow, my tables are all glaring at me,” Amanda said, shooting her own glare back over her shoulder. “A bunch of tight assed old people. I’ll see you later, okay girl? You come visit more often.”

“Of course,” Dahlia said, smiling.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Dahlia. You’re a total hottie.”

“Thanks,” Seth said awkwardly, grinning despite himself. Dahlia could see a faint blush prickling over the tops of his cheeks, and she snorted.

“So what can I do you guys for?” Dwayne asked.

“Oh, we’re not gonna eat anything. Just a Coke for me,” Dahlia said.

“Same,” Seth said.

“Cool,” Dwayne nodded. “Be back with that in a second.”

Dahlia relaxed back into the booth, stretching her arms up over her head like a cat awaking from a nap. “It’s good to be home.”

“Yeah, sorry it took us so long to get back to Avington baby,” Seth said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve got a job to do. I didn’t expect it to be so busy in Virginia, believe me.”

“Oh man, you’d think the Vigil there set up an inquisition or something,” Seth said. “Nobody would even talk about it.”

Dahlia shook her head and smiled. It was a pretty nice gig, all things considered.

Because of the role they had played in subduing the apostate angel Nathaniel, the Creator had offered them a special position among his ranks. They would be intermediaries of sorts between the Empyrean and earth, making sure that another Nathaniel did not come out of the woodwork to try to open Lucifer’s cage again.

As for Nathaniel himself, in a way Dahlia supposed he’d gotten what he wanted. After his physical body was restored, he was escorted to the infernal prison to spend eternity shackled alongside his lover, who seemed none too happy at his failure.

Every so often Seth and Dahlia would meet up with Raphy, Gabe, and Mike, all eternal teenage boys, for collaboration or moral support or anything in between. Alongside her angelic family she kept a watch on her earthly one.

And while food neither harmed nor satiated her, she never declined an invitation to drop in on family dinner with her mom and Gavin, who was about to enter his last year of high school and seemed happier than ever. Rosalind had started working part-time at the local library, though Jude’s alimony was more than enough to sustain the lifestyle she was used to, and she had recently started dating the head librarian, a charming widower in his early sixties.

The souls of the nephilim thrived in the eternal chaos of the cosmos.

Whenever Dahlia had the chance to swim amongst the sea of mortal souls, she made sure to visit Nik, who was thrilled to have Santino with him, and Eddie, who had managed to find the souls of his parents and was happier than she had ever seen him. It was not long before Miss Annabelle appeared in the cosmos to spend eternity alongside the one creature who had ever loved her.

Raven was by far the most incredible sight. Though Raven’s physical body was gone, Dahlia could sense the shape of her soul: a soft, supple woman with curves as gentle as Dahlia’s own. Gone was the awkward man in the stiff checkered suit.

The moment that Dahlia had not been expecting was, consequently, the one that had the greatest impact on her. She had been wandering through the rolling chaos when she came across a spirit that she knew immediately, playing among the other souls of the innocent.

“Lucy,” Dahlia had whispered.

“Hi Dolly,” Lucy’s energy had whispered back. “Would you like to come play with us?”

That had been months ago, and Dahlia had since made as many trips to the afterlife as she could reasonably sustain. She could never stay there for long, though. It was not a place for the immortal.

Currently, Dahlia and Seth were under assignment to peacefully disband the Vigils across the world. The Church had announced their dissolution but had refused to formally announce that the nephilim no longer existed in the world. Dahlia wondered if it was because they provided such a great lesson, just like the monsters under a child’s bed: *behave badly and this is what will happen to you*. Or even worse: *if you are a naughty boy or girl, the nephilim will tear you to shreds*.

Convincing the Vigils to disband was a more difficult task than it seemed. Faced with the prospect that the Church may have in fact actually been lying to them, many grew defensive and some even violent. But eventually Dahlia and Seth had always won out, and the outdated catechism was left shattered like the V iconography on the cathedral floor.

The Avington sect had been the first and easiest to disband. The archdiocese had promoted Father Pierre to Monsignor Pierre, and the church had experienced record-breaking attendance since his institution.

“So where did Raphy say we’re due next?” Dahlia asked once Dwayne had brought their sodas.

“Interesting you ask,” Seth said between sips from his straw. “Actually, we’re supposed to go to Atlanta. And that made me decide to do a little digging.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, it turns out my mother is still alive.”

Dahlia gazed at him open-mouthed. “What?”

“She’s at a nursing home, and she’s got cancer so I don’t think she’s got too much longer left. But I want to see her. I want to comfort her so she can go in peace.”

Dahlia whistled. “Damn, Seth. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any more intense.”

“Will you go with me?”

“Do you need to ask?”

She scooted in closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. “Of course I’ll go with you.”

“Good,” he said with a bashful grin. “Because she always used to give me hell about bringing home the wrong kinds of girls, and I want to show you off.”

Dahlia stuck out her tongue and blew him a raspberry. “That’s the reason you want me to go?”

“Oh no, of course that’s not the only reason!”

“Yeah, okay. Smell you, asshole.”

She pretended to smack him and he grabbed her by the jacket collar and kissed her hard on the mouth, and she struggled at first just to tease him, but could not resist for long. She never could.

“Okay, you win,” she said. “But only ‘cause you’re pretty.”

“Everybody’s gotta have something,” he said.

After paying for their drinks and dropping an extra ten dollar bill into the envelope – Dahlia knew Dwayne would spend it on weed, but as Seth said, everybody’s gotta have something – Dahlia and Seth said goodbye to her former coworkers and stepped out into the glow of twilight.

She knew she would never forget the terror in Steve’s eyes when she’d introduced Seth as her husband, just a few seconds after he had shamelessly hit on her yet again. Seth had made sure to squeeze his fingers with extra force when they’d shaken hands, just to mess with him. Steve had looked like he had to go sit down, or at least change his pants.

“Hold up a second,” Dahlia said to Seth as he unlocked his helmet from the saddlebag and swung his leg over the bike.

“What’s up, babe?”

“Just gotta stretch, you know? Been cramped all day in this jacket.”

“Okay,” he said. “I understand how that goes.”

“Just a second,” she said, sprinting around the side of the building to the alley where the back door to the kitchen opened. Since business was still more or less booming, there was no one outside loitering while their cigarettes burned down past the filters.

Like an antsy toddler, Dahlia peeled off her leather jacket and rolled her camisole up to her neck. With a sigh of relief, she let the massive white wings thrust out of her shoulder blades and unfold behind her. She fanned herself with the wings, preening the tips of the long primary feathers with her fingertips.

She didn’t know how Raphy let his wings get so dirty, or how he kept them tucked inside all the time. The feeling of having her wings tucked in for too long was akin to wearing a pair of pants that were two sizes too tight. It wasn’t painful per se, but the pressure was really irritating.

Footsteps shuffled just outside the alley, and she quickly retracted her wings, yanking her shirt back down. She was jamming her arms into her jacket when an elderly couple passed by and stared at her with questioning looks, as if she had been doing something indecent.

She gave them a wave and a smile.

After fixing her hair, she walked around to the street. Seth revved the engine of his bike and she rolled her eyes at him.

“Coming, princess,” she said.

“I’m not the princess who needs to take my wings out every half an hour,” he teased, sticking his tongue out at her.

“Yeah, whatever,” she said, pulling the helmet from her bag and securing the strap underneath her chin. She mounted the bike and turned the key, and the engine sprang to life with a bestial roar.

“That’s what I’m talking about, baby,” Dahlia said to the bike, and Seth snickered.

“I swear sometimes you love that thing more than you love me.”

“Could be. It doesn’t talk back.”

“Race you to the turnpike entrance?”

Dahlia walked the bike off the curb, poised above the eagerly vibrating engine. “You’re on,” she said.

They took off at once, weaving through the street as twice the speed limit.

Traffic began to thin once they reached the outskirts of town, and they began to crank the odometer.

The ribbon of highway wound in front of them, disappearing into the massive indigo sky and maybe the universe itself.

Dahlia glanced sideways at Seth and found that they were keeping perfect pace with each other. They sped up the entrance ramp in tandem, neither one edging forward beyond the other. They never intended to maintain the same speed; it just always ended up happening.

That was how it was with them.

THE END

Reflective Essay: “Ad Maiorem Scriptor Gloriam”¹

I suppose it sounds strange to say that I have been a writer since my birth or even my conception – long before I ever grasped the mechanics of holding a pencil or forming a letter – but I have. I’ve spent my life dreaming, whether asleep or awake, of hundreds of worlds filled with millions of people, many of whom are strangers, but some of whom are as close to me as my own family. Writing is in many ways like eating, or sleeping, or breathing, or loving; it is a basic need that wants fulfillment, and just as I must drink water I must write. It is that simple. So when I say that I am a writer, I do not say so to put on airs, or to imply that I have somehow mastered a craft that predates the foundations of modern society. I do not perform the craft. I *am* the craft; it is buried deep inside the twisting rungs of my genetic ladder.

I did not choose to write a novel any more than I chose to be a writer; my first novel has always been inevitable, a matter of “when” rather than “if.” When I was younger I did not have the patience or the concentration to complete an entire manuscript, but as a freshman in college I managed to sufficiently develop these traits to the point where I could reasonably attempt a draft. With the encouragement of Professor Arthur Flowers, I sketched an outline of a story based on scenes I had glimpsed one night in a dream: a woman breaking into a museum and stealing a scarab; a male vampire outcast from society, living in a mausoleum; a fleet of vampire hunters storming the hills of a graveyard; the woman leaning back against the altar of a Cathedral as the vampire kisses her. Professor Flowers asked me what I called it, and I thought back to the strange

eroticism of Catholic liturgy, and I remembered how I felt as a child, admiring the golden robes of the priests as I cowered beneath their fury. I thought of the rites of confession, and of all the years of guilt and shame oozing like sweat from those little wooden boxes. I thought of contrition; I thought of reconciliation.

“Penance,” I said. *“That’s what I’ll call it.”*

I spent the summer of my sophomore year writing 50,000 words of a draft, only to find that the storyline had grown stagnant and laborious. I picked at it here and there the following summer, but only managed to tack on an additional 25,000 words – nowhere close to the 120,000 I had imagined. The outline had been good, but the story was quickly drying out. The climax felt forced, the resolution unfulfilling. It was not until October of my junior year, when I was writing a proposal for an Honors Capstone in creative writing, that I discovered the book that I should have written all along. But the anguish of discarding two years of work and starting over with only three semesters to spare before graduation was nearly too much to handle. I grappled with the decision for weeks before making my choice. It was the most dangerous choice, with the most potential for failure and disappointment, but it was the right choice, and I knew I had no other. When my proposal was accepted, I scrapped all 75,000 words of my draft and started anew.

As I progressed through my courses as an English and Textual Studies major, I felt my appreciation heightening for intertextuality and the various orientations of critical thought. While writing the first draft of my novel, I had spent so much time entrenched in my own artistic vision that I had paid almost no

attention to the outstanding body of literature and how those pieces could enrich my own. As I wrote the second draft, however, I swore that I would closely attend to the literature surrounding my topic, as well as the ways in which I could orient my text to suggest various critical readings. I began to reconceive characters to represent particular modes of criticism: Dahlia became a feminist character, Seth and Father Pierre became post-colonialist, Raven became queer theory/QUILT BAG², and the nephilim became the Marxist lumpenproletariat. I also made myself an extensive reading list³, and as I read each piece I tried to identify in what ways the piece “worked” or did not “work,” what successful techniques the writer used to make things “work,” and most importantly how the piece could help inform my novel.

Perhaps my greatest influence while writing the second draft was Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Not only is Pullman’s writing exquisite – his descriptions are beautiful, his sense of pacing impeccable, and not a word seems wasted – but he manages to ingeniously weave his anxieties about institutionalized religion and the absence of God into a unique, fanciful storyline. His metaphors are effortless; the logic of his world does not seem forced or contrived, as it often does in high fantasy. Moreover, though his books are (erroneously, I believe) classified as “children’s literature,” they originate from such complex theological discourse that literary critics cannot help but explore them. Reading Pullman’s novels – in which God is referred to only as “The Authority” and angels are but shimmering bundles of stars – urged me to distance myself from the traditional Catholic theology that I had originally chosen to

follow, and instead to create my own universe with its own rules. In *Penance* instead of God there is the Creator, instead of Christ there is the Son, who is but another angel masquerading as one larger deity, and instead of Satan there is the Adversary. Diverting from traditional dogma afforded me the flexibility to construct my world to its fullest literary potential; also, I now have room in subsequent novels for characters to further explore this universe.

Another body of work that I found particularly influential was Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*. I had grown up reading her novels – I think I was fourteen when I first picked up *Interview with the Vampire* – and I have no doubt that her writing has informed my taste for mixing horror and romance, and religion and eroticism (the “sacred and the profane,” if you will). I have always taken great pleasure in reading her rich language, which I liken to drinking a glass of red wine, and I envy her ability to organically describe supernatural phenomena as though it were something completely natural. In homage to her work, I named Nik's rat after her character Santino, who says in *The Vampire Armand*, “Think no more on St. Francis, with his birds and squirrels and the wolf at his side. Think on Santino, with his rats” (Rice 284).

Departing from contemporary literature, I drew further inspiration from two epic poems: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante Alighieri's *Commedia Divina*. Though written in different eras (early modern and late medieval, respectively), these poems both feature creative approaches towards traditional Biblical theology. The character of Nathaniel, who I had originally conceived as Lucifer before changing my mind and opting for a less expected “bad guy,” was

based in large part on Milton's Satan. Many critics would argue that Satan is by far the most intriguing character in *Paradise Lost*; his anguish is pitiable to the point where readers find themselves overcome with sympathy for the devil. I wanted Nathaniel to share some of the grief of Milton's Satan, that the Creator had forsaken him in creating humankind, and I wanted to emphasize Nathaniel's enviousness of human life on Earth, a place that was not made for him. As I got deeper into the draft and unfolded more layers of Nathaniel's thoughts and motivations, I had him engage in more seemingly mundane everyday activities via Law's body – such as shopping for clothing, petting dogs in the park, and even cooking dinner. Despite his innate desire to free his lover, Lucifer, and to destroy the world and all of humanity, Nate is not an entirely evil character, and is in some regards even sympathetic. Lucifer, on the other hand, for now exists in a stasis similar to Dante's Satan: frozen and inactive in a hellish prison.

Another concept that I gleaned from *Paradise Lost* was the “magical drops” that Nathaniel puts in Law's eyes to allow him a glimpse of angelic Sight. In Book XI of *Paradise Lost*, the archangel Michael drips a special potion into Adam's eyes to allow him to see the future of life on earth:

Michael from Adams eyes the Filme remov'd
 Which that false Fruit that promis'd clearer sight
 Had bred; then purg'd with Euphrasie and Rue
 The visual Nerve, for he had much to see;
 And from the Well of Life three drops instill'd.

(*PL*, XI, 412-6)

Though I particularly liked the idea of waters from the “Well of Life” removing Adam’s mortal myopia, I wanted angelic Sight in *Penance* to serve a slightly different function. Instead I turned to Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Aleph” for inspiration to describe what Law is able to see: quite literally every point in the universe at the exact same time, without conflict or overlap. Of course I did not want this Sight to become a crutch or provide a simple solution to the story’s main conflict, so I had to temper its power to some extent; angels and humans can only experience the Sight for a few seconds and must wait a good amount of time before using it again – humans because they physically cannot sustain the Sight and would be at risk of losing their eyes, and angels because they cannot immediately re-summon the requisite energy.

Milton’s “Well of Life” also partially inspired the “waters of life” into which the nephilim are “reborn” when they first die as mortals and subsequently are “reborn” again and again after they lose their physical bodies, usually at the hands of the Vigil. As Dahlia comes to discover, the waters of life are pure life energy and when taken in small doses can relieve a naphil such as Dahila from her suffering, to the extent that she can find the mental and kinesthetic clarity to harness the death energy inside her. By consuming a bit of life energy, the nephilim become slightly more human again – since humans are balanced mixes of death and life energy, and nephilim are solely composed of death energy. The clarity that Dahlia gains through drinking from the waters of life, which are actually Nomi’s blood, is clarity akin to that of Adam and Eve when they eat the forbidden fruit. The gender roles are reversed, however; Seth seduces Dahlia to

drink the forbidden liquid, and in that sense plays the role of Eve to Dahlia's Adam. Nik plays the serpent and initially seduces Seth to drink the waters, but unlike the Biblical serpent, Nik has himself drunk from the waters of life, which Nomi offered to him. To extend the metaphor, the tree of life is essentially bearing her own fruit for the serpent to eat, because she is in love with the serpent. Although Nomi is the incarnation of the earth mother Gaia, she yields to the power of her human love and harms herself by willingly giving up her blood to ease Nik's pain.

In addition to literature, I looked to my own life as a source of inspiration and material, particularly in regard to the scenes at Sal's Diner. While much of fiction writing is naturally autobiographical, I purposefully attended to recreating the characters and situations that I encountered when I worked at a "family style" chain restaurant in Atlanta. While I changed their names and slight physical characteristics as necessary, I for the most part preserved the people with whom I had spent the summer of 2008: the overweight, smooth-talking manager with tendencies towards sexual harassment; the cynical best friend who knows that she is capable of more than waiting tables and hates herself for it; the ballsy former model pregnant with her fifth child from a different father; the slimy trainer who attempts to deal cocaine to teenagers on the job; the friendly, happy-go-lucky kitchen staff who freeze at the mention of INS; the perverted busboy and the busgirl who (for some strange reason) follows him around like a lovesick puppy. I began with the idea that I would fictionalize these people for the sake of "creative license," but in trying to reform them, I found myself ironing out all the nuances

that made them uniquely interesting. I had to stop and ask myself what I was truly accomplishing in attempting to pull a shade of fictionalization over them, as though I feared their identities might leak through the pages of my book and trickle down to Atlanta. Nothing, I concluded; I was accomplishing nothing but ruining good characters.

That experience taught me that there is no shame in writing particular characters or events directly from life, nor does it make me any less of a writer to actively observe the world around me in the hopes of catching hints of the strange, funny, urbane, shocking, or awkward, that I can store away for later use. I had spent so much of my life as a writer living inside my head and writing from my imagination, that I had almost forgotten the necessity of sculpting real, organic experiences in the text. Friends and family who have read parts of my draft have commented that the restaurant scenes are some of the strongest because of the concrete, specific details of restaurant life that only someone with experience as a waitress could inject.

That is not to say, though, that all writing ought to come directly from real experience; during the drafting process I also learned the opposite lesson, that sometimes the writer must separate him or herself from a subject when it is so painful that it distracts from greater formalistic issues. Like the characters at Sal's Diner, I had written Dahlia's father Jude straight out of "real life," as a thinly veiled portrait of my father with whom I have had a turbulent and strained relationship. I had gotten so wrapped up in this portrayal, in fact, that at some point Jude the character disappeared from the text, and I found myself writing to

my father himself, as though he were actually part of the story. Through Dahlia I was able to say the words I had always wanted to say to him; Dahlia's scenes with her father in the later part of the book became therapeutic beyond the usual function of fiction.

Fortunately, Professor Flowers easily picked up on the discrepancy in tone between passages featuring Jude Ellis and the rest of the book. "You're writing your pain into the book," he told me. "You've got to get away from that, put some distance between you. The father basically works as he is, but he could be so much more. You miss a lot of opportunities with his character if you try to keep him so close to your father." And he was right. In my quest for catharsis, I had neglected the elements of story and character development that are particularly important for a character like Jude, who is an impetus for many of Dahlia's actions.

After months of these trials and tribulations, I emerged from summer break of 2011 with a completed draft in hand. It was longer than expected, clocking in at over 130,000 words, and much of it clearly wanted revision. But still, I had done it: I had written my first novel. The *mélange* of emotions wrestling in my stomach as I wrote the words "the end" was enough to make me unable to eat for the rest of the day. The most conceptually impressive work had been done; I had created a story from nothing, and where there had once been blank cyberspace, there were now over 500,000 different characters, all semantically arranged to create a unique document that no one in existence had ever conceivably written.

That part was over. But the “heavy lifting” of the process, as I discovered, had just begun.

After Professor Flowers read my draft, he sent me an outline of notes detailing the specific points that demanded attention. When we met in person to discuss these notes, he began by smiling and shaking his head slowly. “It’s your folk,” he said. “Your characters are good but they could be great. Everybody needs more depth.” It felt like an overwhelming critique at first, but the more I meditated on it, the more I discovered ways in which he was correct. After a few read-throughs, all I could see were the missed opportunities – for dramatic tension, or heightened stakes, or *something* – blinking like caution lights from so many lines of text. I began sketching out places where I could add layers to the characters, or ways in which I could ramp up the conflict against them. Once I had a general idea of what needed to be done, I took a deep breath, plugged in my laptop, and began the endless task of revising each chapter word-by-word.

I am still in the midst of the revision process. This process has been particularly grueling, especially with the additional burden of schoolwork during the semesters, and has thus far taken twice the amount of time as it took to write the draft – and I am only one third of the way through the revisions.

Consequently, in order to turn this draft in to Honors as my Capstone project, I had to withhold some revisions for the sake of continuity. The primary revision that I withheld is my complete overhaul of Dahlia’s family dynamic. In this draft, as the reader may note, Dahlia’s father Jude is a megalomaniac surgeon whose self-importance enables him to neglect his duties towards his family. Rosalind

takes partially after my mother, in that she is the good parent – the gentle, unassuming mother who serves as the foundation upon which the family stands. Finally, in the first iteration, Dahlia’s younger brother Gavin is eight years younger than she and in high school, and he suffers from anger management problems as a result of his father’s verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse.

In order to add another layer to the family’s upset, in the recent iteration I decided to frame each person’s maladaptive behavior as an attempt to cope with the loss of Lucy nearly two decades ago. Jude is still a neglectful father, but rather than someone driven by selfishness and narcissism, he has essentially resigned from his role as a father and husband because of the constant reminders of his failure to protect Lucy – a failure which has emasculated him and erased his paternal identity in the family (so much so that he can hardly be found in photographs, even when he is standing right in the front). Jude is still buried in his work, but he uses work as an escape rather than a source of self-gratification; it is, to put it simply, all that he has. “Rose,” on the other hand is now a bitter, sarcastic woman who primarily uses alcohol as means of coping with Lucy’s death. She too has lost much of her identity as a mother and tries more often to be a friend to Dahlia than a parental figure, because she hardly trusts herself to nurture anything anymore – she can hardly keep houseplants alive. Eleven years ago Rose made Jude get her pregnant as a last-ditch effort to save the failing marriage and family, with the implicit understanding that this child would “replace” the daughter they had lost. When Gavin was born a boy, Rose gave up on the idea of figuratively resurrecting her deceased child, but instead of assuming the role of friend as she

had with Dahlia, she raised Gavin as a pet of sorts, at times dressing him up in girls' clothing when he was younger. As a consequence, eleven-year-old Gavin has grown up very quickly, with a precociousness uncommon for children his age. He is too smart for his own good, and intense to the point of rebuffing his peers and teachers, who let him sit and read during class without interruption. He can also swear better than any taxi driver Dahlia had ever seen, and at the age of four could curse for five minutes straight without repeating himself.

Looking towards the future, I hope to have the rest of the revisions completed by the end of this coming summer. Professor Flowers has assured me time and time again that I must not rush through these revisions, because it is paramount that I submit the most polished draft possible to potential agents, and while I know that this is true I nonetheless find myself grappling with the urge to finish this project as soon as I can, as though there were some sort of deadline imposed. This urgency, I think, points towards instincts that I have inherited as a lifelong student constantly tackling due dates, sometimes at the last possible moments. "Stop thinking like a student and start thinking like a professional," Professor Flowers has told me. The more I say these words to myself, the more I inch towards the realization that this novel is my bridge to my career after college; it may one day be my sustenance, or at least a part of my repertoire that will open the door to opportunities as a writer or professor. There is a life for me outside of college, and it will be written on the pages of the novels I produce. This is only the first.

Now that I am beginning to look towards my professional career, which will begin with the publication of this novel, I must answer some important questions that will certainly arise during the publishing process, whether they be from agents, editors, publishing houses, or all three. Perhaps the most significant of these question is: who is my audience? I have given special consideration to this issue, mainly because it has lingered in the back of my head for most of the writing process, and I have concluded that I am writing to a group of people with no industry name. For better or for worse, the taxonomic nature of the publishing industry has created a harsh environment for any book that does not adhere to a specific formulaic genre. My book has fantastical elements but it is hardly high fantasy, nor is it horror per se. I may not be writing for the fantasy genre purists, or the connoisseurs of nouveau experimental literature, but I am certainly not writing for Young Adults as the readership is defined, because my characters are older than high school age. According to the current industry, the group that I am writing for does not categorically exist.

Rather than feel defeated or alter the contents of my novel, I prefer to forge my own readership and market my book towards them: they are the older young adults, the Generation Y kids like me who have recently graduated from undergrad and are caught in the stasis between college life and adulthood. We are the victims of a ravaged economy and high unemployment rates, who are told that our hard-earned degrees no longer mean anything, and we are worried about finding jobs, keeping the jobs that we find, marrying the right person, one day owning our own car, or house, or plot of land, being able to afford children – hell,

being able to afford to eat! – and we are nervous, and anxious, and excited, and pissed off. We grew up on *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings*, and we have a taste for escaping into the fantastical, but we cannot relate to the Young Adult genre, to books like *Twilight* whose protagonist's main concern is whether she will ever lose her virginity before she gets married to her high school beau. We cannot relate to high school stories anymore, because we have moved past the days of lockers, awkward crushes, curfews, and the popular kids. We need something, then, that expresses the anxieties we share as twenty-somethings in the 2010's, but allows us enough of an escape to forget our many stressors. We need a story with a happy ending, one that ensures us that things will turn out okay no matter how crappy they seem.

That is the story I have written.

Dahlia is 25 years old and has spent three years in the waitressing job that she took the summer after graduating from college in order to hold her over until she found a better job or applied to graduate school. It was only meant to be for that summer, maybe a few months after, but three years have slipped by, and the GRE guide in her nightstand drawer has only grown heavier with dust. In contrast her boyfriend of two years, who has only known her as Dahlia the wage slave, was recently promoted to Junior Partner at his law firm, and now makes a six figure yearly salary. Dahlia's mother constantly asks when she and Law will tie the knot, but Dahlia can hardly admit that Law approaches the subject of marriage reluctantly, as though he is still appraising her worth. Dahlia longs to quit her terrible job but dreads unemployment and the judgment of her successful

boyfriend, whose addiction to work disturbingly mirrors her father's. On top of her anxieties about never going to graduate school or finding a decent job or marrying the right man in time to have children, Dahlia grapples with the threat of the nephilim who stalk the streets at night, claiming the lives of innocent victims like her sister Lucy.

The nephilim are the clear point of departure from realism in this story, but they are also grounded in contemporary economic critique. Though some nephilim are innately monstrous (such as Wormboy) most are severely disenfranchised to the point where desperation drives them to do things they would normally consider unthinkable. As their penance for taking lives, most nephilim sequester themselves underground to remove the temptation of human life energy, and as the city expands it builds itself quite literally on their backs. In the revision I plan to insert a particularly striking scene where Seth takes Dahlia down to the catacombs of the underground, and she realizes that the misshapen bricks in the wall actually have eyes, and those eyes blink every so often. Instead of trying to understand the root of the nephilim's problems, institutions of power such as the Church choose to demonize them and hunt them through secret societies such as the Vigil. To the vast majority of human beings, the nephilim do not exist. Those who do know about them, however, loathe and fear them immeasurably. I had originally conceived the nephilim as Marx's proletariat, but I decided they were better suited to the role of the lumpenproletariat, the poorest of the poor who even ideologues like Marx disregard. They are the untouchables, the invisible nether caste, the "lowest of the low." Readers may equate these creatures

– who were human once – with the homeless, or the drug addicted, or the imprisoned population, who are systematically dehumanized, stigmatized against, and viewed as threats to society.

Despite all these different anxieties, *Penance* is at its heart a love story. Against a backdrop of chaos in society and anti-society both above and below ground, Dahlia and Seth find solace in each other, and it is Dahlia's love for Seth that ultimately motivates her to risk her soul in order to save the world from Nathaniel. I also explore the love between friends, and the love-hate continuum that often exists among sworn enemies. It is out of love, after all, that the Creator organizes the chaos into matter to create angel and man; he creates these creatures not to dominate them through the tyranny of physicality, but because he loves them, and love presupposes the presence of a creature to be loved. It is through love that the greatest and most abominable actions occur, but the absence of love is the most terrifying concept of all; I suppose if anything, that is the ultimate message of the story. Whether the reader specifically extracts that from the text, of course, has yet to be seen.

Though still an ongoing process, *Penance* has certainly been the most challenging, frustrating, and grueling experience of my life – but by far the most rewarding. “It is one thing to write a few chapters; anyone can write a few chapters,” a literary agent once told me. “Now if you can prove that you can write a book, and you have the commitment to follow an idea to completion through hundreds of pages of text, then you have something to say. Then you're a novelist.” I have spent my life resisting the urge to label myself or subscribe to

superfluous titles, but I can say without a doubt that I could not be prouder to call myself a novelist. I have taken that first step, and I have arrived on the outskirts of a professional world that I will one day know as intimately as I know this college campus.

Though *Penance* is only the very beginning of my journey as professional writer, I have already learned an indescribable amount in these couple years, and I can only imagine what I will understand five or ten years down the line. I wonder if I will ever read through these artistic reflections and laugh, or if I will nod my head and smile and say, “you did alright, kid.”

I cannot say what the future will hold, or how I will achieve the goals ahead of me, but I have confidence that as long as I hold fast to my instincts and nurture the writer that I have always been, I will be just fine. No matter what happens, I will have the eternal satisfaction of a life spent doing what I was meant to do, which comes as naturally as moving my limbs or opening my eyes. I am a writer. I am the craft. As long as I exist I will write, and the characters inside my head will breathe, and smile, and argue, and laugh, and it will be beautiful.

Footnotes

¹ “Ad maiorem scriptor gloriam” is Latin for “For the greater glory of the writer” and puns the original Biblical phrase “ad maiorem dei gloriam” (for the greater glory of God). In *Penance* Seth has a tattoo across his chest which reads “Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam.”

² QUILTBAG is an acronym that stands for Queer and Questioning, Unidentified, Intersex, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, Asexual, and Gay. I prefer this acronym over the traditional LGBTQ since it encompasses a wider variety of sexual orientation and gender identities, as well as the lack thereof. This is particularly pertinent to Raven who identifies as transgender but is physically intersex because of complications from her terrible surgery.

³ I have included my principal reading list in the “works cited” section.

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Summary of Capstone Project

Penance is a fictional novel written both as an Honors Capstone project and as a work that will eventually be further revised and eventually submitted for professional publication. The plot of the novel is as follows:

Since the birth of mankind they have secretly stalked the streets – demons with the faces of men and the mark of the beast on their forearms. Very few people even know that these creatures exist, but those who do live in terror of their murderous lust for human life. The church calls them nephilim, “the fallen,” but their origins and purpose remain a mystery. All the church does know about the nephilim is that they were humans once – people living ordinary lives until death disfigured them – and that, though their physical bodies can be temporarily “slain,” they cannot permanently be destroyed. They always come back.

Dahlia Ellis has spent most of her life trying to forget what happened that night when she was five-years-old, when she watched her sister **Lucy** die at the hands of a naphil. As a senior in college, Dahlia thought she was finally on the verge of escaping the shadow of her past; however, her hopes were dashed when she received an invitation to join the Vigil, a secret society bent on hunting the cursed nephilim. Now at 25 years old, Dahlia feels that her life has become *too* regular. She finds little satisfaction in her job as a waitress, or her relationship with her live-in boyfriend of two years, the megalomaniacal British lawyer **Lawrence “Law” Clifton**; in fact, the only time Dahlia feels alive is when she patrols the streets at night, seeking infernal prey.

Everything changes for Dahlia the day that **Seth Kratos** is seated at one of the tables in her restaurants. He is an enigma with his religious tattoos, black clothing, and gruff demeanor, and he will hardly make eye contact with Dahlia until she finally breaks down and curses at him. They shake hands, and the moment their hands meet Dahlia finds herself hallucinating scenes from her sister's murder until she finally loses consciousness.

Over the next couple of weeks, try as she might, Dahlia cannot stop running into Seth – at the nightclub where she patrols alongside her transgendered friend **Raven**, at the city park, and even outside the diner where it seems as though Seth has been waiting for him. She cannot deny the sexual tension between them, or her fascination with the secrets he holds behind his quiet demeanor. All the while, Dahlia struggles with the emotional demands of her family – of **Jude**, her self-important surgeon father, **Rosalind**, her meek, withdrawn mother, and **Gavin**, her teenage brother with a myriad of anger control issues.

Meanwhile, Law, a pious Vigil member himself, encounters a strange angelic figure named **Nathaniel** (“**Nate**”), who claims that he knows exactly how to destroy the nephilim once and for all. Law begrudgingly agrees to help Nate in his plot, unsure of exactly what he has gotten himself into.

One night, Dahlia foolishly gets lost in the northern ghettos and wakes up in the heart of a terrifying funhouse swarming with ravenous nephilim. Just as she begins to slip into death, another more powerful creature storms the funhouse, destroying each of the nephilim with a terrifying burst of death energy. She

realizes, as this creature bends down to cradle her to his chest, that it is Seth who has come to save her. When Dahlia wakes up in the nephilim's underground fortress, she meets the nurturing **Nomi** and the vengeful **Nik**, and realizes the extent of Seth's dark secrets. Dahlia casts Seth away from her, knowing that she as a Vigil member is duty bound to destroy him, a naphil.

Back at work, Dahlia's coworkers throw her a party celebrating her three years of employment. Panicked by the fact that she has put off graduate school and the rest of her life for so long, Dahlia quits her job in front of the entire staff, steals her mother's car, and drives as far as the car will take her. While she is driving, she spots a young man named **Raphael** sitting by himself on the side of the road. Pitying him, she invites him to join her when she confirms that he is not naphil. Dahlia finds herself strangely drawn to him and has no objection sharing a room when they stop for the night at a motel. In the middle of the night, Dahlia awakes to discover that Raphael is an angel. The two share an intimate moment, during which Dahlia has a terrifying vision of herself on a church floor, broken and bleeding.

The next morning Raphael has disappeared, and Dahlia decides she must return to Avington and face the fate she saw in her vision. She does not go straight home but to the city park instead, where she meets Seth and finds herself relieved to see him again. The two confess their mutual attraction and decide to eschew convention and pursue a relationship.

As Dahlia grows closer to Seth, Law is wound deeper into Nate's plot. Nate manipulates Law's jealousy towards Dahlia's wandering affections, to the

point where Law turns Dahlia into the Vigil as a traitor. **Monsignor Gregory**, leader of the Vigil, apprehends Dahlia and brings her to the church, where she is brutally tortured, but still refuses to surrender any information about Seth and the other nephilim. Dahlia's friend and fellow Vigil member **Father Pierre** finds her gravely wounded in the street outside the church and nurses her back to health with his sister's help.

Dahlia finds herself growing restless in Pierre's apartment, and once she is well enough to move on her own, she leaves and eventually runs into Seth, who has been worriedly searching for her for weeks. After a reconciling and confessing their love for one another, Dahlia and Seth make their way back to his apartment. As they are walking, however, Dahlia spots Law on patrol. She urges Seth to hide a few blocks away and confronts her ex boyfriend. They argue and Law, who has grown increasingly possessed by Nate, kills her in a fit of jealous rage.

Dahlia eventually wakes up in Nomi's enclave underground, a naphil herself. She finds herself in constantly numbness, hungering for the life she once had as a mortal. One night at the club she comes close to killing a man until Raven intervenes, and Dahlia returns to the underground in horror, deciding to hole herself up for eternity. Unable to bear seeing Dahlia's pain, Seth shows her the secret of a power that he and Nik share: he takes her to the sacred waters of life, where she was reborn with Nomi's help, and tells her to drink. Infused with a little bit of life energy, Dahlia finds the pain of death beginning to subside. For

the first time she and Seth share the same type of existence. They make love, unified by their newfound bond.

Meanwhile, Nate's hold on Law becomes more unsettling. Law realizes that Nate's intentions of performing a ritual sacrifice to destroy the nephilim might not be as pure as he once thought. As a naphil Dahlia encounters various Vigil members she once knew, including her father who has been inducted to the Vigil in her absence. She uses her power at one point to save **Strange Eddie**, a mentally retarded naphil from a group of Vigil members, just as Seth had once saved her in the funhouse.

Dahlia also comes to learn that **Nik**, who seems to both hate and desire her, was the naphil who killed her sister Lucy. She is not nearly as devastated as she thought she would be by the news, because she already hates Nik, though she finds herself growing more able to relate to his rage against the living. Through Nik, Dahlia comes to learn what the nephilim really are. They are actually victims of betrayals, whose deaths were so tragic that their existences became corrupted and they became bound in purgatory on earth, made to eternally suffer.

Dahlia and Law meet for the first time since Dahlia's death, and she realizes just how sick he has become. Law has also been self flagellating horribly, and his body is considerably weakened. Back in the Underground, Pierre is waiting with news of the Vigil's plans to entrap Seth and use him in the ritual to summon the Angel of Death. Before Dahlia can move to protect Seth, Nik confesses to Dahlia that Seth was also present at Lucy's murder; he was the one who held Dahlia back from the blast of death energy. Dahlia should have died that

night, but lived on because of Seth. Devastated by this secret, Dahlia tells Seth that she never wants to see him again. She hides away in the Underground, consumed by grief until Nomi urges her to put her sorrow aside. Nomi explains her role as the earth mother, gaia, a creature made of pure life energy.

After visiting her mother, Dahlia decides to forgive Seth and goes to his apartment to find him. However, the apartment is trashed, and he is missing; all that remains is the Vigil's "V" painted on the wall. While Dahlia tries to rally the nephilim to help her rescue Seth, Nate and Law abduct the angel Raphael and cut off his wings, so that he may aid them in their ritual. Dahlia is unsuccessful in riling the nephilim to action and goes off on her own to infiltrate the church via the sewer system. She finds herself unable to proceed, however, because of a set of runes of exorcism painted on every surface of the church's basement. If she tries to cross, she knows she that her physical body be destroyed, and her rescue will be in vain. Just as she is on the verge of giving up, Nik appears and says he will help her because he owes her this penance. He carries her through the rune-covered hallway, and by the end is so mangled he can hardly stay conscious. Dahlia thanks him, kisses him, and moves upstairs to the church to stop the ritual.

Upstairs Nate, who is still occupying Law's body, chides Dahlia for having made it to the ritual and reveals that Seth is not the intended target: she is. He assaults Raphael with a knife and then stabs Dahlia as well; Dahlia's body begins to absorb Raphael's powerful light energy, and she finds herself unable to sustain consciousness. Dahlia awakes in the eye of a strange white tempest, where a vision of Raphael greets her. Raphael explains that when he and Dahlia became

intimate, he transmuted some of his light energy to her, so when she was reborn as a naphil, she was not entirely made of death energy. That light energy also worked as a catalyst to the powers she discovered after drinking from the waters of life. Nathaniel's ritual, despite his best attempts, has ultimately failed. At this point, Dahlia has two choices: she can either let herself die and eternally free herself from the curse of the nephilim, or she can return to her damned state and attempt to subdue Nathaniel. Dahlia decides to dive back into the whirlwind of pain and attempt to defeat Nathaniel.

Nathaniel is shocked to see Dahlia regain consciousness and mounts little resistance to her physical attack. She subdues him, and Law takes momentary control of his body long enough to tell Dahlia that she must destroy his physical body in order to send Nathaniel back to the empyrean, where he will be arrested. Dahlia at first refuses to kill Law, but Law begs her to go through with it, claiming that it is his penance for enabling Nathaniel to harm her. She finally relents, realizing there is no other way, and stabs Law through the chest, as Law wrestles Nathaniel back into his body. Nathaniel's spirit emerges from Law's corpse and curses Dahlia before disappearing to the empyrean. Dahlia unties the wounded Seth and walks him to the door, where she has a brief spat with her father, whom she has chosen to forgive but not let into her life. As Seth and Dahlia are leaving the cathedral, they spot a strange pool of light; this is Raphael's non-corporeal form. He beckons them to follow him to the empyrean, cutting a door through the nighttime air.

Many months later, Dahlia and Seth step into Sal's Diner for sodas. Dahlia visits with her coworkers, some of which have not changed and others of which have improved their lives. She notes that her friend Krista is no longer working at the diner and quit only a few days after Dahlia did. Dahlia reveals that she and Seth have gotten married; the two reflect upon their duty as angelic agents, currently charged with dismantling the worldwide Vigils.

The nephilim are no longer confined to purgatory on earth but have been freed to the chaos of the afterlife, where they reside peacefully with the energy of the cosmos. Dahlia has visited this cosmos and seen the bliss of Raven, who is no longer bound by an awkward physical form, Nik, who has been reunited with Santino, and Eddie who has found his parents. Dahlia has also encountered the spirit of her sister Lucy, eternally young and at peace.

In the diner, Seth tells Dahlia that he has found his mother and that she is on her deathbed with cancer. He asks Dahlia to come with him to visit her one last time and usher her peacefully into the afterlife. Dahlia agrees and they leave the diner. After taking a moment to adjust her wings outside, Dahlia joins Seth in the parking lot, and the two mount their motorcycles. The book ends with a portrait of Dahlia and Seth keeping pace with each other, neck and neck, as they speed down the highway and out of Avington.