



The Kincaid Chronicles:

ORIGINS

MAY DAWNEY

PROLOGUE

“Shall we write about the things not to be spoken of? Shall we divulge the things not to be divulged? Shall we pronounce the things not to be pronounced?”

— Emperor Julian, Hymn to the Mother of the Gods

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” Rayha squinted at the burning bush on the mountainside. “Who am I this time, huh? Fucking Moses?” She looked down at her body, expecting to find robes of some kind, but she was still wearing her own sweatpants and ragged Red Hot Chili Peppers shirt. *Okay, not Moses then.*

The bush crackled merrily thirty feet away but didn’t burn to a crisp.

Rayha had garnered enough biblical knowledge over the last three years to know that this could only mean one thing: trouble. She glanced upward suspiciously, then back to the bush.

“So, is this the part where I talk to God?”

Come closer.

Rayha jumped. She had expected the grandiose voice to boom across the windy mountainside, not inside her head.

She considered resisting the command—she had never been too good at following those—but how much could she resist the command while stuck inside a dream? Because this had to be a dream. Not one of her usual unusual dreams, but a dream none the less; her body was undoubtedly in her bed, in hotter-than-hell Phoenix, Arizona, where she’d left it. Rayha weighed her options. Talking to a bush in her dreams was a sure sign of madness. That said, it didn’t seem like there was another choice but to play this out, unless she wanted to wait until she woke up. If she was allowed to wake up. Where God was involved, all bets were off.

Right, then. Talking to God. With her hands stuffed deeply inside her pockets, Rayha walked forward. “What do you want, God? Allah? What do I even call you?”

Elah no longer resides on the Lower Planes.

The voice seemed to bounce off the inside of her skull. It was disorientating and made the words even more elusive. “Elah?”

Images filled her head; famous statues and paintings that represented God, Allah, Yahweh, intercut with images of Their worshippers idolizing Them. They poured and poured and poured until her legs felt weak.

She pressed her hands to the sides of her head. “Okay, okay, got it! Stop! All of ‘em are the same God. Understood!”

The images stopped.

“Fucking hell.” She squeezed her eyes shut to fight a wave of nausea, then opened them again once her strength returned.

The bush fire sputtered, but was otherwise silent.

Fine, let’s talk. “So, Elah is gone. Who am I talking to? And where did he go?”

That is not knowledge of importance.

“It’s important to me.”

There was a small pause. *Elah has withdrawn to the Higher Planes. You speak to We Who Are Called Harut.*

Rayha nodded. It was easier to deal with this insanity if she just rolled with it. “Okay, so Harut.” She repeated the name a few times in her head, hoping she would remember it when she woke up. “Why am I here?”

An introduction.

“To what?” Rayha glanced around again, but the hillside was still just an average rocky terrain with the added bonus of a burning bush.

To whom.

Her gaze slid back to the bush, eager for a focal point for the voice. “Huh?”

An introduction to whom, not to what. To us.

“Why?” Then another thought dawned on her. “Wait, are you the one that’s been following me? Watching me?” Wind tugged at her shirt but left the fire alone. Chills traversed her skin but the wind was only a very small factor in their formation. Her throat went dry.

The time of your activation approaches. We have been familiarizing ourselves with you.

So the sourceless gaze she’d felt upon her had been them, Harut. “Why have you been watching me?” *I’m a fucking nobody!*

Your future has been decided for you. We must prepare.

Dread seized Rayha and seemed to constrict her chest. She took a deep breath to try and force it to expand again. This conversation headed in a shitty direction. “Decided for me?

What destiny? Prepare how?”

No matter. You do not believe yet. You will perceive the signs.

Frustration welled up. Harut was answering her questions, but only with the bare minimum of cryptic information. “Signs of w—”

The bush flared so violently, the heat scourged her.

Rayha stumbled back. Her heart pumped a mixture of fear and adrenaline through her system even as she brought her arms up to shield her eyes.

A sign. The voice rolled through her skull like thunder. *Perceive and afterward, we shall talk.*

“O-Okay! Okay, got it. A sign. I’ll look for it.” She hesitated. “Thank you? I guess?”

The fire died down.

Rayha took a shuddering breath. Her chest ached from the strain her heart was under. *If you die in a dream, do you wake up? Or are you dead?* She swallowed the question down and buried it deep; she had to focus on the now—right now. “Um. If that’s all, can I go?” She hated how shaky her voice was.

There was no verbal response. The fire dimmed until the unharmed bush was shrouded in moonlight only.

Rayha jerked awake.

CHAPTER 1

“Then Mary stood up and greeted all of them and said to her brethren, ‘Do not mourn or grieve or be irresolute, for his grace will be with you all and will defend you. Let us rather praise his greatness, for he prepared us and made us into men.’”

— The Gospel of Mary

Am I having a heart attack? Oh shit, I’m having a heart attack! Rayha chest was about to explode and her breathing was entirely out of whack. She tried to inhale but something was pressed against her face. She tried to push it away, but felt pressure against her back as well. She couldn't get away.

“Rayhana?”

Even through the haze of panic, the voice was achingly familiar. *Mom!* The dream still had its claws in her, pulling her back in as she tried to fight her way out of the haze. She knew that was her mother, but for a second it was the voice that had come out of the burning bush and her panic soared.

“Rayhana, stop! Stop now, meri bacchi.”

The term of endearment jogged her sense of reality and a things clicked together inside her skull. For one, she was on her belly, trying to breathe through the pillow. Rayha turned her head as best she could and sucked in a breath of much needed air.

Mom stroked down the back of her head and neck as she said more in Urdu.

Rayha blamed the fact that she couldn't understand the words on her slowly ebbing but still very present panic attack. That's what it had been, a panic attack. Her heart was fine. She still slid her hand between the mattress and her chest to verify. The beat was strong and quick, but no longer galloped like a race horse.

Finally, Rayha relaxed a fraction and blinked her eyes open. In the

dirty yellow light of her nightlight, she recognized her bedroom. *Thank fuck!* She'd made it out. A mad laugh threatened to tear from her throat, but she clenched her jaws together. Mom was here, she needed to calm the fuck down before she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of not talking about this.

“Rayhana?”

Shit. She sounds terrified.

Some of the weight on her body lessened as Mom sat up. “A-Are you awake now, yes?”

Rayha nodded. *I talked to an angel!* That was so bad. Like, there weren't enough words in the English language to describe how fucked this made her. She didn't have time to fully wrap her mind around the ramifications of this new development because Mom kept fucking stroking her hair. Rayha swatted at the hand with a groan. “Get off.” She tried not to sound like a raging bitch, but it was hard when her mind reeled.

Mom pulled her hands away but they lingered on her shoulder.

She withdrew from the touch and threw a leaden arm over her eyes to block out the light of the nightlamp Mom must have turned on.

“Turn off the damn light.”

Mom moved and the lamp clicked off.

The fact that Mom did so without comment didn't bode well for Rayha, but at least the headache she hadn't even realized she had lessened a bit, feeling less like icepicks stabbing into her brain through her eye-sockets.

“Rayhana, I worry.”

There it was. *You and me both.* She inhaled deeply, regularly.

“Nothing to worry about.

Just a shitty dream.” *About a burning bush and a fucking destiny without details.* “What time is it?” It might be just her imagination, but her heart rate seemed to slow a bit. She finally relaxed—but not too much, she had a Mom-shaped minefield to navigate.

“It is almost five in the morning. I hear you through the door, so I

come in.” Mom tried to touch her shoulder again.

Rayha shrugged her off. “Heard me. Came in; you heard me and came in through the door.” *For fuck’s sake!*

“Yes, I heard you and came in. Sorry.” Her hand lingered in the air above Rayha’s shoulder.

Mom’s calloused fingers brushed her skin every few seconds, driving Rayha bonkers. She knew she should feel bad about correcting Mom on the language she struggled with so much, but at least it stopped her from asking questions Rayha didn’t want to answer.

“Don’t you have to get ready for work or something?”

Mom seemed to stifle a sigh so it came out a huff. “I will go if you are all right.”

Rayha struggled to get her eyes open enough to glare at her. “I’m fine, you can go. I’ll go back to sleep.”

Mom’s dark eyes were even darker in the low light pouring in from the living room that doubled as the kitchen. Rayha squinted and examined her. Mom’s hand twitched in her lap, seemingly eager to reach out.

“Seriously, it was just a nightmare.” Rayha dropped her arm onto her eyes again, blocking out Mom’s worry, or attempting to, anyway.

“You have many nightmares, Rayhana. Too many nightmares.” Mom whispered the words, which made them worse to hear.

“Trust me, I know.” She put a fair bit of venom into her voice, hoping it would scare Mom off. She really didn’t want to get into how different this nightmare had been from all the others. “You’ll be late. Go.”

Mom didn’t get up. A few seconds later, her hand brushed over her knee. “I will be home for dinner. You will be there, yes?”

A touch of longing flitted through her chest; a childish desire to spend time with Mom like they used to. Rayha shrugged, hoping to quench the feeling with nonchalance. “If nothing comes up.”

A few seconds of breathless silence later, Mom’s hand withdrew.

The fabric of her janitorial overalls rustled as she stood. “Sleep well, meri bacchi.”

This time, the term of endearment rubbed Rayha the wrong way. “I’m not your little girl anymore, Mom. I’m fifteen.”

“You will always be my little girl, Rayhana. May Allah watch over you until I see you again.”

Yes, that’s absolutely what I want. It’s not like I don’t deal enough with the asshole in my dreams. “Yeah, whatever. Same to you, I guess.” The wish felt even hollower with Harut’s words still echoing in her mind. She startled. *Harut!* She’d remembered the name! *Yes!*

The door clicked shut; Rayha had missed Mom’s departure. Now she stared at the door and sighed. “Fucking hell...” *Mom will be feeling shitty about this all day.* A small voice inside her head tried to convince her that if she got up now and hugged her mom, they would both feel better. That would involve getting up and potentially answering more questions while her head spun and her body ached. No, the solitude of her room was exactly what she needed. If only she didn’t feel so guilty about hurting Mom.

Mom’s bedroom door opened on the other side of the trailer. With her eyes closed again, Rayha could clearly picture how Mom wrapped layers of fabric carefully around her head until it came together in a tight hijab, held up by hidden and not-so-hidden pins. The graying dark hair would be hidden from the world in devotion to both her God and her dead husband.

Even when feeling crappy, the childhood memory of watching her do it made her smile—and worsened the feeling of hollowness inside her gut.

She waited for her footsteps to sound again, then listened to Mom collecting her things and putting on her shoes. *Last chance.* Rayha already knew she wasn’t going to get up and hug her. She held her breath until she heard the door to the trailer shut, then she exhaled loudly. *Well, that’s that.* She sat up and cradled her head in her hands. “Fucking headache.”

With one hand on her forehead and the other on various furniture to help her along, Rayha got up to search her room for either alcohol or weed. There was no way she was going to be able to fall asleep again unless she was either drunk or high, and preferably both. Not when her head was full of angel bullshit and Mom-induced guilt.

* * *

It was well into the afternoon when Rayha managed to drag herself out of bed. The only food stashed away in the fridge and cupboards was plain white rice and eggs, so Rayha dressed while the rice cooked and tried to wake up. She'd spent the morning reliving the suicide-by-angel of Saint Margaret of Scotland after her husband and son had been killed, so it took some doing—especially after the burning bush incident earlier that night. She hadn't quite wrapped her mind around that one, but at least the panic had died down to a more manageable sense of dread.

She made short work of a quick meal of egg fried rice, did her make-up, and headed out in search of Dale. Not that she felt much like company, but it beat staying home alone by a mile.

Dale was an easy guy to find on a Sunday. As soon as she pushed through the obscured hole in the badly hydrated hedges and spotted the wrecked trailer that was their HQ, she could tell he was in because the door was open. No one came here but them.

“Hey.” She knocked perfunctory on the outside of the trailer and stepped in. The scent of spray painted and pot tickled her nostrils. He must have been here a while.

“Hey.” Dale was still in yesterday's clothes—leather pants, fishnet shirt—which was a telling sign of a night spent anywhere but home. The black coat he never went anywhere without lay in a corner, on top of a sleeping bag. He didn't look at her, just retraced a line in his artwork with deep red. Joan of Arc, as per her description, as the fire of the pyre licked up her legs.

She shivered. “Shitty night?”

He stepped back on his plateau soled boots without losing his balance on the floorboards—which she still considered one of his most impressive skills—and shook the can. “Stephole.”

“Got it.” She dumped her bag by the door and gave the art more consideration. “Did you sleep here?”

“Yeah. He took some boozed up bitch with him to fuck. I didn’t need that.” He outlined the base of the fire some more.

“So you ended up drawing Joan again?” She was his second favorite of all her dream visions, right behind the virgin Mary as she had appeared to Maximilian Kolbe in the German death camp of Auschwitz during World War II. Rayha hated that dream.

He shrugged. “It’s something to do.” Dale stepped back again and finally turned to glance at her. After a short inspection, he arched a brow. “Bad night as well?”

She snorted and sank down on his sleeping bag. “Aren’t they all?”

“Probably.” With a final glance at the nearly completed piece, he walked over and sat down next to her. After a moment of inspection, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in.

She inhaled the scent of his sweat and rested her head against his shoulder for a moment of comfort she was badly in need of. “It was a weird one, but I kind of don’t wanna talk about it. I need to think about it first, okay?” The best part of the trailer was that it was really quiet. She only had to whisper the words and they projected easily off the barren walls and rotting floorboards.

He rested his cheek against her head. “Sure.”

His acceptance was a front; Dale knew her far too well. Within a few minutes of quietly leaning against him, she felt the words bubble up and out of her despite her resolve to think about it some more first. “Do you know about, like, Moses?”

“Moses? The dude who parted the sea or something?”

She could hear his frown on his voice. “That’s the one. Before he freed a bunch of Jews and guided them to the promised land or

whatever, he was this punk shepherd and one of his sheep went off, so he had to chase it down, right?” She felt her cheeks prickle. Maybe she should have just lead with “So, I dreamt about a burning bush,” but she tended to meander a bit when it came to her insanity. Joan of Arc, she was not.

“Okay, so?” He stroked her upper arm with his paint-covered fingers.

Rayha watched goose bumps break out on her arm despite the heat. “Shit, this is going to sound—okay, whatever. Moses headed up some mountain to get his damn sheep and sort of ran into this burning bush—”

Dale snorted, but waved his hand for her to go on before she could do more than roll her eyes.

“You are such a dude. Anyway, this was a, you know, plant-thing that was on fire but not burning down. Moses found it, looked at it, and then God started talking to him through the bush and said Moses was the chosen one to free the Jews from the Egyptians or whatever.”

“Okay, so far, so biblical. You dreamt about Moses? That’s a new one.”

Deep breath. “No, I was myself, PJ’s and all.”

“What? You don’t sleep in your birthday suit?” He grinned.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. Now do you want to hear this or not? I’m already pretty convinced I shouldn’t be saying anything and you’re not exact—”

“I want to hear it. Sorry.” He scooted a bit and checked her face with a frown of his own.

“This has you spooked, like, more than usual. Why?”

She scooted back a bit and shrugged. It was easier to talk about this stuff when he wasn’t holding her. That was safer anyway; Dale was great at getting the wrong idea about their friendship. “Cuz I dreamt about a fucking burning bush and some voice told me his name was Harut and that God’s fucked off somewhere an I’ll be getting a sign to prove all this shit is real.” She watched Dale’s face for a

reaction.

For a few seconds, he just stared at her, then his gaze slid to the virgin Mary on the opposite wall. “Did you get a sign?”

She shook her head. “No, but it was only a few hours ago and all I did since was make breakfast and walk over. Jesus’s face didn’t pop up in my fried rice. Trust me, I checked.”

He didn’t laugh like she had inspected him to. Instead, he just starred at Mary on the wall.

“What?”

“This is how it started with all of ‘em, right? Their angel presenting themselves to them?”

A chill ran down Rayha’s spine despite the oppressive heat trapped inside the trailer. This is why she hadn’t wanted to talk about it; hearing him say what she’d been too scared to put into words herself made it very real all of a sudden. “I guess.” He was right, though. She’d dreamt about the lives of saints for years now, and every single one, from Jesus to Mother Theresa, had experienced the reveal of divinity. Of course that didn’t mean jack; they were dreams and she was undoubtedly nuts. There was nothing more to it.

Unless she actually did get a sign.

“What did you say his name was?”

“Hm?” Rayha looked up from her lap. Dale’s gaze had returned to her. “Oh. Harut.”

“Is he in the Bible?”

Rayha paused. “I dunno. It didn’t ring bells, but I only skimmed the damn thing. It’s, like, a million pages. And then there is the Torah as well, and the Qur’an. I guess I can try to see if the encyclopedia has something on him tomorrow? Or try the computer then? The library is closed on Sunday, so...”

He nodded and reached for his bag. While he rummaged through its contents, he said: “There is somewhere else we could try, you know? Especially on a Sunday.”

Rayha bit back a groan; too childish. “We’ve been over that. I’m

not going to go to church, or a mosque, or a temple, or anywhere else religious. They'll call the cops on me."

And they should, too. No use entertaining the loonies.

Dale pulled out a party bottle of Bacardi and twisted the cap off. "Come on, it makes sense. If anyone knows about this stuff, it's a priest."

When he handed the bottle over, she took it and sipped, then winced as the lukewarm liquid scorched her throat. She felt better instantly. "What do I say, huh? Hi, I wanted to ask about some angel named Harut. Have you heard of him, because I dreamt he talked to me thought a burning bush last night."

He couldn't help snicker again, so she punched him in the arm. "Decidedly not funny."

"It's a little funny. And yes, something like that, but without the dream-bit. Just ask about an angel named Harut and if he gets suspicious, we make a run for it." He pried the bottle from her hands, drank, then handed it back.

She took a much larger sip this time. Maybe that would make his words less sensible—because he was right, a priest would know. The question was, did she want to find out if her dreams were more than that? She hadn't really felt the need to investigate the religious side of her other dreams because they had always been sort of left-of-stage, but tonight's dream had been different and it scared her. "I don't know, man. It sounds like a really bad idea somehow."

"What have you got to lose?" He plucked at the laces of his boots. "We've gone over them all; Joan of Arc, Saint Sebastian, the queen lady, the Indian lady—"

"Native American, asshole, and her name was Kateri Tekakwitha."

"Whatever." He eyed the bottle. "All the stuff you dream about, that's all stuff people say happened to them. What if your angel dream is true as well?"

Rayha licked her lips. *Yeah what then? What the fuck would that mean?* She hadn't been normal for years, but to actually embrace the

crazy was something else entirely. “Maybe I read about him somewhere. Maybe I’m just meant to be a writer and I have a really creative mind.”

He snorted. “You’re about as creative as a brick, don’t flatter yourself.”

“Ass.” She grinned despite herself. Dale always made her feel better, even about the imminent demise of her sanity.

“Point is, so far, you’ve been one hundred percent right. If you’re right about this Harut as well, wouldn’t it be good to get some dirt on him before this goes any further? I mean, prepare for the worst, right?”

“The worst?” She arched a brow. As an afterthought she handed him the bottle along with the question.

He drank, nearly finishing it. “Well, most of these people didn’t end up with a happily after ever, did they?” He waved his free hand around the trailer, drawing Rayha’s eye to all the pieces on there. Almost all of these stories ended in death and destruction, usually of the person in whose head she’d resided. “Maybe there’s a way out if you have really been, you know, ‘called upon’.” His air quotes were made harder by the bottle.

Rayha pried it from his hands and finished it. He had a point, and a pretty good one. That didn’t mean she liked it. “Okay, fine. You win. We’ll go see a priest. I can sit on my ass and wait for a sign that might be all in my head or I can find out if there’s some obscure angel mentioned somewhere in some ancient text and freak myself out more. Why not the latter.” Her voice held much more bravado than she felt.

Dale plucked the bottle from her fingers before tossing it into a corner. “Atta girl!” He got up and extended his hand. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

With great resistance, Rayha took Dale’s hand and accepted his help getting up. “If this backfires on us, you’re taking every bit of blame for it.”

He waved her off with a grin and gathered his stuff. “Don’t worry,

Kincaid. I know where to run when the shit hits the fan—away from you!”

Dale ducked out of the trailer before she could retrieve the bottle and throw it at his head.

“Jerk!” But she felt a lighter because of his fuckery—not a lot, but enough to following him out into the daylight and face the inevitable.

CHAPTER 2

“No man is born into the world a Master, and for that reason are we obliged to learn. A man can have no more shameful and evil title than that of being an ignorant person.”

— The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage

Rayha squinted against the glare of the sun reflecting off the virginal white walls of the very imposing St. Mary’s Basilica. Dale had needed only a single glance in the phonebook to pick it over the others. *Of course.* She had been fine with it, but now she was reconsidering.

The cathedral rose dauntingly into the sky, speaking countless promises of holy punishment. One tower on each side of the façade made the whole thing even more impressive. Stairs led up to three entrances, which were all closed. It was probably to keep the heat out, but it could also be a sign not to go down this path of inquiry.

She shallowed down her nerves.

Beside her, Dale had shrunk a size or two as well. He pulled his coat tighter around his stick-thin body. “Right...”

“They’re going to think we’re devil worshippers.” There was no other conclusion; they both looked like they’d walked out of a Slipknot video.

Dale licked his black-painted lips. “Yeah. Definitely.” He paused, then tipped his chin up.

“Fuck it, I’m going in.” Before she could object, he had made it to the staircase and headed up.

Rayha grumbled internally, but she followed him anyway. They’d spent an hour and change on a bus for this and far more money than she wanted to think about, so there was really no reason not to follow through now. *Except that this can’t end well.*

As soon as she followed Dale through the squeaking outer doors,

cool air engulfed her. She barely bit back a moan of relief.

Dale grinned. “Now I get why people go to church.”

Rayha shoved him forward, but grinned anyway. She couldn’t agree more. Any reprieve from the desert heat was a blessing.

It even got pretty chilly once Dale led them through the doors into the body of the cathedral. The temperature change was only partially to blame for the hairs on Rayha’s arms standing on end; the inside of the cathedral was even more impressive than the outside.

Arches aligned the center path from the font to the stage. “Stage” probably wasn’t the right word for where the priest stood and preached, but it was the best word Rayha had. The ceiling rose up above Dale as soon as he stepped out of the shadow of the organ. His gaze slid from one stained glass window to the next.

Rayha took in the statue of Jesus on the cross that greeted her. It was about two thirds of life-sized but had been put on a pedestal so it towered over her. She rubbed her palms absentmindedly, remembering the pain of the spikes being hammered through. It was a pretty decently made statue, one of the standard shorter haired, bearded ones. While pretty, it didn’t look a lick like the man in question. Rayha tore her gaze away and walked past it to catch up with Dale as he made his way past row upon row of benches.

There weren’t a lot of people inside. Japanese tourists lingered around a small alcove with another statue in it—since it was a woman with a baby, Rayha guessed it was Mary herself—a few people prayed or chatted amongst themselves while seated on the benches, but they barely made a dent in the feeling of emptiness the cathedral exuded. Maybe they were between services.

“We can still turn around.” Even her whisper felt too loud.

He shook his head, but his gaze was caught on to the large stained glass window above the stage, Mary in all her radiant glory.

Rayha resisted the urge to rub his back. “I’m sure that if there’s a heaven, your mom’s there.”

His shoulders slumped a little more. “Yeah, she should be.”

Rayha shook off her uneasy feelings in favor of finding a distraction for Dale. “Come on, let’s find a priest.”

For being in a near-empty cathedral, finding a priest was a surprisingly more difficult endeavor than Rayha had expected. There weren’t any in sight and after wandering around for a few minutes, Dale suggested sitting down and letting someone come to them.

It worked.

He was clean-shaven, with short salt-and-pepper hair and a mandatory kind smile and showed up in the aisle next to their bench. “So, you two look a little lost.”

Rayha looked up and she smiled back. “Pretty much.”

“In that case—” He moved to face them and held out his hand. “Let me see if I can help. I’m pastor Roberts.”

“You’re not a priest?” She shook his hand. It was much warmer than hers. *Maybe he’s used to the chill.* Rayha had begun to envy Dale his coat.

Pastor Roberts chuckled. “No. In general, but there are exceptions, Catholic ministers are called ‘priests’ and Protestant ministers ‘pastors’. Unless that’s the question you came to ask, I won’t go into all the other differences.”

Dale shook Pastor Roberts’s hand too. “How did you know we had a question?”

Pastor Roberts sat beside Rayha and leaned forward a bit so he could look at Dale as well.

“I could quote scripture at you, but I’ve discovered that young folks tend to frown upon that practice.” He chuckled again and clasped his hands together.

Rayha’s gaze was drawn to them. Pastor Roberts had arm hair that extended all the way down to his hands, which left Rayha feeling unsettled without knowing why. *They look like dad hands.* A sense of loss filled her chest.

“Usually when people come here, they come for one of three things: prayer—which you aren’t partaking in—take pictures for the

vacation scrapbook—which you also aren’t doing—

or contemplation.” He used his fingers to tick off each option.

“What’s that?” Rayha slid her gaze back up.

“Contemplation? In this instance, it means thinking deeply about something important.”

He didn’t seem to mind explaining, which made Rayha like him better. “Yeah, I guess we’re contemplating, then.” She took a deep breath. “I do have a question. About angels.” She side-eyed him to check his reaction.

He nodded. “Go on.”

“I, um...I was wondering if there is an angel in the Bible called Harut.” An invisible but heavy boulder landed squarely on her chest and prevented her from inhaling deeper than shallowly.

“Hm. No, I don’t think so.”

Her stomach simultaneously launched into her throat and plummeted down into the pit of her belly. “Oh.” *I should be happy with that, right?* She checked on Dale.

He looked a little crestfallen too.

“...but there is mention of angelic twins called Haroot and Maroot in the Qu’ran.”

Pastor Roberts’s tone was light, but she felt his gaze on her as her stomach did another flip and her speeding heart pumped blood to her cheeks in a rush. “O-Oh?”

Dale’s hand landed on her leg and he squeezed. “You’ve read the Qu’ran?”

“Of course. All sacred scripture is of interest to me because of my chosen profession. And sometimes, it proves useful. Do you want to hear the story? It’s a short one, and I don’t think they are mentioned more than once.” He leaned forward a bit more and worked his hands.

“Yeah.” Rayha nodded. “I want to hear it.” She covered Dale’s hand with hers and held on to it like a lifeline. His fingers were just as cold as hers.

“It’s from the second surah of the Qur’an, called ‘Al-Baqara’.”

Rayha nodded; she recognized the name.

"I see that rings a bell? Well, for the sake of convenience, I'm going to assume you don't know anything about the Qu'ran and Islam, all right? I'm not an expert by any means, but at least, if I explain too much, the story makes sense. If I leave out parts I think you'll know, it might become unclear." When he got nods in return, he continued. "It says in the Qu'ran that demons used to ascend to heaven to listen to angels talking. They brought the information they overheard down to humanity, mostly to oracles and soothsayers."

"What are those?" Dale listened with rapt attention.

"People who predict the future; fortune tellers."

Dale nodded.

"Because everything demons said came true, people started to believe everything the fortune tellers said. Once that happened, the demons started whispering lies to the fortune tellers too, more and more until there was only a little bit of truth in what fortune tellers said and a lot of lies."

Pastor Roberts looked serious, which made Rayha feel better about listening with her heart in her throat. "Why would they do that?" A horrible notion presented itself to her—one worse than talking to angels. *Is that what happened to me? Is Harut—or He Who Calls Himself Harut—really a demon?*

"Well, no one knows for sure, but the Imams I have spoken to seem pretty sure it's because that's what demons like to do best, create fear and confusion among people so they won't trust each other and God—or Allah." He smiled in the way grown-ups smiled at children when they didn't want them to be afraid.

Rayha hesitated. "So...were, or are, Haroot and Maroot demons?"

Pastor Roberts chuckled. "No, they are angels. They saw how people believed all these lies and how the demons taught human kind magic too, and they became really angry at humanity for being so stupid to believe all of these lies and turn away from God. God told them that if they felt so passionately they wouldn't be swept up by the

lies, they should go down and live as mortal people for a while to prove they would be able to resist. I think God tried to make the point that making bad decisions doesn't mean God gives up on you." He checked the both of them over, then glanced down Rayha's body.

Hot anger pumped through her system at being ogled by a pastor, then she realized his gaze lingered on her belly, then slid to their joined hands, and back to her belly. *Shit, he thinks I'm pregnant!* The notion was so ludicrous, she had a hard time holding in her laughter. She did let go of Dale's hand, just to make it clear they were not fucking and cleared her throat.

Pastor Roberts slid his gaze back up. "Yes. Well..." He cleared his throat as well and sat back.

Dale withdrew his hand to his lap.

"Whatever the reason, Haroot and Maroot accepted and they went down to earth where they lived among mankind and warned them against the lies and the magic spread by the demons. People believed them and started coming to the twin angels for advice, but something happened to Haroot and Maroot too. They fell in love with a woman and eventually they had intercourse with her."

Dale grinned. "At the same time?"

That elicited another chuckle from Pastor Roberts as well as a headshake. "It doesn't say."

"What happened next?" Rayha's moment of amusement had passed and she'd cycled back to being worried and nauseous.

"Well, Haroot and Maroot weren't very lucky, because the woman knew they were angels, and they were also seen by someone as they were intimate with her. The angels killed the person who had seen them, and because the angels had been drunk at the time, the woman was even able to learn the password to heaven. She used it to ascend and when Haroot and Maroot attempted to go back up to paradise themselves, they weren't allowed back in because they had sinned."

Dale scoffed. "Idiots."

Rayha elbowed him in the ribs. "Then what?"

Pastor Roberts watched her a few seconds. He seemed about ready to ask her why she was so interested, but he picked up the story instead. “God told them they would have to be punished but let them decide if they wanted to be punished on earth or in heaven. Both chose to serve their time on earth and God sent them to Babel to teach magic to humans.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” The words escaped Raya before she could filter them.

“Why would he send them to do exactly what he previously told them to fight?”

“That is a good question.” Pastor Roberts wrung his hands again. “Why do you think He did that?”

Rayha contemplated. “Maybe...maybe to test people?” She licked her lips as she tried to gather her thoughts. “Kind of like when moms warn kids not to touch something hot and they keep wanting to do it anyway, so they let them get burned so they won’t do it again?”

Pastor Roberts nodded. “That would be my guess too. On top of that, the tower of Babel appears in Genesis. It was an attempt of humanity to build a tower so tall it could reach heaven. God struck the people with his power and created different languages amongst them so they wouldn’t be able to understand each other and the effort would be doomed. Adding magic to the mix would have made it even more difficult for humanity to reach heaven in any other way than a good, pious life.”

Rayha’s thoughts were spinning; her visiting angel was actually mentioned in scripture but for doing something sinful. “So, is Harut a bad angel?” It took her a few seconds to get up the courage to look over at Pastor Roberts.

“No. There is no such thing. Fallen angels become demons, but Haroot and Maroot didn’t fall, they made a mistake, just like humans. God punished them and they got back in His good graces, so to say.” He chuckled, so there was probably a joke in there somewhere.

Rayha chuckled too, a little awkwardly, and the sound was echoed

by Dale.

“These old stories—there is mention of these events in the Old Testament too—are not generally considered fact. It depends on who you ask, of course, and I find a lot of comfort in the Old Testament myself, but even as a pastor, I am willing to admit that there might have been a touch of creative license applied to it.” He nudged her, which caused that same feeling of longing as seeing his dad hands had.

She shifted closer to Dale. *Shit. Mixed signals, Kincaid.* She scooted back.

“Take these stories as how I think they were intended, as learning tools for ethical behavior. The moral of the story, I think, is not about testing humanity, it’s about showing that humanity, at its core, is plagued with a lot of hardship and temptation and that even a being as pure as an angel would have a hard time resisting it. It’s a story about accepting your humanity. Maybe there is an angel named Haroot, and maybe he has a brother called Maroot, but you’re looking like you’re afraid they’re going to descend down from heaven any second, and I promise you that the odds of that happening are very slim.” He smiled, as if his words had solved everything.

Rayha forced a smile onto her lips and got up. “Thanks. That’s really helpful.” She glanced at Dale, who hurried off the bench as well.

“Yeah, helpful.” Dale thrust out his arm and Pastor Robert got up to take his hand and shake it.

Rayha did the same.

“You haven’t told me why you’re interested in obscure angel references.” He didn’t seem offended by that, just curious.

“Well, you know.” She let go of the pastor’s hand and made her way to the aisle. “You never know when it’ll come in handy.” With that, she waved—feeling lame instantly—pulled Dale away from the inquisitive pastor, and rushed out. Suddenly, the Arizona desert heat didn’t feel so oppressive anymore.

* * *

Mom was already home when Rayha finally made it back to the trailer, which was unfortunate because Rayha could really have used some time to process. Her head reeled with information and possible consequences. Dale hadn't exactly been talkative on the way home, so time alone with her Diskman would have been welcome. Instead, she braced herself for the inquisition—which she had far too much intimate knowledge about as it was.

“Rayhana, sit, sit! You are late.” Mom’s tone fell somewhere between pissed off and sad, which was probably what she was going for.

“Sorry.” She pulled the door of the trailer shut and inhaled the scent of spicy curry. Her stomach clenched needily to reminded her that she hadn't eaten anything since brunch. Since dinner was going to be a thing anyway, she might as well be nice and get some “daughter points” in the hopes Mom would leave her alone the rest of the evening. She took her boots off and slid into the booth that served as their dining table, games corner, reading nook and many other things. “How was work?”

“Oh, it was.” Mom stirred the curry and tasted. She hummed and turned the heating plate off. “You? Did you have good day?”

“It was fine.” Rayha resisted the urge to correct everything Mom said and instead pulled off a piece of naan and ate it. *Still warm.* She smiled happily and chewed. Daughter points wouldn't be won with just that limited response, so she inhaled deeply and added: “I went into town with Dale. The bus was late, so that's why I'm late too.”

Mom waved her hand and brought the pan over. Thick potato curry with green peas and peppers.

Rayha's stomach growled.

“It is okay. You had fun, yes? Fun with Dale?” She wiggled her eyebrows in the way that Rayha really hated; the way that said “You

can tell me he's your boyfriend. You should have a boyfriend, Rayhana. All girls your age have boyfriends. Get a boyfriend!"

"I had fun with Dale." She left it at that. Instead, she scooped curry into the bowl Mom had put out for her, pulled the already munched on naan over and tore off another piece to use as a spoon.

"Dale should come by for dinner. He too thin. No good for you." Mom served herself and ate, but watched Rayha every second as she did.

Rayha grumbled, appetite all but lost. "Thanks Mom. Is that your way of saying I should lose weight?"

"No, no!" Mom's eyes widened and she reached out over the table to take her hand.

Rayha pulled it away just before Mom could grab it and glared.

Mom clenched her hand into a fist for a second or two, then slid her arm back across the table. "Of course, I do not say that. You are beautiful, beautiful girl. Healthy girl."

Rayha snorted. Her hunger won out over her body confidence issues and she took another bite. "Whatever, Mom."

For a second, it seemed like Mom would press the issue, then she exhaled slowly and plastered on a smile. "It is good that you had a good time. You are ready for school, yes?"

Shit. School. It was about the farthest thing from Rayha's mind with everything going on. She quickly reviewed Monday's classes and assignments, then stifled a groan. "Uh, yeah. Pretty much."

Mom squinted. "That is homework not completely done?"

Sigh. "No, but I'll do it after dinner." A stupid history paper that she'd completely forgotten about. Sadly, history was the one course she couldn't risk showing up at without homework. "Promise."

That seemed to appease Mom because she brought the curry-covered naan to her mouth and chewed without another word.

Rayha sighed. *Well, there goes contemplation time.*

Of course, that was way too simplistic a thought. Half an hour later, Rayha sat behind her tiny desk with her paper and pen, trying to

focus on the American Revolution when all her head wanted to settle on was Harut and her angel situation. That was the crux of the thing, wasn't it? Did she have an angel situation? And if it wasn't an angel situation, then what was it?

She put the paper aside a moment and hovered over a fresh sheet. *Options.*

The first one was obvious and she wrote it down. The rest followed easily.

- a. angel situation.*
- b. demon situation*
- c. bad angel situation*
- d. delusional*

She circled the latter. That was still the most likely of the four options. It didn't sit well with her that Harut—or Haroot, at Pastor Robertson had called him—was a real angel in scripture. Not exactly the arch angel Michael, like Joan of Arc had dealt with, but he was mentioned, none the less. That made it more real. Hoping she was insane was insanity in and of itself, but it was still better than the alternative.

So, what were the odds she'd pulled a random name out of the hat in her dream which just so happened to be a name in scripture as well? And even if it was a name she'd read, why wouldn't her subconscious mind have gone for something more grand like Michael, or Gabriel, or any of the other arch angels? Delusion of grandeur only went so far if you chose one of the nobodies as your lord and master.

Rayha circled the fourth option again, and then again; she was clearly delusional. Her burning bush had promised her a sign and so far the only thing close to it was tucked away in information she'd actively sought out herself. That wasn't proof, that was research.

She tore the paper from the block and crumpled it. She was just going to have to put it out of her head and deal with her fucked up dreams. Until some super obvious sign presented itself—which wasn't going to fucking happen—she was mentally ill, or she had a brain

tumor. Those were the two options and she was sticking to them.

With a groan, Rayha turned the page back to her three sentence essay and stared at it again. This is where her focus should be now, not on something she couldn't prove the existence of. Getting a four page paper out still took her almost until midnight, because there was no way to shake the anxiety that continued to flutter around her heart.

CHAPTER 3

“Bruise, thou shalt not heat; bruise, thou shalt not sweat; bruise, thou shalt not run, no-more than Virgin Mary shall bring forth another son.”

— *John George Hoffman, Pow-Wows*

Dale waited by the bus stop with a few other kids from their and other schools. He wore his black leather coat even though it was ninety degrees in the shade already.

Rayha stopped beside him and flapped her shirt to get some airflow underneath it. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He looked up and inspected her. “That bad?”

Rayha had plastered two layers of powder onto her face and she’d applied her black lipstick and eyeliner heavily in the hope no one would notice how runover she felt. *The little shit knows you too well.* “Not as bad as two nights ago.” Just your run-of-the-mill inquisition torture dream. Nothing serious.

“Sorry.” He reached out to touch her arm, but she shifted her stance and he dropped his hand. “Short day, at least, right?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Why do you know my schedule so well?”

He shrugged and kicked the tufts of grass poking through the pavement by his feet. “No reason.”

“Bullshit. If I ever find out you have one of those creepy starker-walls about me in your bedroom, I’ll bury you six feet deep.”

He grinned. “You wish.”

She elbowed him in the gut.

“Hey! Don’t take your shitty nights out on me.” He didn’t seem too upset.

“Fuck off, dude.” She wasn’t either. It seemed like he was avoiding the subject of yesterday’s church visit, which suited Rayha

just fine. “Did you actually write something for history class or are you just going to provide entertainment for the rest of us?”

“Bit of both.” He patted his bag. “But I put something on paper, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Something shitty, probably. Something that is going to get you into a world of hurt. She gave Dale’s boney shoulder a firm pat. “Well, good luck.”

His smirk gave his teenage face some age. “Fuck the butcher, right?”

“Just don’t get axed, kay? I need you in that class.” *Shit. That came out wrong.* Before he could reply, she elbowed him in the ribs again. “Don’t even dare.”

He made a satisfying “umph” noise and threw up his hands. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Kincaid.”

Appeased, Rayha got on the bus when it arrived.

Their looks were usually enough to dissuade anyone from talking to them but the ride was the usual hell of hot and loud and it aggravated her lingering headache.

Rayha fished her Diskman out of her bag, put the headphones on and drowned her discomfort in Nirvana as she stared out the window at the passing housing blocks. She didn’t remember what it had been like to live in one of these houses with a green lawn in front of it and plenty of room inside to stretch out her arms and not touch a wall. She could picture it though, so well she could almost believe she wasn’t going home to the trailer in the afternoon.

The throng of people was much worse at school. She wished it wasn’t as hot so she could have worn a hoodie today, but she didn’t deal with heat very well. Not like Dale. Rayha got overwhelmed by the number and loudness of high schoolers almost right away and took Dale’s arm. She rested her head against his shoulder. Even if he had a crush on her, he was still her best friend—her only friend—and she trusted him to get her to class when it was all a bit too much.

He pressed her arm against his side and wordlessly guided her to

the butcher's homeroom.

Serious bad luck to start off with history on Monday anyway.

When he stopped, Rayha looked up and let go. They had assigned seats here and not even Dale—who seemed to have very little regard for his life, let alone his scholastic career—went against it. She fished her essay from her bag and put it on the empty desk by the door.

Rayha had just enough time to see that Dale's "essay" ran a little under half a page long and started with "The British were punk ass bitches" as she moved past. She snorted. *This is going to be a clusterfuck.*

The butcher did not take well to either swearing—which was Rayha's main reason for getting in trouble with him—or taking the piss with his most beloved subject, the American Revolution.

Dale tended to excel at both.

She took her place by the wall, three rows in, and sent Dale a questioning look, combined with an arched brow and the universal sign for "You're nuts."

He grinned and leaned back cockily. He held out his hand, palm down, and wobbled it, which meant either "a little bit," or "we'll see," in a situation like this.

She shook her head and got her books out as the rest of her classmates filed in and took their seats around her. Rayha hated them all with the power of a thousand suns but in this class, there was one universal truth: their collective hate of the butcher surpassed all social hierarchy within the school. No matter if you were goth, cheerleader, or nerd, if the butcher had it out for you, you would be protected, because the butcher had kicked Joshua out of their class, and Joshua had been one of the only kids in the school who had been on friendly terms with everyone. His parents had pulled him out of school and no one had forgiven the butcher for being the instigator of their loss.

Out of respect for the universal rule, she nodded politely at cheerleader airhead Kelly as she passed, and Kelly gave her a small smile in return.

Rayha laid out her book, her binder with notes, and her fountain pen, then kicked her bag under her table. She looked up just in time to watch the butcher appear stage right.

He closed the door behind him and smacked it with the flat of his hand.

Anyone who'd missed his entrance jumped and shut their mouths as they sat straight.

The butcher observed them and was observed in turn by thirty or so teenagers.

“Morning.”

A mumbled and mismatched chorus of voices repeated the greeting back to him.

“Is there anyone who didn't hand in their essay?” He pawed the pile by the door and thumbed through the papers. The butcher's impressive biceps flexed even with that little motion.

Rayha felt the familiar mixture of hatred and fear claw up her spine.

No one answered.

“Last chance.” He squinted his beady little eyes as he took them all in. A gleeful smirk pulled at the corners of his mouth.

No one moved; they all knew better.

Slowly, the butcher nodded. “Good.” He moved to the desk that faced the center row and put the stack down, then placed his briefcase beside it. “Open your books to page—”

Someone knocked on the door.

A tense hush befell the room.

Rayha swallowed down a flutter of nerves. The butcher hated to be interrupted, and he would undoubtedly take it out on them. They were only two weeks into the start of the new year, and already Joshua was gone. The butcher was famous for failing—axing—as many people as he could, seemingly without repercussions for his position and Rayha could not afford to be axed.

She slid down in her seat a little, striving for invisibility as she

glanced away from the butcher long enough to see Principal Valez' looking through the window in the door. As curious as she was, a few seconds was all Rayha dared to take her eyes off the butcher when he was interrupted.

The vein that ran from his neck to his forehead had begun to thump, which was a bad sign. He stared at Principal Valez through the glass.

Rayha dared another glance, this time at Dale, who'd sat up nervously. As if sensing her attention, he met her gaze and shrugged, but the worry was plain in his eyes. It was easy to guess why. Dale could talk his way out of his essay prank—he was a smooth talker like that—but not if the butcher was in a terrible mood. He couldn't afford to be kicked out of history any more than Rayha could.

The door opened.

Rayha held her breath.

Principal Valez strode in. Behind her, shielded almost entirely from view by her impressive bulk followed the thinnest girl Rayha had ever seen. The parts of her face Rayha could see were sharp, but most of it was hidden by lackluster strands of mousey brown hair, which accentuated the “rodent” vibe. She acted like one too; wide eyes took in the room in bursts. She fidgeted with the edge of the tightly woven fishnet gloves that ran up half her forearms and chewed her lip vigorously.

Nothing in her could keep Rayha's attention, so she returned her focus to the teachers. The tension between them was palpable, and not at all in a good way.

“Etta.” The butcher nodded with seemingly great reluctance.

Principal Valez smiled at him, but there was nothing friendly about the curving of her lips. “Mr. Haynes.”

Rayha had almost forgotten that was their teacher's last name. Everyone just called him “the butcher,” a left-over momentum from Hayes' pro-football hay-days discovered after the Joshua incident. Why reinvent the sociopathic wheel, right?

“Apologies for the interruption, but we have a new student with us today.”

The butcher’s laser-focused gaze slid to the girl.

She all but skittered more firmly behind Principal Valez.

Principal Vales stepped aside and guided the reluctant mouse in front of her, holding her there with a hand on each shoulder. “Mr. Haynes, class, this is Paige Guthrie. She just moved here from Florida with her parents.”

The girl cringed at the term “parents,” which was always an indication of a sordid mess of a story.

Rayha could relate.

“She’ll be joining you from now on.” Principal Valez’ chipper tone fell flat.

Silence filled the room.

Someone coughed.

When no one cheered, or applauded, or threw confetti—whatever it was Principal Valez had expected them to do—she cleared her throat. “Right. Well, you go take your place now.”

She patted the girl on the back of the head and then pushed her forward, into the row between Rayha’s and the center one, toward the desk which had been occupied by Joshua.

Paige sat down with a furious blush.

All gazes in the room—save for Paige’s and Principal Valez’—darted between the girl and the butcher.

The butcher just smirked. “Thank you Mrs. Valez. We’ll take good care of her, won’t we, class?”

A chorus of “yes, sir’s” and “of course’s” went up in the most subdued manner possible.

Paige’s dropped her head. Her hair blocked her face entirely now.

Is she crying? The thought filled Rayha with dread. If Paige cried, she was dead; the butcher would pick on her until she broke a rule and he could kick her out.

“Good then!” Principal Valez’s chipper attitude was back in place.

Rayha wondered if she was really dense enough to think this would end well for either Paige or the class, but she didn't have time to think about it. She exchanged another look with Dale, this time over Paige's head.

He looked worried too and he wiped his palms on his pants.

"Have a lovely day!" The door shut behind Principal Valez.

Silence fell again, even more tense than when the principal had still been in the room.

All heads turned back toward the butcher.

He folded his massive arms over his more massive chest. "Well, well, well." Dark amusement clung to the drawn out words.

Paige seemed to shrink on the spot.

Rayha suspected she was dying to flee, but Paige stayed in her seat.

Smart girl.

When she looked up, she noticed everyone seemed to be trying to catch everyone's eye. Eyebrows were raised, lips turned up or down, head were shook or nodded, all to get some important questions answered, like: *Are we willing to go to war for a stranger? And if so, how?*

"I think we should all take this opportunity to go over the classroom rules again." The butcher raised himself up to his full seven-foot-something. "Do I like to be interrupted?"

"No." Rayha said it mindlessly.

Everyone in the class echoed her.

Paige looked up, seemingly jolted again by the unison of their reply.

So, that's what terror looks like. It would have been amusing to watch if Rayha wasn't intimately aware of the type of person the butcher was. Now she looked at her with more attention, Rayha realized Paige wasn't so much chewing on her lip but playing with a very small ring through it. Her respect for the girl grew.

"You are right, I do not." The butcher laid a hand on his briefcase.

“Do I like changes, then?”

“No.” Again, the answer was mind-numbingly easy and everyone gave it, even Dale.

“You are right, I do not.” The butcher stared at Paige with a slowly deepening scowl.

“Now, I know you are not to blame, girl.”

Paige shuddered.

All around her, kids shifted in their seats, eager to get away from the site of impending doom for the new girl.

Would he really throw her out on day one? Can he get away with that?

“I know that you have been put in my class by the administration, and I am sure they didn’t tell you about today’s essay, hm?”

For a few heart-stopping moments, Paige didn’t reply. She seemed frozen solid.

Then Laura, who had the seat behind Paige, kicked her chair.

“No!” Paige squeaked the word.

The butcher’s hand slid from the briefcase to the pile of papers. He leafed absentmindedly through the stack. “That’s an issue for me, because I have a very important rule. Four-eyes, what is it?”

Tommy was well-trained to listen to his “pet name” and shot up into a standing position. “If you show up without your homework, you never have to show up again. If you don’t want to do the work, stay home.”

“Very good. Sit.”

He did.

“You have not done your homework, so I should fail you now.”

Paige was either too terrified or too smart to talk back. She stared at her desk and waited for her sentencing.

“Is there anyone who has a solution, hm?” It was obviously a rhetoric question; he’d made up his mind to kick Paige out.

Glances were cast again. No one spoke, but the questions hung thickly in the air between them. *Is he really going to do it? Do we try*

to stop it? Is the risk worth it?

Time to do anything quickly ran out and before she could think about it, Rayha raised her hand.

The butcher's cold eyes landed on her.

She shivered. *What am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?*

"Yes?" He sounded both annoyed and amused.

She stood and brought her trembling hands together behind her back. "Perhaps, maybe, she could hand it in before lunch?" She knew better not to say "tomorrow" or even "end of the day." If there was a large chance Paige would be able to make the deadline, it wouldn't be any fun for the butcher.

Paige looked up at her with a mixture of despair, hope, and fear.

Rayha ignored her and waited with her heart in her throat. *If he axes me, my mom will have my head.* It was worse than that, though. Education as everything to Mom. If Rayha failed history, Mom would be heartbroken.

Across the room, Dale shifted.

"That," the butcher said as he straightened. "Would be very hard to do. I'm not sure if that is a solution at all." He smirked.

Rayha nodded. "You could always fail her then? But it seems like a good challenge? Maybe?"

The butcher looked from her to Paige and back. "All right, fair enough. Before lunch then." He chuckled and shook his head. "Good luck new girl." He sat down behind his desk without dismissing her.

Relief flooded Rayha's system, but quickly froze in her veins. She didn't dare to sit, so she stood awkwardly beside her chair until the butcher started his pre-planned speech anew.

As soon as the words "American Revolution" fell, she lowered herself down as slowly as she

could. He didn't even spare her a glance and she exhaled deeply. *Jesus fucking Christ! What even is this school?*

Dale looked equally relieved and he nodded at her with a proud

smile.

Rayha smiled too, even though a tremble started up in her body and her headache had worsened considerably.

Then the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. A hauntingly familiar pressure formed inside her skull and threatened to turn her stomach like on a roller coaster. Her cold sweat intensified. Rayha's still-speeding heart missed a beat. *Shit*. She looked up and scanned the room.

Dale was no longer looking at her, but Paige was. She smiled weakly at her and mouthed "thank you." She still looked like she was about to cry.

She nodded at the girl and slid her gaze onward; Paige's attention was not what had given her goose bumps. Her stalker was back.

All of the kids had their attention on the butcher. Of course, no one had sneaked into the back of the class, but she still felt a presence, a source of attention. *Just what I needed today*.

She tried to rile her anger, but it was hard when fear overwrote her bravado before it had even taken a hold. Rayha was back on the mountainside, hearing Harut admit to stalking her. Here was that presence again, turning this class into even more of a clusterfuck. *Or he's marking the occasion; observing it because it matters*. But what was it that mattered? Her standing up to the butcher or...her gaze returned to Paige. She squinted. *Or her*.

As soon as the thought formed, the feeling of being watched faded. Rayha's stomach revolted as if the leaving entity tugged at it on the way out. She swallowed down the rising nausea and realized she was giving credit to a delusion. That was never good. There wasn't a solution to insanity, but it was something that could be—should be—ignored. Rayha set her jaw and forced herself to focus on the butcher's monotone monologue instead of the mouse and her fucked up head. She still had a class to get through in one piece.

* * *

Once the bell went, Paige's head came up from her chest for the first time since she'd been left alone. The entire hour, she'd sat with her bag on her lap, staring at the desk.

Rayha couldn't blame her; a trancelike state was undoubtedly less traumatic than hearing the butcher drone on about how the Brits had been slaughtered by the invincible American army.

Paige started getting up, realized everyone had remained seated and quickly sat back down again. A deep red blush flushed her cheeks again and she clutched her bag to her chest with more force.

The Pavlovian reaction to the sound of the bell was—as always in the butcher's class—quenched by the rules he'd drilled into them. The entire class stayed perfectly still and waited for the butcher to finish his speech, which undoubtedly ran long because of Paige's introduction to the class.

Rayha found her attention drifting again. It was hard not to worry about her deteriorating mind. She glanced behind her again, into the general direction where she'd sensed her onlooker. It was still a plain piece of wall, next to the window. Had it really been Harut? Somehow the thought was much worse now she knew his history—if it hadn't been a delusion and he wasn't a demon. Rayha resisted the urge to bang her head on the table; these thoughts were driving her even more nuts than she obviously already was.

As she turned her head back toward the butcher, she caught Paige's staring at her. She caught and held the new girl's gaze.

Paige smiled nervously. Her eyes held a plea and Rayha knew exactly what Paige wanted from her: help with an essay that could maybe keep her in this class.

Rayha was very familiar with sainthood through her dreams and she was damn sure no one would ever call her saintly. That said, she had been stupid enough to get up to defend Paige. Besides, there was a very slim chance that Paige was, or was involved with, her divine sign. She supposed it wasn't exactly an angel descending from

heaven, but the timing of Paige's introduction into her life was a little bit too coincidental for Rayha's liking. After a few seconds of contact, she let Paige's gaze go without confirming or rejecting the silent request.

"...with that out of the way, one final announcement!" The butcher drew her attention away from Paige's eyes. "There will be an impromptu quiz on Wednesday."

A few groans fractured the silence.

Rayha pressed her lips together to keep hers in.

"You will all be called to the front of the class and asked a single question. Get it right, you stay. Get it wrong and you're done for the semester. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." *As if there's another option.*

"Dismissed."

Paige lingered in her chair this time but her whole body tensed, seemingly eager to make a run for it. She checked on Rayha again.

Rayha packed her bag, stood, and slowly made her way out of the class in the middle of the pack of silent kids.

Paige followed her without being prompted. Only after ten or so more paces into the hallway did Paige do the inevitable. "Sorry, um, girl? Wait, please?"

It would be so easy to just keep walking toward math class. Rayha stopped, sighed, and turned. "Yeah?"

"That was insane." Paige's voice trembled as badly as her body. She sounded as squeaky as Rayha had expected; mousey.

"Yeah, and you aren't done. You have exactly..." She checked the pocket watch strapped to her book bag. "An hour and forty-three minutes to get an essay together on why the American Revolution was an inevitable conflict in history."

Paige went even paler. It made her freckles stand out plainly on her skin. After a few moments of perfectly emoted terror, Paige said: "I-I was homeschooled."

Rayha let that sink in, then laughed darkly. "I guess that means

you're fucked, hm?"

Skeletally thin arms wrapped tighter around the bag, as if it would protect her from the evils of the public school system. She bit her bottom lip and looked up at her through her lashes. "Did you...did you write it? The essay?"

Rayha was impressed she'd gotten the words out. Maybe Paige wasn't so much of a mouse after all. She shrugged. "You heard the rules, of course I did."

"Can you help me?" Paige's voice was still soft, but it had gone steady.

Students flooded around them like water around a rock in a river. Dale had already disappeared into the crowd, probably to get a smoke in before his next class.

Rayha examined Paige's eyes, which were brown with green and probably some yellow too. They were messy, like Paige seemed to be with her unkempt hair and fidgety fingers playing with the pull of her bag's zipper. "I can, but what's in it for me?"

Paige shrugged and looked away, but only for a moment. "What do you want?" Someone bumped into her and she moved with the shove, stepping closer to Rayha.

Options, options. She could ask for anything, really, and be a bitch about it too. That said, if she asked for drugs or alcohol, she'd leave herself vulnerable to repercussions if Paige blabbed, and asking for money was probably going to go over like shit too if Paige went to Valez. She shook her head in resignation. "Just buy me lunch after."

"Deal!" Paige smiled shyly, which made her look kind of pretty—much better than when she wasn't smiling, at least.

"Okay, let's get this done then, mouse. I was supposed to be in math class five minutes ago." *Not that I'd wanted to go, anyway.* She would have, but now she had a Samaritan excuse not to. She mentally patted her own back as she got them moving. "Did you listen to a word the butcher said?"

Paige frowned. "The...butcher?"

“That’s what we call him.” The hallways emptied as the second bell rang.

“It fits.” Paige tried to blow a lock of hair out of her face, seemingly still unwilling to let go of her bag, but it barely budged. “Is he allowed to do that?”

Rayha snorted. “Depends on who you ask. The schoolboard, sure! Anyone with a law degree, not a snowball’s chance in hell. Since he’s still here, you can guess who’s in charge.”

Paige huffed her small chest. “I hate him!”

“We all do. Welcome to school.” Rayha glanced aside as they walked. “Why did your folks stop homeschooling you?”

“We moved. It’s part of this fresh start thing.”

She looked down at her feet, miserable or maybe ashamed. Rayha didn’t know her well enough to guess. “I take it you don’t approve?” She pushed the door to the library open.

“Well, that was my first class.” Paige shuddered and renewed the grip on her bag as she slipped past.

With a chuckle, Rayha closed the door behind them. In a more subdued tone she continued their conversation as she guided Paige to the computers. “It gets better. I mean, they’re all out to kill us, but with homework, not banishment.” She pulled the chair out behind one of the four computers the school had available.

The computer booted up noisily as she pressed the button. It had been on sleep mode, because the login screen came up instead of the full loading process that took several minutes to complete.

“Sit. Pull up Encyclopaedia Britannica and start reading up. I’ll get you some books and tell you what you should focus on when I get back.” She dumped her backpack by the leg of the desk.

Paige nodded and grabbed the mouse. “Oh, hey!” She wiggled the pointer as the screen came to life. “I need your login.”

Rayha turned on her heel and leaned over to type in her student number and password. The sharp scent of fear sweat struck her nostrils. She ignored it but held her breath as casually as possible.

“There.” She straightened and watched the bluish green desktop appear, chock full of icons. “That one’ll take you straight to the website.” She pointed.

Paige double clicked. “Cool. Got it.”

Rayha turned again.

“Hey!”

Ugh! “Yes?” She faced Paige once more, hands on her hips, eyebrow pointedly raised.

Paige got small again, boney shoulders hunching. “What’s your name?”

“Oh.” Rayha deflated. “Rayha.”

“I like it.” Paige smiled at her.

Rayha’s already tortured stomach did a little flip. She resisted the urge to smile back.

“Um, cool. I’ll get your books.” She pointed behind her and walked backward already before turning around and disappearing between the nearest bookcases. This day was already doing her head in.

Paige was engrossed in her reading by the time Rayha returned. The mouse wheel ticked every time she scrolled lower.

Rayha put the books beside her and pulled up a chair. “So, the most important thing to know about the revolution-according-to-butcher is that only, like, a hand full of noble Americans gave their lives for the greater good and all Brits were massacred. Oh, and no other country helped us; not much anyway. They were there and, I dunno, did the laundry or something.” Rayha rolled her eyes emphatically.

“But...” Paige scrolled back up. She frowned as she re-read the encyclopedic article.

“That’s not true.”

Rayha nodded. “Yep! Such is the nature of the beast. Write it down, collect your pass, and survive another day.”

Paige tilted her head, seemingly confused by the crazy of the

American school system.

“Less gawking, more writing. I’ll be here for questions. I have a ton of math homework to do now I’m missing that class anyway.” She pulled her backpack toward her and took out her books.

Paige hesitated a handful of seconds. “Rayha?”

“Hm?” Rayha looked up from the math books half out of her bag.

“Thank you. For what you did in class and for helping me. It’s...” She swallowed something down with difficulty. “I need to keep going to school.”

Rayha arched a brow, but she sympathized with wanting to please parents or something similar. “Sure. Just hurry up, the butcher will absolutely axe you if you’re even a minute late and no one will be able to do a damn thing about it.”

CHAPTER 4

“While man is of no brutal species, he cannot be an animal in respect to his mind, and much less in respect to his soul, which is of no species.”

— Francis Barrett, *The Magus*

“Just wait until everyone’s out of the classroom, go in, hand him the essay and say something like ‘I’m sorry I interfered with your class,’ then wait until he dismisses you and slowly walk back out. No sudden moves and say nothing he might interpret as even remotely adversarial, okay?”

Paige nodded. She’d handed her bag to Rayha to hold, so she now clutched the sheets of paper to her chest.

Her essay was a messy, sort of rambling affair but Rayha guessed it would be enough to keep her in class. Nowhere in the process of writing it had Rayha felt even remotely divinely signaled.

The bell rang and it took only a few seconds for other doors in the hallways to fly open under the force of escaping high schoolers. It took almost a minute before the butcher’s door opened as well and a subdued pack of kids walked out with phenomenal self-restraint.

Rayha waited for them to file out, then pushed Paige lightly. “Go.”

She went reluctantly, dragging her sneaker-clad feet as she did.

Even though Rayha tried, she couldn’t hear what Paige said. The butcher was easy to listen in on.

“If it isn’t the new girl, baring paper. Hand it over.” Silence. “Did you do this yourself?”

He paused for what Rayha assumed was a reply; she didn’t dare check around the corner.

“Will I find a copy of these words in this pile here?” Another break. “Then I’ll see you Wednesday, new girl. Don’t interrupt my class again.”

A few seconds later, a paled and highly mousey looking Paige appeared. The wide eyes and hunched shoulders had returned. “Can we go now?”

Rayha nodded. “We can go now. Well done, mouse. You survived.”

When Paige’s lips threatened to curve into a smile, she pulled her lip piercing into her mouth instead. “Where to for lunch?”

“That way.” Rayha handed over Paige’s backpack and inclined her head to the left.

Phoenix Highschool’s cafeteria was a typical one, filled with tables of screaming kids rigorously divided by either race, clique, or sometimes both. The school served food to kids enrolled in the lunch program, but much of it ended up in the trash or on the walls. Today was apparently a good day for the janitorial staff as the walls were clean.

Rayha cast a glance at the plastic trays and realized why: pulled pork sandwich day. It was apparently one of the few meals that was eatable, but Mom would drop dead from a heart attack if Rayha put pork into her mouth. It was a pretty good day to buy lunch.

They filled into line, which gave Rayha ample opportunity to study her might-be sign.

Paige seemed to shrink around loud noises and lots of people. She stayed close too, as if Rayha could shield her from the cacophony by bulk alone.

I’m not that fat, thank you very much. She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t make a fuss.

Today’s lunch options were pizza and lasagna, so the choice was obvious. “Two slices of pizza, please.” She turned to Paige. “Do you want some too?”

Paige shook her head and kept a careful eye on the large cafeteria space. She seemed primed to run. “I’m lactose intolerant. I brought food.”

“Lactose what now?” Rayha arched a brow.

“I’m allergic to dairy—milk and such. Pizza has cheese, which is pretty much the same thing. I’ll get sick.”

Rayha cast her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, mouse. That sucks. No pizza would kill me.”

Paige smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Dad makes pizza, but without cheese for me. I’m fine.”

Rayha didn’t believe that for a second. Who could be okay without gooey cheese on their pizza? “Okay, well, thanks for being cool with me eating pizza then.”

“No problem.” Paige paid for her. “Without you, I’d be kicked out of history class. I’m not sure how my parents would take that.” Not very well, judging by her expression. “They’d probably make a fuss with the principal.”

Rayha nearly choked on her first bite of pizza. “That would be a decidedly bad idea.” She swallowed. “Like, for real. The butcher would make your life hell from that point on. At least when he kicks you out, you’re free. Imagine being in class with him when he hates you.” She shuddered.

Paige shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe if enough parents complain, he’ll get fired?”

“Doubtful. Something’s going on, like, the butcher has something on someone high up on the food chain and he’s using it to keep their balls in a vice.”

“Maybe it’s a woman.”

“Huh?”

“You said balls. Women don’t have them.” A mischievous glint appeared in Paige’s eyes.

“Lady balls then. Whatever. Point is, the butcher is untouchable and we just have to deal with him.” She planted her ass on a low wall and balanced her paper plate on her lap.

Paige sat down next to her, pulled her feet up so she could sit Indian style, and fished a lunchbox from her bag. She bit into her egg sandwich after a moment of obvious hesitation and watched the

goings-on around them as she chewed for far longer than required before she swallowed. Away from the throng of people, Paige had relaxed again.

Rayha noticed a pattern.

The pizza was good. Warm and soggy with grease from the cheese. Mom had taken last night's leftovers and Rayha had gotten out of bed too late to make something, so her stomach was rumbling. She bit into her pizza again. "What brings you to Phoenix anyway?"

Paige tensed. "I, um, don't want to talk about it." She blushed, which made Rayha think that either it had been something Paige had done or something shameful her folks had done.

"Okay, sorry. Can I ask if it sucked leaving your old place?"

Paige swallowed a new bite and put the sandwich back into the lunchbox. She didn't look at Rayha. "I miss the house and my room. The ocean too. It's a different kind of warm here, which I don't like much, but it's also a fresh start and that's good."

She didn't sound very convincing. *More like terrified, actually.* It made Paige a lot more interesting, at least in terms of that divine sign she was still on the hunt for. "Well, I'd be lying if I said that made a lot of sense."

Paige bit into her lip again, around the piercing, and chewed a few seconds. "Sorry. That's pretty much all I can say, okay?"

"Ominous but acceptable." She nodded. *God knows there is enough I ain't ever telling you!* Besides, they shared at least one class, so there was lots more time to get Paige to trust her enough to open up.

The bell rang before Rayha could think of something else to say.

She regretted that it ended their conversation. She also hadn't even started on her second slice of pizza. "What's your next class?"

Following Paige's example, Rayha got up.

"Um..." Paige checked a sheet of paper. "Biology in B1."

"B-hall, first room," Rayha said. "I'll walk you."

Paige smiled, put her lunchbox in her bag, and pulled that off the

wall. "Thank you."

"No problem." Rayha finished off the first slice as they walked, then turned her thoughts to the issue of eating the second slice now or saving it for later.

* * *

Dale rolled splits with a skill and speed Rayha hadn't seen in anyone else. Even with Dale's skills, he took far too long for her liking. She drummed her fingers on her thigh as she sat across from him on the floor of the trailer with the supplies between them.

"You're hovering." He didn't look up at her, just added the dried herbs to the tobacco with due diligence.

"Sorry, I'm just very ready for a smoke." She forced herself to lie down on her back and give him space.

"You got stuck with the new girl, right?"

She shrugged. "I volunteered, and she's nice enough. Paige."

"Paige, right." He carefully rolled the four stuck-together rolling papers and mash into a split; she heard the paper crinkle by her ear. "It was touch and go for a minute there."

"I guess."

"He could have kicked you out, you know. I was ready to defend your honor in case that happened."

She tilted her head to glance at him. "What happened to running the other way if shit ever hit the fan?"

"Hm. True. Well, it's good we'll never have to find out." He grinned and rolled the split tighter. "I don't get why you sacrificed your lunchtime for her, though."

That reminded her. She sat up and pulled her bag over. "She bought me lunch, no

sacrifice made. The essay had to be handed in before lunch, remember? I just skipped math. Do we have homework?"

"Yeah. I'll look it up." He paused. "What are you doing?"

Rayha pulled the now-cold and smushed pizza slice from between a few sheets of taped-together pieces of paper stolen from the school printer. “I never got around to eating it.” She pulled the slice in two and held out half.

Dale grinned. “Pizza! Awesome, I like her better already.”

“I bet.” Rayha bit into her half of the slice and hummed while she eyed the split. “Almost ready?”

Dale balanced the slice on his knee and nodded. “Ready to light up.”

“Awesome.” She felt more relaxed already.

He had to take care with the loose filling but before long the joint looked to be lit and stay lit. Dale inhaled and hummed. “Good shit.”

She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers. “Stop hogging.”

He took another drag, then handed it over. He blew out the smoke, took a bite and lay down, one arm behind his head, the other holding the pizza slice by the crust.

Rayha inhaled deeply and coughed as the smoke irritated her throat and lungs. She held the burning split away from her body as she gasped for air, then coughed again.

Dale grinned. “How can you still suck at this?”

“Dunno. It’s a skill.” Her voice was raspy. She tried again, shallower this time. The sharp smoke still tickled, but she held it in.

“Better?” Dale took another bite.

Rayha nodded and let the smoke escape through her nostrils. “Much.” She held the cigarette out to him.

He slid his arm out from under his head and took it. After a drag, he released the smoke in three perfect circles.

Rayha settled on her back, using Dale’s belly as a pillow. She chewed her pizza and enjoyed the first tendrils of her high.

The late afternoon daylight streamed into the cracked windows and cast colorful shadows over the already colorful walls. She turned her head to watch the wall that represented the life of Joan of Arc.

Dale was a good graffiti artist and his rendition of her story was a

very well put-together collage that stretched from her childhood in a small village to the appearance of Michael to the subsequent journey to the king of France, her battle victories and eventually her death on the stake.

Rayha diverted her gaze from that last scene. Every time she saw it, she could feel the flames lapping up her clothes and burn away her skin. The scent of burning flesh filled her nostrils. She took a bite and inhaled the scent of tomato sauce and cheese instead.

“Rayha?”

She hummed in acknowledgement and turned her head to check on him.

“Are you okay?”

Rayha frowned. “Fine. Why?”

His shrug traversed through her body. “Dunno. The dream, I guess? And then finding out about Harut?”

“Do we have to talk about this?” She held out her hand for the split.

Dale placed it in between her fingers. “I guess we don’t, but, you know, I’m your friend.”

She inhaled the acrid smoke, then again before she handed the joint back. “I’m okay.”

He hummed, then fell silent again. He took another drag, held it, and let it out. Again, three perfect circles, almost identical in size, drifted up into the sweltering heat trapped under the roof of the stripped trailer. They dispersed before they hit the slate.

Rayha watched them.

“Um. Don’t take this the wrong way, but maybe it’s time you saw a shrink? Or a doctor?”

Rayha was secretly impressed he had the balls to propose the unspeakable. “If you don’t want to walk funny the rest of today, you’ll want to shut up.”

He chuckled, but only two times; her head bobbed up and down with them. “Rayha...I seriously don’t want to piss you off, but you

can't deny this isn't exactly normal."

The strong weed Dale's cousin had provided took the edge off her headache and worries. She felt slightly floaty and hard to anger, but the subject was triggering. "You know what'll happen if I talk to a shrink."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Other people have dreams, though. Weird dreams."

If only it were that easy. "They don't feel like dreams. More like memories. And you know just as well as I do that they happened to someone, at least." Rayha sighed. "I know you're worried, okay? I get it and I guess I'm grateful about it too. I just can't go to a doctor. They'll either say I'm nuts and lock me up or they tell me I have some sort of brain tumor and then I'll die because we can't afford to get it fixed. I'd rather not know and drop dead one day."

Dale held her gaze, then nodded slowly; he knew what it was like to be trailer trash even more than her. "I get it, but I don't like it."

Rayha chuckled and waggled her fingers for the split. "Me either."

He handed the cigarette over. "They're happening more frequently, aren't they?"

She ran her tongue along her teeth, then clacked it. "Yeah, pretty much." She smoked in the hope of soothing the nerves that made her ribcage feel too tight to keep her insides contained.

"And you still feel that presence?"

She nodded. "Felt it in class today."

He paused at that. "Rayha? I'm thinking that if you ever see an angel, you should let me know."

"I'm not going to become the next Joan of Arc, Dale. I'm a fat immigrant girl who drinks too much, lives in a trashy trailer, and gets winded after running twenty feet. I'm not the stuff saints are made of."

"You never know."

"And then what, huh?" She tilted her head to stare at him, unable to grasp why he seemed so eager for his theory to become reality.

"What if some angels is going to descend from heaven like they did

for Margret and Joan and all the others? Then what?”

He met and held her gaze. “Then you can get out of here, and if you get out of here, maybe I can get out of here too. Away from this... this shithole.” He pressed his black-painted lips together like he was going to cry.

Oh shit. She deflated and rubbed his arm. “I’m sorry Dale, but that’s not going to happen.

We’ll get out of here but not...not riding the wings of an angel or some shit.”

He stared at her, then pushed the last of the crust into his mouth. “We’ll see what happens.” He tilted his head away.

Damn, he’s upset. Now what? Then she realized he hadn’t turned his head away from her but toward the image of the virgin Mary. Her heart clenched in sympathy and she reached above her head to find his hand.

He took it and squeezed, but his gaze didn’t return to her. His thoughts were probably with his mom—they usually were when he looked at Mary.

Rayha starred at the opposing wall, where Joan’s troops stormed Orléans in crudely sprayed chaos. *Does he have a point?* All of these people had seen and heard angels. She just had weird dreams and maybe, sometimes, something watched her. *No, this is all Dale imagining things.* It was too bad, really, because getting out of this hell-hole sounded good.

She turned her head to check on her friend. He was still staring at the virgin Mary. “You’re quiet.”

He shrugged. “I’m high. There is a difference.” His head slowly rolled toward her. His eyes were more moist and slightly red-rimmed under the layers of mascara, as if he was holding back tears.

“Technically,” Rayha squeezed his hand. “...that’s not a difference but a consequence.”

He frowned. “Stop making me think.” The hint of a smile pulled at the corner of his lips.

“Sorry if I said something stupid.”

She rolled the back of her head over his belly. “You didn’t. It’s just...that stuff isn’t real. I want to get out of here as much as you do, but angels? Demons? That stuff’s just...Bible talk. Qur’an talk.”

He shrugged. “The people in your dreams believed it and they did great things.”

“I know, I’m just trying to say I’m not that great, okay? I’m just me, and you and I are not that special.” It was the sad but unavoidable truth. No use in beating about the bush about it.

Dale pulled his hand free and lay it on her forehead.

Because it soothed her headache, she let him.

“I really think that maybe you should talk to someone. Someone who is not me. Have you told your mom yet?”

Rayha groaned and pulled his hand down to cover her eyes. “No.” She drew the word out. “I think she knows something’s up, I mean, duh. It’s a small trailer and I pretty much wake up screaming every night now, but I just sort of...don’t know how to tell her. I mean, what am I gonna say? ‘Mom, since I turned thirteen, I’ve been having dreams of heroic people in history who sacrifice their life in the service of God? Unless I drink myself into a stupor, I don’t get any sleep at all?’” She shook her head. “Nah, I don’t know exactly how that’s going to go over, but it won’t be good.”

Dale stroked her hair.

Again, she let him, but she knew she would have to put the brakes on soon. He would get all kinds of weird ideas if she didn’t, like that she was into him.

“Maybe write her a letter or something? That’s what you do when you come out, right?”

That had Rayha groan even louder. “Oh, fuck off. For real.” She slapped him on the leg.

“Well,” he said sagely. “Whatever you do, I suggest doing it in one big info dump. Rip the bandage clean off, you know?”

She snorted. “Yeah right. Just drop the subject, okay? My brain is

still trying to murder me and I need to do math homework because I had to be all chivalrous to a mouse girl today. I seriously don't need this."

Dale patted her head. "Okay, weirdo." He finished the blunt and pressed it out on the floorboards. "Get up. I'll check what Kipper assigned."

Rayha sat. Her vision swam and lethargy pulled at her limbs. "Woah."

Dale grinned. "Good stuff, right?"

"Bloody hell." She pressed her gloved hand against her forehead. The scent of weeks of sweat had soaked into the wool and she pulled her hand away again in disgust. Marijuana always made her sensitive to smells.

"Lightweight." Dale grinned.

"Pothead." Rayha carefully looked up to judge the state of her vertigo. It had mostly settled. She took in Dale, who had pushed up onto his elbows on the dirty floor. "Stop grinning and tell me what I need to do." She pushed at his hip and he rolled over to fetch his bag.

"You're right," he said. "Definitely not hero material. You're mean."

"Oh don't even! And hurry up, it's time to go. Mom will be home soon and you—"

"Don't say it." With a groan, he pulled his scheduler from his bag.

"Sorry. Still that bad?" Rayha pulled her Doc Martins clad feet under her. Her befuddled mind made her feel like she was walking on clouds, which was the one thing pot had over alcohol.

"Pretty much. The asshole is drunk all the time now and Kimberley seems to be a keeper." He opened the notebook and thumbed through to this week.

"Can't you call the cops on him ag—" She pulled her backpack from the floor. The Diskman she'd throw on top of it crashed to the floor, bounced, then opened. The CD stayed locked in, thankfully. "Fucking hell!" She retrieved the device and clicked the lid shut

before turning it on.

Dead silence fell.

Dale watched with equally bated breath as she waited for the tech to spool up.

Rayha swallowed down her nerves. If she'd broken it, there wouldn't be a new one. Her mom couldn't spring that kind of cash.

The raging guitars underlying Nirvana's "Negative Creep" blasted hollowly from the headset as the song started.

Relief flooded her system and Rayha exhaled audibly to let out the pressure that had been building up inside of her.

"Lucky." Dale ran his hands through his black hair, then smoothed it forward again, over his eye.

She hummed. After hitting the "stop" button, she turned the Diskman over to check for damage. There wasn't any, as far as she could tell. Maybe a few more scratches, but the thing was a couple of years old and every bit of its surface was scratched.

Dale exhaled deeply. "Anyway, page seventeen through twenty-four, assignments eight through twelve." He closed the book and got up too.

Rayha nodded, still preoccupied with the averted disaster. "Yeah, okay. Cool." *Half way done. Glad I worked while Paige wrote her stupid essay.* She finally looked up to see Dale putting on his coat. "Good luck tonight."

He shrugged. "I'll be fine. You know me, I'm lightning on my feet." He feigned to the side, as if avoiding an imaginary blow.

"Not funny."

Dale closed his bag and threw it over his shoulder. "Little funny."

"Whatever, dude. Whatever." She rolled her eyes and made sure she had everything before putting her headphones on. "See you tomorrow."

When she headed toward the door, Dale stepped forward. "Wait."

"Hm?" She stopped and pushed her headphones back down around her neck.

“Here.” He pulled a bottle of branded whiskey out of his bag and held it out to her.

She hesitated. “You sure?”

He nodded. “Stephole won’t miss it.” He wiggled the bottle. “I know the nights are bad.”

They were. They were a fucking nightmare—literally—but his stepdad would definitely notice a bottle missing from his stash. She hesitated, but he wiggled the bottle again.

“Take it.”

She did. “Thanks. Seriously.”

When he smiled, he looked even younger than his fifteen years. “All good.”

She didn’t like the look in his eyes, a mixture of “you’re my new messiah” and “I really want you to be my girlfriend,” but stuffed the bottle into her bag, regardless. “See you tomorrow.”

He didn’t object to her leaving this time, but she felt his eyes on her all the way home.

CHAPTER 5

“Man being essentially created after the image of God, after that, he rashly presumed to generate the image of God out of himself; not, indeed, by a certain monster, but by something which was shadowly like himself.”

— *Francis Barrett, The Magus*

Paige chewed the little ring through her lip absentmindedly as she stared out the window at the barn. It had become hard to make out in the twilight, but that didn't really matter; she had already stared at it for an hour without really seeing it, a while more couldn't hurt.

The ball of worry in her gut twisted. She hadn't been able to eat much of her dinner, and the few bites she'd managed to get down kept threatening to come back up whenever she thought of today.

High school was a horrendous place of torture. She'd known that, but it had been

reconfirmed by the behavior of the teacher Rayha had called “the butcher” and the impossible obstacles of social interaction.

She shifted in the windowsill and groaned when a stab of pain traversed up her tailbone.

Maybe it was time to get up. Paige dangled her feet in front of the ticking radiator, then slid off and stretched out.

The lights flickered. Dad had said he would have an electrician over soon, but he'd said that from day one but eight miserable days later, the issue still hadn't been resolved. At least the boiler had been installed on Friday and cold showers had become a thing of the past.

She hated this house. Everything was old, badly maintained, and it still felt entirely foreign. Even her old things felt out of place in her new room. The space itself was also smaller; the low, sloped ceiling made her feel claustrophobic. Unlike in her old room, she couldn't avoid looking at her bed, which was probably the worst part about the

move. She'd pushed it against the wall, lengthwise, and into a corner, but it still took up a quarter of the room.

Maybe I should put curtains up around it. She could probably calculate the angle she'd need to cut the fabric in so she could compensate for the sloped ceiling—at least when they were drawn. *Maybe until then I can go through the hassle of taking the restraints off in the morning.* It might make her former princess bed feel a little more inviting again. The thought

left her exhausted before she'd done any work, so she resolved to just avoid looking in that direction too much.

Truly, though, she had more pressing issues, most pressing of all: how was she going to make it through school? Even if she didn't have history class tomorrow, there would be another class, other people. The only one who'd shown her any kindness was Rayha, a girl whom her parents would hate on principle and who was, by all definitions of the word, crude.

How could Paige befriend a girl like that when befriending anyone meant— *No, don't finish that sentence.*

The ball of worry in her gut worsened. She was nauseous again.

"Paige?" Mom's voice, from downstairs.

Paige jumped. She realized she still stood by the window, frozen with thought and indecision.

"Paige?"

She looked up at the door and willed her feet forward. She pushed the handle down with a trembling hand and pulled. "Yes?"

"Dad says it's time to get ready for bed."

The words landed like a slap to her cheek and the little hairs on the back of her neck rose.

Bedtime. Danger time. "I-I'll get ready."

"Ten minutes."

"Got it." She closed the door and pressed her forehead against the old wood to get a grip on the trembling that had gripped her body. Her heart beat out of control at just the thought of—

Paige stopped the thought from forming. Again.

She took a deep breath and straightened. On autopilot, she brushed her teeth as she peed, then combed her hair, and slipped into her pajamas. Paige sat down in her reading chair with her legs pulled up as she waited for the inevitable. Rocking slightly, she watched the door.

She heard him coming up the stairs, followed his footsteps down the hall, and held her breath. There was a knock on the door. She jumped, even though she had known it was coming. “Yes?” Unwilling to get under the covers until she really had to, Paige stood and waited in the middle of her room.

Dad hadn’t changed out of his work-clothes; he was still in dress pants and a white shirt.

He’d taken his tie and jacket off though. His gaze ran down her body.

She shivered.

“Socks and gloves?”

“Sorry.” She pulled them from her nightstand and pulled them on—soccer socks that went all the way up over her calves and runner’s gloves made out of a weird synthetic material that never kept her hands warm.

Dad waited impatiently, watching her every step of the way.

She pulled the blankets up while everything in her told her to run and laid down on her back before she scooted all the way to the bottom of the bed.

As always, he restrained her legs first, then pulled the blankets over her feet. They both knew they wouldn’t stay there, but it was part of their routine. Hopefully her socks would keep her feet warm.

She stretched her arms out above her head and stared up at the ceiling.

He leaned over her to secure the wrist closest to the wall first.

“Too tight,” she said softly.

“Hm.” He loosened the padded belt straps one hole.

“Better, thank you.” She moved her wrist to get more comfortable, but it didn’t really help. The restraints were supposed to be tight, after all.

Dad secured her other wrist too. “Good?”

She nodded, because if she opened her mouth, she would scream.

It was all supposed to be routine now, wasn’t it, after two years? It had never gotten routine. Paige feared it never would.

At the start of this bedtime ritual from hell Dad had asked her “if she was comfortable”

before leaving. The answer to that had been so obviously negative that he’d soon shifted to

“I’ll see you in the morning,” which had been worse. They were currently in the process of figuring out something better, so she waited for him to say his parting words.

The lights were turned off and the door clicked shut.

Paige turned her head and peered into the darkness. Tears welled up again and this time she let them. They rolled down her cheeks and onto the pillow, leaving itchy tracks she couldn’t scratch at. No parting words were probably the best words. It still hurt. “Good night,” she whispered. She swallowed down her sorrow and began the long, anxious wait for dawn. Her struggle to stay awake was made easy by her tumbling thoughts. They landed on Rayha most of the time as the only point of hope for tomorrow, which was another thing that terrified her, because there was no way to predict if Rayha would be willing to spend time with her again.

* * *

“Mom?” Rayha dropped her backpack onto the kitchen table.

No reply.

“Mom?” Still no response, so Mom was probably still on her way home; there was very little space to hide in a trailer. *Awesome!* Not only was she home on time, she rarely had the place to herself. She

was definitely going to make the most of it.

Eager to settle in, Rayha checked the cupboards of their kitchenette for a treat. She found a battered packet of oatmeal creme pies, which Mom thought were somehow more healthy than, say, rainbow cookies because they had oatmeal.

It would do.

She pulled the packet open and picked a sticky chunk out with her fingers. For a second, she contemplated if maybe a sugar high was not the best way to go about murdering her headache, but she popped the chunk into her mouth anyway. *Fuck it.*

Rayha took the cookies into her bedroom and pulled the door shut behind her.

It was bloody hot outside, but it was way worse inside. Why Mom didn't move out of the damn Arizona desert was beyond her. Well, that wasn't entirely true, Dad had brought her to a house in the center of Phoenix and the trailer park was as close to that house as Mom could afford to be. Even fourteen years after his death, she was obviously reluctant to leave the area. Besides, where were they going to go? To Pakistan where they would live with a family who had cut off all contact because she'd ran away with an American man?

Nah. Rayha hoisted the window up, then dropped down on her blood red sheets. *I'm stuck here.* She stared up at the poster of Marilyn Manson at his most androgynous—which was a really sexy look. *Maybe it's not such a bad thing.* Dad had left memories here. It was the closest to him Rayha was ever going to get, because Mom had been forced to bury an empty coffin.

She tipped the cookie package up to her lips and let the sticky crumbs fall into her mouth—and onto her sheets. "Shit." She rolled over to start to clean them up when the trailer door opened and closed. *Double shit.*

"Rayhana!"

Her mother's cheerful had Rayha's groan. *How does she know I'm home?* Then she realized she'd left her backpack on the table. *Triple*

shit. She dropped her forehead onto the bedding. “In here!”

Mom pulled the door open. She was halfway done unpinning her hijab so it hung loose around her shoulders and chin. As soon as she spotted Rayha, she smiled and opened her arms for a hug.

“Mom, no.” Rayha rolled her eyes emphatically as she gathered crumbs, then ate them.

She dropped her arms. Mom continued to smile, but some of her eagerness faded from her eyes.

Rayha instantly felt bad, but not bad enough to take back her reprimand.

“Kaisi hain? Tumhara din kaisa guzra?”

Whatever guilt had lingered instantly evaporated in a rush of annoyance. “Mom! English!

We're not in Pakistan, okay?” Rayha glared at her as she crumpled the empty cookie wrapper and tossed it into the bin under her desk, two feet from the bed. Everything was so damn cramped in here! Especially her head felt two sizes too small for her brain.

When no reply came, Rayha looked back up.

Mom still stood in the doorway. She wore the look she always got when she was

reminded of Dad: thin lips, moist eyes and nostrils that flared with every slow breath.

Rayha’s insides cycled to guilt again. This time it remained at the forefront of her emotional wheel of misfortune so she got up. “Sorry.”

When she opened her arms, Mom stepped into her embrace and held her. “I am sorry too, Rayhana. I know. I know you are American girl. Your father’s girl.” Mom patted the back of her head.

Not even the cleaning supplies she used all day could dampen the scent of food on Mom’s skin. She smelled intensely like biryani, nihari, keema, and naans. The scent always hung in the trailer, but it was never as strong as in her mother’s arms. It transported her back to when she was still a kid and it was totally okay to hang out with Mom all day and help her cook, a time before the dreams had forced Rayha

to distance herself from her mother out of shame and the fear of rejection.

She forced herself to remain stiff in the embrace, but inhaled deeply. “It’s okay.” She pulled back, but slowly so as not to make Mom feel rejected again. As much as they butted heads, Mom took being a mom very seriously. Rayha hated almost everything about her life, but she didn’t hate her, even if Mom annoyed her to no end. “I um...I need to do homework.

For school.”

Mom cupped her cheeks. “School is good. Come sit in kitchen? I make you something for food?” She imitated eating by binging her fingers to her mouth and tapping her lips.

It was such a “Mom-gesture” that Rayha’s desire for privacy dissolved. “Yeah, okay. But just for the homework, I have other stuff to do, ‘kay?”

“Okay, okay, no problem!” Mom took her hand and pulled her out. “Sit, sit, I make you shikanjabeen and naan, yes?”

Rayha sat and looked up at her mom as she shuffled through the trailer, gathering ingredients without waiting for Rayha’s answer. Suddenly, she was really aware of the fact that day in, day out, Mom made sure they had enough money to eat and for Rayha to go to school. Rayha really needed to stop being such a bitch to her. If only Mom didn’t make her want to pull her hair out with everything she said or did. *No, not always.* She allowed herself to smile. Right now, she felt a little comforted by Mom’s presence. With everything that was going on, Allah knew she needed it.

“Thanks Mom,” she said softly. *I’m sorry for being such a fuckup.* She swallowed and pulled her bag toward her. Rayha couldn’t change that she was messed up, but at least she could do what remained of her math homework and pass.

It wasn’t much, but it would have to do.

* * *

The metal edges of her full plate armor dug into her armpits. They rattled past the chainmail underneath as she shifted in the saddle. Her heart thumped inside her chest like a drum. She inhaled deeply and filled her lungs with moist air.

The walls of Orléans stood tall in the distance. Nothing appeared to move; the English soldiers had dug themselves in deep. Fog rolled over the plain from the Loire, just thick enough to give the scene a ghostly feel. Across it, the French inhabitants of the city embarked on boats and barges.

“It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?”

She turned her head to the side.

Gilles de Rais appeared next to her on his mount. His gaze appeared to linger on the city, not the militia.

“I have been inside her and she is naught but a shell. The English dogs took all they needed and left none for the French.”

He shrugged. Gilles had taken off his helmet; sweat caused his hair to stick to his scalp.

“That is how war is, Jeanne. Didn’t God tell you that?”

Anger flared inside of her chest and pushed through her veins. She lay her hand on the pommel of her sword. “Do not mock our Lord, de Rais. It is He who guides my hand and it is He who shall lead us today, on the sixth of May, fourteen twenty-nine of our Lord, to a victory unlike any in the history of France!”

Gilles chuckled. It was a dry, derisive sound that only served to rile her anger more.

Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the hilt even tighter.

“You are an interesting child, Jeanne d’Arc, but you are that, a child. Our army consists of strong men and farmers in equal parts, thanks to your intervention. What do they know of battle strategy? What do they know of war?” He slowly turned his head to look at her. “What do you?”

She set her jaw. “I know all I need to, *Sir*. I know that Saint

Michael's blade and mine are one. I know that the Lord's angels are on our side, and that we will conquer Orléans by their decree." She tilted her chin up. "We stood strong against the English at Le Loup, did we not?"

Did we not retake the bastille with a hundred and forty Englishmen killed and forty taken to ransom?"

He smirked. "It was Dunois, who led that charge, child, not you."

"Perhaps, but he employed a strategy we decided on together, he as the Bastard of Orléans, I as the chosen one of God." She glanced upward and crossed her heavily plated chest in reverent wonder.

Gilles appeared less impressed. "Pray He is not put off by your boasting, Jeanne. We could use His guiding hand today."

She let go of her sword and took the reins instead. "Then gather the men. We attack the Boulevart head on!"

Her horse, seemingly sensing her urgency, shook his head and whinnied.

Gilles stared at her, his lips slightly ajar. "You joke, I hope?"

"You wanted to see the hand of God at work, did you not? Then you shall see her. Gather the men, we charge!" Righteous fire filled her entire being. "You have stopped my attack for many days now, you and Dunois both. It is time to do what I came to do. We charge in one hour, so ready your men."

He still did not move. "Jeanne, barely half of your precious militia has crossed the river.

They won't be here on time. The men are tired, with just a single day of rest between attacks.

You wish to strike at the heart of the English with an ill-prepared army?"

"I do! We are not 'ill-prepared,' Sir de Rais, we are the army of God! Do you not have faith?"

He hesitated, but then inclined his head. "I would never presume to question the Lord."

Or the king of France, who sent me here, but you would never

admit that, would you? “Then ready the men. We attack, de Rais. We charge the English!”

And they did charge. Like hungry wolves, they descended on the bulwark.

The English cannons roared from the walls, but they charged.

Fifteen hundred strong at least, they raced forward on steed and foot, chopping down resistance when it came.

The French militia took up the call and hurried to join their better-armed and better trained brethren.

The soldiers kept her out of the worst of the fray, even as she tried to approach it.

“Let me closer!” She held her sword high. Her bold blue-and-gold banner waved above her head from the pole secured in the flag stand behind her saddle. “Let me administer the Lord’s justice!”

But they did not let her. Someone had obviously given clear orders to make sure her only purpose was to act as a tool of intimidation. She watched in dismay as the dead piled high—on both sides of the war this time. Cries arose from the flanks as the cannons fired from the walls of the Augustine. Every impact sent sprays of dirt, blood, and dismembered body parts into the sky.

She pushed forward, eager to reach the din of the fighting. She needed to reach the walls, she was useless here. “Let me pass!” She pushed her steed forward, but neither infantry nor mounted combatants budged.

New cries arose.

She strained to hear them over the shouting, the clashing of swords and polearms, and the blasting cannons.

“They come! They come from Saint Privé! The English march!” The cry was picked up by more men and more men.

“Get her away!” She identified the voice but couldn’t find the man whom it belonged to in the thick of battle. Gilles de Rais’s command was honored instantly, however.

A young man, younger than her even, she assumed, with a smear

of red over his eye grabbed the reins of her skittish horse and yanked.

The well-trained steed followed that lead instead of the kicks to his flank she provided.

“No! Do not take me away! The battle is not lost, it can be won! Believe in the decree of our Lord!”

The young man looked up at her with soft brown eyes that spoke tales of horror, then he cast his gaze down and pulled. The entire French army scrambled to retreat. It swept her along like a wave, away from the walls, away from her victory.

The cannons seemed to cheer the victory of the Englishmen instead.

In agony, she threw her hands up to the sky. “Saint Michael! Come to me like you do! Speak of the Lord’s words! This is not what you intended for me, is it? This retreat is not your will!”

“No, it is not.” The young boy stopped and looked up again. His eyes had turned into the purest blue, radiating the light of the Lord. “Take your banner, Jeanne. Take it and state your decree. I will protect you from harm, if you have no fear in your heart.”

A sob of relief and gratitude tore from her throat. She sheathed her blade. “I have no fear in my heart, just Gods will.”

“Then take you banner. Hold it proudly above your head and claim the Lord’s victory.” The ethereal gaze lingered on her for a few seconds more, then dimmed.

The boy shook himself out and looked around. He jumped when he realized he was now near the back of the retreating force.

“Help me down, boy. Help me down or I swear the Lord will strike you dead.” She had no hesitation He—or Saint Michael—would.

The boy didn’t doubt either; he hurried to undo the stirrup on one side, then knelt down in the muddy earth.

She used his body as a step before she grabbed the pole of her banner. The pattern of the dual fleurs-de-lis and a crowned sword inspired even greater courage in her. The king of all France had

granted her this coat of arms. It was a holy symbol and it was hers alone. She pushed the beam and banner up high as she started her march back toward the wall.

Saint Michael held his promise. Not one bullet struck her. Not once did the cannonballs come close. She marched, and behind her, the army took notice.

The English too, noticed. They had streamed out of the bulwark with obvious eagerness to secure their victory, but now came face-to-face with a vessel of the Lord.

She felt the holy light radiate from her and she lowered the banner just enough so she was able to thrust it into the air once more. “In the name of God!”

The battle cry had wings of its own. It rose over the noise of the two armies, over the explosions, and over the clinging of armor. They inspired fury in the hearts of the French and terror in the Englishmen. They faltered, her army did not. As one, the French turned on their heel.

“Leave the Boulevard be, Jeanne! The bastille of the Augustine! Take the bastille!” It was Gilles de Rais again. He had a different horse under him, and blood coated his armor, but he was alive.

She nodded and pointed the banner. “To the bastille!”

The French cried out their agreement as if they were of one throat, and one mind—her mind.

Her head buzzed with a heady thrill as the troops clashed once more.

Now the English were exposed and they were caught off-guard. They fell under spears and swords, under axes and bashes with strong, French shields.

“Thank you, Saint Michael, thank you Lord!” Tears streamed down her cheeks as she held the banner high and followed the army. “Praise the Lord!”

And the French did, with every drop of English blood they spilled.

CHAPTER 6

“Jesus said, ‘Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you. For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest.’”

— The Gospel of Thomas

Paige was in her chemistry class, which pleased Rayha. Most girls in their school were horribly vicious and fake, which ruled them out for serious interaction. Spending time with Paige yesterday hadn't sucked as much as Rayha had assumed it would. She was a little off somehow, but Rayha couldn't judge anyone on that; she'd spent her night in Joan of Arc's plate mail boots.

“Morning.” She dumped her backpack on the table next to Paige's books.

Paige jumped and her gaze darted up. Her shoulders dropped as soon as she seemed to recognized Rayha. “Oh. Hi.” She smiled, which still did that thing to her face that changed her it from mousey to pretty.

“So, back for more, hm?” Rayha straddled the stool and checked on the teacher, who was still busy chatting with some of the other kids.

“More?”

“Punishment. School?” Rayha took her in. “After yesterday's BS with the butcher, I half expected you to bail.”

Paige deflated. “I wanted to.” She looked down and played with the hem of her blue jeans skirt. “Maybe being homeschooled wasn't so bad after all.”

“Yeah, maybe not.” Rayha reached out and ran her hand along Paige's back as a sign of comfort. *Jesus!* Paige was thin enough that Rayha could feel the bump of each rib as she ran her palm down. Rayha was pretty sure she had ribs herself, but it had been a while

she'd been able to feel any of them except for the ones where her ribcage ended. She chuckled, but she wasn't at all amused, more like shocked. "Don't they feed you at home?"

Paige tensed under the touch. "I um...I don't eat much." She glanced at Rayha and bit her lip. There was a question in her eyes, but Rayha couldn't read her well enough to figure out which.

Rayha rubbed up and down her back once more, then casually withdrew her hand. "You should come to my place for dinner one day. No one can resist mom's curry."

After a moment, Paige relaxed and she gave Rayha another smile. "I might."

Their gazes held and a small, unfamiliar flutter worked its way upward from the pit of Rayha's stomach until it teased along the inside of her chest. She cleared her throat.

Paige shifted. "It's um, it's nice to be out of the house."

The words tore Rayha's attention away from the odd sensation and back to Paige. It took a few seconds for the meaning of the words to register. "That bad with the parentals?"

Paige swallowed and gave a half-hearted shrug.

"It's okay, we all have our issues."

"Issues, right." Paige huffed and looked up at the teacher.

Okay, that's a clear enough sign to back off. She changed the subject. "No essays for chemistry, so you'll be okay today."

Paige nodded. "Good." She glanced at Rayha as she continued to pluck at the fabric. "I didn't tell my parents about the butcher."

"Smart. I swear, it wouldn't make it better." Rayha fished her books out of her bag. Mr. Joyce had wrapped up the conversation with James, which could only mean he was about to start his lecture.

"I think you're probably right. We just get through, right?"

Her little lopsided smile brought back the wiggle inside Rayha's chest, which was both unexpected and intriguing. "Uh, yeah. I guess. High school ends eventually, right? Or you kill yourself." She chuckled.

Paige jumped as if slapped. She stared at Rayha with wide eyes and her hand flew to the glove around her left wrist. A deep blush settled on her cheek in seconds.

Oh. Shit. Rayha's chuckle froze in her throat. "Sorry, didn't mean to—"

Paige looked down at her wrists and fumbled with both gloves now, getting them to stretch along her thin arms as much as she could. She shook her head vigorously. "I-It's okay.

It's—"

"All right, class. Class! We're getting started. If you could all open your books to page sixty-four, please? We'll continue our conversation on atomic structure."

Rayha didn't want to focus on atomic structure, she wanted to make sure Paige was okay, but Paige stared pointedly at Mr. Joyce and chewed her lip as if her life depended on it. Her leg bounced up and down nervously, again and again.

Smooth, Kincaid. Very fucking smooth. Let's try to avoid dredging up any more painful memories today. With a sigh, she focused on Mr. Joyce and his passionate declaration of love for all things too small to see with the naked eye, which she couldn't give two shits about.

* * *

As she stood in line for today's lasagna, an apple and a carton of milk, Rayha watched Paige enter the cafeteria.

She blended into the crowd with remarkable skill; nothing about her stood out and she seemed to stick to the walls deliberately on her way to the open door. No one talked to her, no one even seemed to register her before she disappeared out into the schoolyard—which was probably how Paige liked it.

Rayha noticed her, though, as easily as if she'd been tracked by a search light. As soon as she had her food, Rayha weaved her way through the crowd and into the scalding hot Arizona sunlight to find

her and say sorry for being a moron who stuck her foot in it.

Paige hadn't talked to her all throughout the class, and they weren't in the same biology class, so as soon as Paige had scurried out of the chemistry lab, Rayha had lost sight of her.

It took Rayha a while to spot her, but it shouldn't have.

Paige had returned to the low wall where they'd sat yesterday. She'd drawn her legs up and was reading a book splayed out on her lap. Not a textbook, a reading book. Her lunchbox sat beside her, opened and full.

"Hey."

Paige looked up, once more startling, but not so badly as during chem class. "Hey." She blushed.

"How are you?" She sat but kept Paige's lunchbox between them as a buffer for Paige's comfort—and maybe also her own.

"Okay." Paige worried her piercing between her teeth.

"That's good." She took a deep breath. "Um, sorry about before. I didn't mean to dredge shit up."

Paige nodded. She reached out for a sandwich and took a small bite. She chewed slowly as she stared down at the pages of her book and swallowed. "Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah, sure." Rayha slid her gaze to her food and poked her lasagna with her fork.

Paige hesitated.

Rayha felt her gaze on her, so she took a bite and chewed, trying to appear casual.

After a few seconds, Paige put her sandwich back in the lunchbox and rolled the fishnet down her left wrist. She hesitated another few seconds, then reached across the divide and Rayha the inside of it.

A thick, still pink scar ran along the length of her wrist, cutting through even older, shallower marks. A band of agitated, chafed skin encircled her arm, worsening where the swell of her thumb started.

Rayha stared, then reached out to take Paige's thin wrist between her fingertips. She put down her fork so she could traced the scar, but

didn't dare to touch the angry red skin. *Jesus.*

Paige's arm jerked as if she was fighting herself not to pull away. Her cheeks flushed again. She bit into her lip around the ring until Rayha feared she would draw blood.

"You really tried to kill yourself?" She glanced up, but didn't linger; the scar pulled her gaze back.

"Yeah. Two years ago." Paige's voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper. "Dad found me and called 911. They took me to the hospital and, well, I made it."

"Hm." Rayha met her gaze and held it. She didn't want to ask the question, but something in Paige's tone forced her. "Did you want to make it?"

Paige tensed. Tears welled up, but she contained them. She pulled her arm back and covered the scar up with her glove. "No." Paige couldn't manage more than a whisper, but she shook her head for emphasis.

"That's really sad." Rayha's gaze fell to the now-covered wrist, then slid to the other as well. "Do you still want to die?"

Again, Paige seemed to hesitate. "I still want it all to stop, but I...I can't. I'm trapped." Her tone was hollow.

"Trapped?"

Paige nodded and sniffed. "Never mind." She unfolded her legs and let them dangle along the wall, looking ready to bolt. Her hands gripped the stone of the wall tightly enough for the blood to drain from her knuckles. "It's just all messed up now." She still seemed to be fighting tears.

They were catching a few glances, but no more than Rayha usually got, so she covered one of Paige's hands with hers. "Look, I have a lot of shit going on, but if you want to talk, we can talk, 'kay? I don't want you to kill yourself."

"Right." Paige chuckled darkly, but her gaze seemed fixed to their touching hands. "Trust me, I'm not going to. Not now, I can't."

Rayha hesitated. "Is that, um...is that why you have the other

marks?”

Paige’s hand jerked under Rayha’s, but she kept it there, on her knee. “N-No. Well, maybe. Sort of.” She sniffed and wiped her nose on the glove of the hand Rayha wasn’t holding.

“You’re not making much sense, you know?”

“I know.” Paige fell silent a moment. “I want to, but I’m not allowed to talk about it, I think.”

Rayha knew that feeling well. She plastered on a smile and squeezed Paige’s hand. “If you ever do want to tell me more, that would be okay.”

Paige looked up at her and mirrored her smile. Their gaze caught again. “I might. Maybe. I just have a lot going on and I have to think.”

“That’s okay. I get it.”

“Thank you.” Paige’s pinkie finger lifted and stroked the side of her index finger.

Was this weird? Rayha’s gaze drifted down to the gently stroking finger. Maybe it was weird. *I should probably pull my hand away.* But it also felt really nice. The returned flutter in her chest made her hesitant to act.

“I have class soon.” Paige’s tone was soft. Her gaze still lingered on Rayha. “If I don’t see you again today, then maybe tomorrow?”

Rayha nodded. “That would be nice—good. I’ll be here. Tomorrow. In school.” She frowned, caught off guard by her own inability to formulate decent sentences. *Fucking hell, what even?*

Paige eased her hand out from under Rayha’s and put her lunchbox and book into her backpack. She slipped off the wall and turned to face her. “Thank you for listening.” She blushed again. “Could you, um, please not tell anyone about, you know?”

“I won’t. I promise.” She held up her hand and wiggled her pinkie.

The gesture caused a real smile to appear on Paige’s lips and she reached out to link their pinkies together. “I hope so,” she said softly. “But it was—” She took a deep breath that puffed up her chest. “It was good to tell someone.”

Rayha suddenly felt a little guilty for not telling Paige about Harut. It was stupid, but shouldn't openness and trust like Paige had just shown her be rewarded by trust in return?

She needed to think about that as well as the possibility of Paige being the sign Harut had promised her. Maybe it had something to do with her attempted suicide or the reason she couldn't go through with it now? "Any time you want to talk, okay?"

"Thank you. Maybe." She let go and held her hand up in a wave. "I'm going to go now."

Bye!"

"Bye!" Before Rayha could say anything else, Paige blended in with the crowd and disappeared, leaving Rayha to rub away the ghost of Paige's touch that still made her hand tingle.

* * *

As soon as the bus arrived at the park, Rayha headed for the abandoned trailer to look for Dale. As far as she could tell, he'd skipped class again, so he was most likely hiding from the world in the trailer, high as a kite.

When she got there, she found the door and trailer window shut tight. Nothing inside gave the impression Dale had been in today.

Rayha frowned. Dale not showing up at school was commonplace, Dale not showing up at the trailer for a day was virtually unheard of. She checked her pocket watch. It was nearly six, so Mom would be home soon for dinner. If she checked for Dale at his stepdad's trailer, she'd be late. Rayha left the trailer and stared longingly at the path that led to Dale's house, but decided against it. After the rough few days with Mom, she didn't really want to add to the hassle.

Two hours later, as soon as Mom left to clean more offices in the city, Rayha left for Dale's. The trailer he shared with his stepdad stood only a few streets away from hers. It was a decrepit beige thing with a leaky roof that Dale had to fix whenever a storm blew past. A rest of

raccoons lived under floorboards. Sometimes their eyes were visible in the light of the streetlamps as they scurried behind the rotting wooden trellises that kept the wheels and anchors out of view.

There was light on in the main section of the trailer even though it wasn't really dark yet. When the light flickered and changed color, Rayha realized it was probably the TV.

Dale's bedroom window was dark. She glanced around before she left the path and snuck up to it. It was also quiet inside, but Dale had to be somewhere. He wasn't at HQ and he wouldn't be watching TV with his stephole. Dale didn't have many places to go, especially not for a few hours, so he had to be home. She knocked softly and ran before she crouched down out of view, just in case Wilbert had heard her.

She'd seen Dale's stepfather Wilbert exactly once, and that was enough to never want to experience that kind of unpleasantness again. The guy was a grade-A asshole with a swastika tattooed on his chest, just above the words "White Power." She'd ran into him and Dale randomly. All the color had drained from Dale's already naturally pale face, so Rayha had understood instinctively that she wasn't allowed to talk to him right then. It was the first time she'd truly realized that her skin color made her different.

The window opened with great difficulty, cutting off Rayha's trail of thought.

Dale stuck out his head.

"Dude!" She hissed the word from behind the neighboring trailer.

He turned his head toward the sound and his dark eyes fixed on her. For a few seconds, their eyes met and Rayha was sure he'd refuse to come out. Then he inhaled, nodded, and held up a hand with five fingers extended.

She nodded and withdrew to the bench they usually met on when Rayha came to get him.

It was out of view of the trailer and not in direct proximity to a lamppost, which Rayha liked because she didn't want a the spotlight

on her.

Four minutes and change later, Dale appeared. He wore his long leather coat again even though it was still at least a hundred degrees and he kept his head down right until he came up to the bench.

“What’s up?” He’d been drinking or smoking. Maybe both. His eyes were red-rimmed and his cheeks pale.

Then she noticed the white on his cheeks was mostly powder. “Shit, did he hit you?” She stepped off the bench and turned his head so his cheek caught a beam of diminishing sunlight. It was swollen and red.

Dale pulled his chin from her grip and shrugged. “Whatever. Come on, let’s walk.”

“What happened?” She fell in step with him as she tried to inspect his cheek.

“The usual.” Dale looked away, through the window of another trailer with the TV on.

“Woke up to him being fuck drunk and he went off.” He snorted darkly. “Asshole.”

She took his arm and pressed close. “Anywhere else but your cheek?”

Dale laughed. “He wishes! Nah, I ducked after the first one. I was going to leave, but, you know...”

“Yeah, I know.” She didn’t, not really, but instinctively she understood that it was hard to leave a home, even if it sucked. Rayha couldn’t imagine every leaving mom, even if it meant living in the trailer. “Will he be pissed you came out?”

He shrugged, but then shook his head. “Probably not. He’s out cold and there’s beer in the fridge.”

The hate in his voice was painful to hear. She rubbed his scrawny arm through his coat and shirt. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head and squeezed her hand against his side. “Not your fault, Kincaid.”

They entered and exited the light of the few streetlights that

worked on the park grounds.

“Dale?”

“Hm?” He guided her off the cracked road and into the grass to slip through the hedges that hid the trailer from view.

“Still no sign, I think.” She let go of his arm to follow him through the gap.

He surpassed her and wiggled the door of the trailer open. “You don’t sound sure.” He checked on her before stepping in.

She followed him. “I’m not, but if I got it, it wasn’t obvious.” She hesitated. “I want to share, but I need you to swear you won’t tell a soul. Swear-swear. I’d be breaking a promise, so you have to swear the oath.”

He pulled his sleeping bag to the center of the trailer and eyed her. “Sounds serious?”

She shrugged. “Maybe, I don’t know, but you’re my friend. I want to tell you.”

Dale dropped the sleeping bag and held up his hand.

She took it.

“I swear on my mom that I won’t repeat anything you are about to tell me. May the fucking cancer that killed her, kill me if I do.” He faux-spitted on the floor.

Rayha squeezed his hand, then shook once. “May the fucking cancer that killed her, kill you if you do.” With the ritual completed, she let go. “Do you have weed?”

He nodded and sat down. “I’ll make you a blunt.” As he got his supplies from his pockets, he watched her. “What happened? Or didn’t happen?”

Rayha sat down on his sleeping bag as well and plucked at the filling poking up through the burn holes. “Paige.”

Dale arched a brow. “The new girl? What about her?”

“Dunno. Nothing, maybe. She’s got a secret—and she tried to kill herself. And I think her parents are assholes to her.”

“Are those things related?” He rolled the loose filling into the

paper.

She shrugged and pushed fluff back into the hole. “Maybe?”

“Hm.” He brought the blunt to his lips and flicked his lighter on. The end of the cigarette caught and he inhaled in puffs, urging it to stay lit.

“‘Hm?’ That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say?” He inhaled again and held the smoke as he gave her the blunt.

She took a shallow drag and shook her head as she held the stinging smoke in as long as possible. “I don’t know, I’m just confused. I mean, how did we go from burning bush to Cluedo?”

Dale chuckled, letting the smoke escape. It circled around his face, making him look like a dragon about to breathe fire.

She couldn’t help smile. What would she do without Dale to make her feel better?

Dale held out his hand for the blunt. “I guess it could still all be in your head?”

Rayha inhaled, handed him the cigarette, and shrugged. “That was always my take. You, however, have been a big believer.”

“Not always.”

“True, but the last year or so? And you’ve been using my dreams for art inspiration much longer.” She watched him inhale and blow out circles; four this time.

He shrugged, but she knew him better than to think he wasn’t affected. “I needed something to do.”

When your mom got sick, when it all went to shit. “I know.” She reached out for his knee and rubbed. His gaze went down to her hand, so she withdrew it.

He reached out quickly to grab it—not forcefully, pleadingly.

She allowed him to hold her hand, even as her heart rate sped up. Today was not a good day for Dale, and he’d obviously been smoking far more than just this blunt. Getting his ass handed to him by his stepdad also didn’t help, she assumed. She wanted to be a supportive

friend, but she knew Dale well enough to know what was going to happen next. “Please don’t.”

He looked up at her with bloodshot eyes. “Why not, Rayha? We like each other, right?”

He massages her palm, her fingers.

“You’re my best friend, totally.” She tried to slip her hand from his grasp, but he tightened the hold. She gave in.

“I can be a cool boyfriend too.”

There it is. She shook her head. “We’ve been over that. I just...I just don’t see you that way.”

“How do you know?” He scooted forward without the use of his hands—one still held hers, the other held the joint that was being wasted—until their knees touched.

Rayha knew she’d have to shut him down more forcefully soon, but dammit, she hated hurting Dale’s feelings. “I know, okay. Please, Dale. You’re making a foo—”

He rushed forward and kissed her.

His lips landed mostly on hers, his breath hit her cheek, his scent rushed up her nose as she inhaled jerkily. Rayha’s insides did a little dance, but she wasn’t sure if it was out of shock or want. Then she fully realized Dale was fucking kissing her. Instinctively, she slapped him upside the head and leaned back to break the kiss. Rayha pushed up on slightly shaky legs and glared down at her friend. “Dale, for suck sakes! What did I just say!”

Dale massaged the ear she’d managed to hit and stared up at her. He was a tangle of black-clad limbs on the floor; abandoned and rejected. “Sorry,” he mumbled, but he wasn’t.

“I’m going home now. Go sleep off your high or something; you’re an asshole when you’re this messed up.” She shook her head and pushed the door to the trailer open. Her hand trembled and she only now realized her heart still beat entirely out of whack. Had she liked that kiss after all, or was it just adrenaline?

Rayha let the door falls shut behind her and balled her hands to

fists as she escaped through the hole in the hedge. “Dammit, Dale, I didn’t need this today.” She muttered the words angrily and kicked a rock under one of the nearest trailer.

CHAPTER 7

“The born are to die; and the dead to revive; and the living to be judged; for to know, and to notify, and that it may be known, that all is according to plan.”

— *Charles Taylor, Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*

Rayha had taken up vigil on the low wall in front of the school and she had far too much time to think. Dale hadn't been at the bus stop again. After yesterday's bullshit, she found herself conflicted about seeing him. On the one hand, she wanted to be sure he was okay and she wanted her friend with her, but she was also still pissed off. Since she'd spent the night talking druids into embracing Christianity, Rayha wasn't in the mood to deal with his whining. Her head hurt and she had a million things to deal with that did not involve a stupid boy's stupid crush.

Instead of Dale, Rayha waited for Paige. Since today's classes started with history, Rayha wanted to catch her before they made their way in. It was always better to head to the butcher's class with a buddy. Besides, Paige might get herself in trouble with him again without proper instruction.

That was her official reason and she was sticking with it, but of course there was more to it than that. The unofficial reason was that she was still trying to figure out if Paige was or had possession of the sign Rayha was looking for. Unless Rayha got some answers to the most burning of her questions soon, she feared her head would burst. If Paige was her sign, they had to spend time together, so Rayha waited in front of the school where the busses arrived in the hope she hadn't missed Paige coming in already. That, and she kind of liked spending time with Paige.

Paige got off the bus dead last, with her bag clutched to her chest.

Rayha got up, smoothed her skirt down, and walked over. “Hey

you.”

Of course, Paige jumped, but not as severely as before. When she turned, Rayha could see why. “Holy shit, you look like someone ran you over with a truck!”

Paige swallowed and her eyes moistened. “It wasn’t a good night.” She examined Rayha almost without seeing her. “Did you sleep well?”

Rayha knew when he was being blown off. “You know. The usual.” She still scanned Paige’s face and posture. Paige looked like someone who should be home resting, not at school, about to go into the minefield that was history class. “Um, I don’t want to pry, but did something bad happen?”

Paige sniffed and ran her nose along the top of the glove. She winced and wrapped her arm around the bag again. “I can’t say.”

“Uh, okay, but, you know, I’m worried about you.” She checked her pocket watch. They had a little less than fifteen minutes before class. “Are you sure you don’t want to find somewhere to talk?”

Paige nodded. She was so tense that she trembled. Her knuckles had turned white from the force she used to grip her bag. She looked infinitely small and very messed up.

A silly thought popped into her head and her heart shot into her throat. “Paige? Do you want a hug?” Rayha had never been a hugger, but Paige seemed so utterly miserable, she couldn’t think of anything else to offer support.

Tears came to Paige’s eyes for real now, not just the little bit of moisture that had settled there. She wiped the tears off with her glove, but far gentler than she’d done with her nose.

“P-People will see.”

Rayha tried to decide if that mattered to her and she wondered why it mattered to Paige.

Does she think associating with her will somehow ruin my reputation? And what reputation would that be? She was already a social outcast, trailer park trash, and she was an “other” in the school’s copious race groups as well. Rayha had nothing to lose by association

with Paige, but now she had to wonder who'd told Paige that she'd have that influence on people's social status. Or was she worried about her own? "I don't really care about that."

More tears filled Paige's eyes. She lowered the bag to her side by a strap and stood still, gaze on Rayha's clavicle or shoulder. "Okay."

"Right. I'm going to hug you now." Rayha stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Paige's waist. The odd feeling in her chest returned, heating her from the inside out. She pulled Paige closer.

Paige's frighteningly thin form held tense for a handful of seconds, then she rested her head against Rayha's shoulder. Another few seconds passed before Paige's free arm wrapped around her neck.

Rayha stroked her hair and pressed her cheek against Paige's head. Paige smelled like vanilla and strawberries, or what shampoo companies through strawberries smelled like. It was nice. Without conscious decision, Rayha closed her eyes and sank more into the embrace. For a few seconds, everything in the world fell away except for page Paige; no school and students, no butcher, no angel business, no secrets.

With a shaky inhale, Paige pressed her face into the crook of Rayha's neck.

Is she crying? If so, they were silent tears. The thought made her hold Paige a little tighter against her body, but she didn't dare put too much pressure on her for fear of hurting her.

Something inside Paige seemed to give way. She gripped Rayha's shirt and pressed closer as the sobs came. They shook her entire body.

For a few seconds, Rayha smiled. It was good Paige let it all out. Then she remembered they were at school and they did have a reputation of to uphold, that of teenage rebel at a school meant for fuck-ups and losers. *Shit.* Rayha checked over Paige's shoulder to see how much attention they were getting. Glances, whispers. Her heart rate sped up. She hated being paid attention to. It made her clothes feel too tight and her skin too dark, and all her make-up and jewelry seemed childish.

Paige melted into her as if unwound after months of being coiled too tightly.

She needs this. And frankly, Rayha needed it too. She needed a hug that wouldn't lead to a kiss, one she didn't have to feel guilty about. She cupped the back of Paige's head and held her protectively against her, sheltering her from the onlookers as she fell apart. "Shhh..."

Paige tensed as if she were urging the pieces of herself back together, but her head laid heavily on Rayha's shoulder and remained there. She still held on to Rayha's shirt like a lifeline. "S-Sorry."

The mumbled word caused her skin to break out in goose bumps. Rayha swallowed down something electric. "It's okay."

With a sigh, Paige snuggled against her neck.

Rayha's mouth went dry. The electricity she'd swallowed down spread throughout her body, causing her skin to prickle. She closed her eyes and shut out the world. "You can tell me, if you want? I won't say anything to anyone." *Not even Dale this time.*

Paige stiffened. "I-I don't know if I can."

"You can. It'll be good for you." She ran her hand over the bumps of Paige's spine.

Paige seemed to consider her options. She inhaled deeply and nodded. "Okay." It was barely a whisper. Another few seconds later, she pulled back and wiped her red, wet cheeks clean. Her mascara had ran, making her look a little raccoon-ish. She didn't meet Rayha's gaze. "I have to go straight home after school, but if you want, you can come with me? I'll um...I'll check in with my parents and we can talk?"

Rayha scanned her face, noted the way Paige pulled on her lip piercing, the way her eyes were wide, her cheeks burning red. Her hands had slipped to Paige's waist and she could feel the tremble in her body. "Okay, then I'll come with you after school."

A watery smile settled on Paige's red lips and she brought her gaze up to Rayha's. "Thank you."

Rayha shook her head. “No need.” She smiled and took Paige’s hand. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up before class. The butcher will eat you alive if he sees you like this.”

* * *

Paige sat next to her in the very back of the bus, by the window, legs drawn up, fingers plucking on the synthetic material of her gloves. Every time the bus hit a pothole, she moved with the violent jerks instead of bracing. She had withdrawn in on herself and seemed completely lost in thought. Seeing her get tossed about like a ragdoll left a darkness inside Rayha’s gut she didn’t like. She felt overwhelmed as it was; the heat in the bus, her lack of restful sleep, and the heat that seemed to seep into her from Paige’s hip where they touched made her feel like someone had put her brain matter into a blender.

Rayha had asked her at the bus stop if she’d reconsidered, but Paige had shaken her head.

The unease in her belly worsened. *Worry*. Sometimes it helped to consciously label her emotions. It detached her from them. *Pity*. No, not pity. She felt sorry for Paige, though. Just because it was finally something to say, she decided to ask Paige. “What’s a more positive word for pity when you really mean you wish someone felt better?”

Paige tilted her head to the side. Her gaze remained on her wrist. “Compassion, maybe?”

Compassion. She tasted the word. “Yeah, that’s better.”

Paige finally looked up at her. “Why do you ask?” Her shoulders remained hunched.

The bus hit another pothole and the jerking motion caused Paige’s head to bang against the window. She winced but didn’t rub the sore spot, nor did she sit up straighter.

Instinctively, Rayha reached out to cup the back of her head and stroked. “That’s why.”

Big eyes stared at her. Paige didn't resist the touch.

Rayha settled her arm along the back of the seat and kept her hand where it was. *Compassion*, she mused. *Protectiveness*.

"I can take care of myself." Paige bit into her lip and looked away.

"I know." Rayha wasn't sure if that was true; she wasn't sure about anything today, especially not Paige. Dale hadn't come to school, her angelic stalker hadn't made an appearance since Monday, she was back to her usual crazy and the burning bush dream was feeling more and more like any other.

Paige remained tense, even though she molded against her.

Paige wanted to kill herself, that was real. If there was something divine involved, maybe it was Rayha's job to keep her from going through with it. Would that count as a divine sign?

It seemed more like a test than a sign. Of course, trying to be a good friend to Paige and maybe getting her to stay alive was important even without divine interference. Rayha ran her fingers through the slightly greasy strands of Paige's hair.

Paige's eyelids fluttered. She set her jaw but leaned against Rayha more securely. Her chest rose and fell more rapidly.

Rayha watched it happened with fascination.

"Sorry, I'm just tired."

"Don't worry. It's fine." She didn't stop her gentle stroking.

A single tear darkened the fabric of Paige's skirt in an almost perfect circle. She sniffed.

"So tired." The roar of the engines drowned the words out almost entirely.

She guided Paige's head against her shoulder and held her through another pothole attack.

Paige didn't object. She continued to pluck at her gloves and sniffed every few seconds, fighting a runny nose.

The bus was half-empty. No one paid attention to them. They'd reached the fancier part of the city. Most of the people on the bus were dark skinned and dressed in blue collar work uniforms. *On their way*

to or done with work shifts like Mom. Rayha ran her short nails over Paige's scalp and felt her shiver.

Paige snuggled a bit.

Warmth settled in Rayha's chest along with a flutter in her belly. She tried to name it, but still couldn't find the perfect word. "What do you call a mixture between nervousness, happiness, and anxiety?"

Paige was silent for a few seconds. "I don't know, but I get it." Her voice was still hoarse.

"I feel it too."

"Oh." She stared at Paige's nervously working fingers. "Good."

Paige hummed softly, or she said something Rayha couldn't decipher. It didn't really matter because she stopped fidgeting and relaxed against her.

Rayha's heart worked overtime. Why was she feeling this...dizzy? This out of whack?

There was so much to worry about, her scrambled brain seemed to turn it all into a ball that was stuck in her belly.

"What if's" were doing her head in;

What if she was imagining things?

What if she was insane or had a brain tumor?

What if Dale had been right about angels and destiny?

What if Harut was real?

What if Paige and Harut were connected after all?

What if Paige hurt herself because Rayha thought she was insane or had a brain tumor but it was actually a divine sign?

What if Dale's stepdad had finally caused him serious harm?

She pulled Paige's head against her shoulder more firmly.

"Are you okay?" Paige tilted her head to look at her.

Rayha set her jaw and nodded. "Just thoughts. Thoughts that won't leave me alone."

"Oh." After a second, Paige took her hand and squeezed.

It wasn't a solution, but it was oddly soothing.

The busted intercom crackled and Paige's head came up. She

glanced out the window.

“That’s our stop.” After a little squeeze, she let go of Rayha’s hand and pulled her bag up to her lap as she waited for Rayha to get up.

Losing touch with Paige left Rayha feeling oddly empty, which made her realize holding Paige had made her feel more full. More of those feelings that didn’t seem to have a name coursed from her belly to her heart and back. She grabbed her backpack, got up, and got out, hoping fresh air would sooth her insides.

The bus stop wasn’t exactly in the middle of nowhere but the houses on the street were more like farms and they stood far away from the road, behind fields of yellowed grass and galloping horses that drew away the gazes of anyone traversing the road.

“This way.” Paige secured her book bag around her shoulders and walked back the way they’d come from.

The hot sun bearing down made Rayha sweat by the time she’d taken three paces. She caught up with Paige and glanced at her.

Paige stared at her boots. She held the straps of her bag tightly. “When we get home, you’ll have to wait in the barn. I need to make sure my mom and dad aren’t home.” She set her jaw in either fear or sadness, Rayha couldn’t tell.

Not odd at all... Still, she’d come this far. “Okay, but you and your family aren’t cannibals or something, right? Weird axe murderers?” She chuckled, but she couldn’t help worrying just a bit.

Paige chuckled and shook her head.

It was good to see her smile again.

“No. You’re fine. I’m just...I’m uh.” She thought for a moment. “Grounded. I guess that’s it. I just have to make sure they aren’t there and call Mom at work to check in. If one of them is home, I’ll be a bit longer but I’ll sneak out.”

“Wow. That’s hardcore. What did you do?”

All signs of amusement and happiness drained from Paige’s face again. She slumped. “I’ll tell you later, okay? If I think I can.”

“Okay.” Rayha resolved to stay silent the rest of the way.

Paige guided her off the driveway before it curved toward the house and toward a huge wooden structure. There wasn’t much shelter beyond the barn, so Paige made her hurry, probably hoping to hide her before they could get spotted. The property was truly on the outskirts of Phoenix; Paige’s back yard was the desert.

The barn threw a long shadow onto the sand and cacti. Rayha estimated her entire home could have fit into it four times, at least. They sneaked up to it and Paige glanced around the corner before she hurried over the huge double doors and undid the rope that held the two halves together. She beckoned Rayha over.

Rayha didn’t like running, but she hobbled along until she could slip in.

Paige followed her in and hurried to pull the door shut behind her.

The barn used to be a stable, Rayha guessed, but now it was stacked with stuff—anything from a tractor to an old crib, gardening tools, old doors, and lots of dust. The roof was as leaky as a rusted-through bucket, judging by the beams of sunlight streaming down, but perhaps it was possible to stay dry under the hayloft. *If you could get there.* There was too much crap stacked in here to even try.

“Just wait here, okay? I’ll go check.” Paige seemed nervous and her red cheeks couldn’t be explained away by the heat only.

Rayha nodded. “I’ll be here.” Where else was she going to go?

Paige watched her a few seconds as she mauled her lip again.

“Okay. Thank you.” She nodded awkwardly and slipped out.

The barn door fell shut and it was silent. With bated breath, Rayha waited, half expecting Paige to lock her in. Instead, she tracked Paige’s footfalls as they headed toward the house until she couldn’t hear them anymore. She exhaled shakily and looked around for something to sit on and pass the time until Paige returned. Her heartbeat was still quick and it had nothing to do with the short jog toward the door. It had only just settled when the door creaked. Rayha jumped up from the chair she’d liberated from the mess and looked for

a place to hide, just in case it wasn't Paige returning.

Of course, it was. Paige poked her head in. "No one's home. We can go to the house to talk, if you want?"

Something in Paige's voice or look made Rayha hesitate. "Would you rather stay here?"

"Um." Paige bit her lip again. "Yes, kind of. If they come home and see you, I'll be in so much trouble."

Rayha nodded. "Then we'll talk here. It doesn't matter to me."

A weight seemed to lift off Paige. She straightened. "Thank you. I'll, um, I'll get us some cokes."

Before Rayha could reply, the door shut again. She wiped her forehead on her shirt. As she waited, she spotted a rolled up, dusty carpet and carefully pulled it from its hiding spot.

Some smaller household items clattered down and Rayha winced. No one came in, so she pulled the carpet out fully and rolled it out. It was threadbare but she assumed it had once been a beautiful Persian rug.

She sat, pulled her legs under her so she was sitting Indian style, and waited, picking at the carpet. Her hands were trembling. Thoughts swirled but never materialized into identifiable ideas. Her heart beat just a fraction too quickly.

Paige returned. She had two cans of coke and a packet of something pressed against her chest with one arm and pulled the door shut with the other. "Sorry." She sat down opposite Rayha on the carpet and handed her one of the cans.

Rayha took it, cracked it open and took a long drink. The cold liquid instantly cooled her insides and she hummed.

The packet crackled, drawing her attention.

Rayha lowered the can and snuck a glance at it. Crisps. "Oh, nice."

Paige shrugged, but there was a sparkle in her eyes. "Have some." She pushed the opening toward Rayha.

"Thanks." Rayha took a handful of chips and popped one into her mouth as she watched Paige fidget with her gloves again. *Time to bite*

the bullet. She swallowed her mouthful and took a deep breath. “So, talking.”

“Right, talking.” Paige slumped even more. Her back hunched. She stared at her hands.

She didn’t look like someone ready to spill her secrets.

“Maybe...maybe we can make a promise that neither of us will repeat anything that’s said today?” Rayha still toyed with the idea that Paige was part of her sign, and if she was, Rayha had a story to tell as well. She needed Paige’s silence as much as Paige probably needed hers.

“It’s what my best friend Dale and I do, promise on something important so we’ll never tell.”

Paige nodded and looked down again. “I swear on...” She hesitated. “I’m not sure what to swear on that I care about.” She tilted her head and glanced up at Rayha through her tumbling hair. “I don’t think I care about anything like that.”

Rayha hummed. “Well, I usually swear on my dad. He died when I was two.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Paige frowned. “What happened?”

Rayha sighed and broke a chip in two. “He was a journalist, a photographer. He went to some island, Grenada, and the hospital he was taking pictures at got blown up. They never found his body.” She sniffed and popped both halves of the chips into her mouth.

“That’s really sad, Ray.” Paige let go of her glove and stroked Rayha’s knee with her fingertips.

Rayha blinked. No one called her “Ray.” Dale had tried exactly once and he’d walked funny for two days. “Ray” was a guy name and she wasn’t a guy. Paige’s touch cut off her complaint. She glanced down at her black-and-white tights and Paige’s pale digits lightly on top of them. The flutters in her belly returned and she lost her trail of thought. “Uh, yeah, it’s okay. It happened a long time ago, I don’t remember it.”

Paige moved her fingers back and forth no more than an inch. She

worked her lip ring again. “I guess I can swear on my brother. He’s alive, but I love him a lot and he still loves me too.” Her eyes moistened.

“‘Still loves me?’ As opposed to who?” *What’s going on in this family anyway?*

“My parents, I guess. But that’s...that’s part of the story.” She withdrew her hand and once more plucked on her glove. The material was fraying, turning the edges into fluff.

Rayha’s leg felt cold without Paige’s touch, even if she was sweating bullets everywhere skin touched skin. “Okay, so...that’s what we swear on then. I swear on my father that I will never repeat your story to anyone.” She held out her hand.

Paige glanced at it, then held her own out and took Rayha’s. “I promise on my brother’s life I won’t share what we say today with anyone.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.”

“I promise that I won’t repeat what is said here today to anyone, and may the bombs that killed my dad, kill me if I do.”

Their gazes met and held. *That’s it then. All in.* She let Paige’s hand go.

Paige took a deep breath. Her hunched shoulders and ragged hair made her look even tinier, not mouse-like at all but like a wild bird ready to fly. “We moved here because of me.

Because I...”

Rayha waited motionlessly, afraid to spook Paige if she even moved a finger.

“I have dreams. They are—” Her voice broke.

Hope soared. Rayha’s heart thumped wildly. If Paige had the same dreams, it was a sign, right? Harut’s sign? It would prove things, insane things. When Paige hadn’t continued after what was undoubtedly more than a minute, Rayha could no longer resist the urge to prompt her. “Paige? Please, tell me? I have dreams too.”

Paige looked up. She still seemed on the verge of tears. “You have dreams?”

“I do. Please, tell me about yours?” Even as she said it, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know anymore.

Paige sniffed and her gaze dropped down. With trembling fingers, she plucked a thread from the carpet. “When I dream, I go to hell.”

The words were spoken so faintly that Rayha had to strain to hear them. She swallowed down a lump of hope and worry. “Hell” could mean a lot of things; many of Rayha’s dreams would qualify. She leaned forward. “Go on. What do you mean, ‘hell?’”

Paige shrugged.

“It’s okay, whatever it is.” It was like talking to the stray cats that roamed the trailer park; if you kept your voice soft and didn’t move, you could get a little bit closer every few minutes. Rayha hoped Paige wouldn’t flee in the end, like the cats always did.

“Hell, with demons. I see them and they see me. If they catch me I —” A sob caught off her speech and the tears that had been threatening for minutes now, fell.

Rayha frowned. *Demons?* Warning bells went off inside her skull; demons weren’t real.

Neither are angels, you bitch. Stop judging. After a moment of hesitation Rayha scooted forward until their legs touched and she could take Paige’s hands in hers. “It’s okay. I won’t judge. I promise. Please, tell me what happens if they catch you?”

Paige didn’t react to her movement or presence until her hold closed, but then she leaned forward, against Rayha’s shoulder and broke down again. Her whole body shook with the force of her sobs.

It was easy to wrap her up now, without onlookers, even if her thoughts were racing and she was trying frantically to connect puzzle pieces she wasn’t even sure went together. Rayha stroked up and down Paige’s protruding spine. “Tell me,” she whispered.

Paige gripped her shirt by her sides and pulled herself in, or Rayha forward. Now Rayha could feel the tremble underlying the sobs that

racked Paige's frame. "I-It's hard. My psychologist said not to talk about it, because it validates the delusions."

"I bet he would say the same thing to me. I'm not sure I believe in demons and—" she stopped herself before she could say "angels." "But I believe in you, and I believe that you have these dreams." She leaned her head against Paige's. Her hair tickled her skin. "So please, tell me."

"I..." Paige inhaled deeply. "Sometimes when I wake up, it's not me."

If Rayha hadn't been holding her and her mouth wasn't almost against her ear, she would have missed it. "Not you?" A chill ran down her spine. "Then who are you?"

Paige's trembling worsened. She pulled at Rayha's shirt so hard that Rayha felt the strain on her back. "One of *them*." Immediately, she started crying again. This time it was so overwhelming, Rayha knew instantly she wouldn't get another word out of her until it passed.

Rayha stroked her hair and rocked her gently. *One of them? What does that even mean?*

A demon? "Like, possession? The exorcist?"

Paige slapped her thigh weakly, then chuckled through her sobs.

Oops. "Um, not like possession or not like the exorcist?"

"E-Exorcist!" Paige gripped her shirt again and sniffed. She wasn't crying as violently anymore. "When they catch me in my dream, I can't get back to my body. *They* get in it. I-I hurt my parents—well, my body did, *they* did."

An ice-cold hand seemed to trail its fingers down Rayha's spine. "Holy shit. Paige, that's...that's hardcore." *If it's true. What if Paige is lying and her parents are really super nice folks? What if she's nuts and she hurts herself?* She tried to pull away a bit to look at her, but Paige moved with her, refusing to be watched. Rayha gave in and remained seated, hugging Paige awkwardly in a way that must hurt Paige's back, but she didn't seem to mind.

She rested her forehead against Rayha's shoulder and wrapped her arms more solidly around her. "I know."

Despite her confusion and fear, Paige's body against hers made her feel things too; things she had trouble identifying, like on the bus, like at school. Paige's warm breath tickled her neck and her knee pressed against Rayha's inner thigh. "W-What happens when they get in?" The ridiculousness of the question didn't escape her notice.

"They trap my body and tie it up. Eventually, the demon leaves and I get sucked back in. Then I wake up."

Rayha felt her swallow against her shoulder. She adjusted her hold. "Does it happen often?"

Paige molded into the new embrace seemingly automatically. "It used to, but I got better at avoiding them. I know my way around now."

She sounded so defeated, some of Rayha's doubts disappeared. "What about your parents?"

"They...they took me to every doctor in the area who was even remotely specialized in sleep disorders, neurology, and psychiatry. I got pills, but that only made it worse. I still felt drowsy in my dreams, so it started to happen more often because I couldn't outsmart the... *them*. I couldn't think straight and shake them off." Paige's hold on her shirt lessened, but she leaned heavily against Rayha's body now, having almost slipped into her lap. "They agreed to stop the pills, but in return they tie me down every night so I won't be able to hurt them if...you know."

Rayha stroked her back. "When did it start?"

Paige tensed again. "Almost right after I tried suicide." She took a deep breath, then released it against Rayha's neck. "I sinned and I'm being punished."

The words caused goosebumps to break out on Rayha's skin, despite the heat. She instinctively pulled back to look at her, but Paige renewed her hold and still refused to be looked upon. After a few seconds of struggle, Rayha surrendered and leaned in again. She

brought her hand up to run her fingers through Paige's hair. "You really believe that?"

A shudder ran down Paige's body. "I do. I know it's true. There's...there's a girl in hell, I call her "Goldie," because of the color of her hair. She committed suicide and she's stuck there, so I know where I'd gone to if I had succeeded. If I kill myself, I won't be going to hell just for the night, it'll be for a long time."

Rayha had to take a moment to wrap her head around all of this. Paige's attempted suicide and subsequent hell—literally—was far worse than anything Rayha had gone through. If all of it really happened, of course.

"Say something." Paige pulled at her shirt.

Rayha jumped. "Oh. Sorry. I was thinking, I guess. Um, I'm sorry about what's happening to you. It's a lot to take in."

Paige nodded against her shoulder. "I know. Do you...do you believe me?" She seemed to hold her breath and the tremble worsened.

"I..." Did she? What reason would Paige have to make this up? With Harut's promise of a divine sign in mind, she couldn't help but buy into it, at least in as far as she bought into the whole angel thing—which was up in the air at the moment. "I believe you as much as I believe myself."

That had Paige pause. She finally sat up, beet red, eyes red-rimmed and her hair even more mused up than it usually was. "What does that mean?"

"Um." Rayha resisted the urge to smooth the wayward locks down. Instead, she focused on her upcoming confession. "Right, so, when I was thirteen, I started having really weird dreams." She could see Paige was about to open her mouth and hurried to answer the question she knew was forthcoming. "They're not like yours. I don't go to hell. They're memories." *Bite the goddamn bullet already!* "Memories of saints in history."

Paige frowned. "Huh?" It was without a doubt the least

sophisticated thing to come out of her mouth so far.

“Yeah. Joan of Arc, Margaret of Scotland, Saint Patrick, all these really religious people who either fought or died for, you know, God. Also people like Moses and Jesus. Let me tell you, crucifixion hurts like a bitch.” She chuckled at her own not-so-much-a-joke joke.

Paige didn’t laugh, nor did she chuckle. She swallowed and dropped her chin to her chest.

Her fingers found the edges of her glove again and she plucked. “I know.” Before Rayha could ask what that comment was about, Paige cleared her throat and looked back up. “What happens in your dreams?”

“Um.” Rayha stared into Paige’s eyes, trying to divine if she should drop the subject or not. “Basically I’m them and along for the ride. They go around convince kings and druids to be more Christian, or I break bread, or fight wars, or get burned at the stake, and I watch them do it as if I’m them.” Why did it sound so much weirder out loud than in her head? She scanned Paige’s features. “How nuts am I sounding?”

Paige smiled and all her mousiness disappeared again. She shook her head. “I just told you I get possessed by demons.” It was clearly hard on her to say the words, but she soldiered on. “I think I’m not exactly qualified to think anyone’s crazy other than me.”

“You’re not crazy.” Rayha was relatively sure of it, anyway. Well, a little sure.

“I hope so, so if I’m the most crazy one of us and I’m not crazy, then you can’t be crazy either.”

Touché. “Okay, Mouse, point taken.” She reached out and squeezed Paige’s hand.

Paige the color that had just barely drained out of her cheeks returned in a rush. “Were you done telling me about your dreams?”

“Um. Sort of?” She took a deep breath. “No, I guess not.”

“It’s okay.” Paige squeezed her hand.

Somehow, the support really did make it easier. She weaved her

fingers with Paige's. "I dreamt about myself the other night. I think I met an angel."

Paige's eyes widened. She leaned forward a bit. "You did what?" Her tone was a touch awestruck.

"Don't get too excited." Rayha snorted. "He regurgitated Moses at me, burning bush and all, then said it was an introduction and that he would give me a sign soon to prove it was a true encounter, not something I dreamt up." She met Paige's gaze and shrugged. "I thought maybe it was you. You could still me my sign, actually, but if it is, it's a pretty um...what's the word? Complicated?"

"Convolutd, maybe? It means something that's twisted up and messy."

Rayha nodded. "That'll do; convolutd. If you are my sign, it's a very convolutd sign."

"Yes." Paige picked at the carped with her unoccupied hand. "Very. You can't deny that it's weird that you dream about angels and I dream about demons." She glanced up. "It has to mean something, right?"

Rayha nodded. "Else it's a damn insane coincidence." She held Paige's gaze, trying to find the meaning of all this in Paige's eyes. Even if Paige's nightmares were just that, even if they were both simply insane, it was still the same kind of insanity. It linked them, but why? "Am I supposed to fix your problem? Is that it? Do I get a sword somewhere and, I dunno, kill your nightmare demons?"

"I don't know." Paige ran her palm over her face to dry her cheeks and eyes some more. "But if you find a way to stop this, please tell me. Please do it. I'll do anything." She started crying again.

Rayha's chest ached. She pulled at Paige's hand.

Paige let herself be guided into another hug and wrapped her arms around her neck. "S-Sorry." She nuzzled a bit.

A shudder caused goose bumps to rise up all over Rayha's skin. "About what?"

"I'm just so tired." Paige's whisper seemed to enter her body

through the skin of her neck, not her ear.

Rayha pulled her in and wrapped her arms around Paige's back by sliding them under her armpits so she could help keep Paige upright.

"I get it. Me too." But she was too numb to cry.

"We'll figure it out." Instinctively, she pressed her lips against Paige's head.

Paige nodded.

Her hair tickled Rayha's cheek.

"I hope so." The worst of the tears seemed to have dried already. "You have to go soon.

They'll be home." She didn't pull back.

"Okay." Rayha held on. There was something soothing about hugging someone soft and non-threatening. As much as she liked Dale, he had gotten the wrong impression about where

their friendship was going. Whenever she hugged her mom, Rayha always felt bad because she couldn't tell her everything. It almost invalidated the hug.

"I'm happy I was put in your class, Ray." Paige sniffed again.

Rayha smiled and ran her hand lightly up and down between Paige's boney shoulder blades. "Even if you have to deal with the butcher?"

Paige giggled.

It was a sound unlike any Rayha had ever heard; high and melodic. She liked it.

"Yeah, even with the butcher, I'm happy I was put in a class with you, and I'm happy you helped me, and I'm happy you're my friend." She finally pulled back but slowly, and not far; just far enough to look into her eyes. The color of her eyes had shifted to that of emeralds.

"You are my friend, right?"

Breath puffed against Rayha skin with the words and the goose bumps came back. Paige's stick figure arms suddenly felt heavy on her shoulders. Rayha could feel Paige's breathing quickening under her hands as her whole body worked to get the oxygen in and out of

her lungs. “Yeah,” she said in nothing more than a raspy whisper. “I promise.”

Paige’s gaze dipped to her lips. She swallowed.

A shiver coursed down Rayha’s spine as realization kicked in. *Oh!* She licked her suddenly parched lips on instinct. *Is she going to kiss me? Do I want to be kissed? By a girl?*

Memories of Dale rushing forward to kiss her poured in. But he hadn’t made her heart hammer like this, or caused her to feel a little dizzy.

“You promise?” Paige’s gaze lingered. Her breathing shallowed even more.

Rayha didn’t trust her voice. Could Paige hear her frantic heartbeat? Was her breathing messed up like Paige’s? She nodded. *Maybe I do want to be kissed by her.*

“Even if I...?” Paige leaned forward slowly. Maybe she was giving Rayha time to say “stop” or to turn her head away?

She didn’t. Rayha’s thoughts jumped to the times Dale had tried, to his kiss, to the soft swell of breasts on Marilyn Manson’s album cover.

Paige closed her eyes at the last second, and then their lips met.

Rayha’s heart skipped a beat or two. Flutters exploded in her belly. She let her eyes fall shut and pressed forward just a bit, to feel more. *I’m kissing.* Her brain failed to do anything but observe and register.

Paige’s lips didn’t move and they didn’t linger long, but that was fine. It was a kiss, a real kiss, and every nerve ending in Rayha’s body fried then and there.

“Even then?” Paige pressed her forehead against Rayha’s.

Rayha didn’t know how to deal with the explosion of emotions inside of her chest. The feeling she’d had on the bus that she hadn’t been able to name returned in the form of butterflies and a rush of blood through her body that left her feeling tingly and numb at the same time, but in the best way possible. “Yeah.”

Paige exhaled a shuddering breath and sat up. Her arms slipped

from Rayha's shoulders, but her fingers stroked Rayha's cheek as they passed—just the fingertips and they left streaks of heat on already glowing skin.

The glare of the sun seemed even brighter when Rayha blinked her eyes open.

Paige's cheeks were ferociously red and her eyes wide, but not out of fear. She smiled. "You have to go."

"I know. I'll go." Rayha got up, but her legs felt as wobbly as Jell-O. "I'll see you in class tomorrow?"

"Or during lunch break." Paige's smile widened. "Get home safe."

Rayha waved her off. "Don't worry, I'm fine." *Liar*. She was anything but fine, but at the same time, she also felt like life was perfect.

"Okay. Then, um...bye." Paige waved.

"Bye." Rayha waved back, feeling lame instantly but unable to find something else for her hands to do. Her first kiss played over and over in her head. It was only when Rayha made it back to the road that she realized she hadn't asked why Paige had wanted to kill herself to begin with.

CHAPTER 8

“Beginning and end are You, and You alone rule all. For all things are from You, and in You do all things, Eternal One, come to their end.”

— *Papyri graecae magicae*

The bus passed her the second she set foot on the shoulder of the road.

“Shit.” Laziness and pent up energy warred, then Rayha decided to walk. There was nothing worse than sitting still when your thoughts were sprinting.

The last few days had been a messed up rollercoaster of emotions. Without drugs or alcohol to medicate them into oblivion, she was stuck on the side of the road with no other option than to suffer through them. She briefly considered trying to steal some liquor at a gas station, but with her luck she’d get caught and Mom would be even more disappointed in her.

Fuck it all.

Cars rushed by, but Rayha kept her eyes on the bone dry dirt just in front of her feet. Tufts of yellowed grass formed stumbling blocks she’d rather avoid.

Just this morning, Rayha had been a messed up trailer rat with fucked up dreams, now nine hours had passed, she felt no closer to solving her sign issue, she’d told a near-stranger her story, and—oh yeah, just FYI—she’d kissed a girl!

Rayha kicked a rock and watched it tumble. As much as the first two worried her, it was the third that was lodged inside her brain, consuming every bit of brainpower she possessed.

Paige had kissed her, and she’d liked it. A lot. Like—if she could have kisses like that forever, she wouldn’t need drugs or alcohol anymore; she’d be high off that. Which was definitely a problem.

Mom's going to fucking kill me! The thought stopped her dead in her tracks. Cars blew by. The gusts of wind they

produced yanked at her clothes and hair. She felt rooted to the spot as dread pooled low in her belly. After Dad's death, all Mom had left were Rayha and her religion. The last time Rayha had checked the Qur'an, it frowned on liking girls if you were a girl.

She swallowed down a lump in her throat. Did she really like girls? Well, she liked Paige. Or maybe she was just feeling this way because it was her first real kiss? But Dale had given her kissed her as well and she'd felt nothing like how she'd felt with Paige; tingly and weak in the knees.

She walked on. A deep longing to talk to Mom constricted her chest. She would never be able to, obviously, but she wanted to. When Rayha was little, they used to talk for hours. She would tell Mom about school, and friends, and feeling ugly. Mom had always known exactly what to say to make her feel better, and when she'd talked about growing up in Pakistan or meeting Dad, Rayha had felt special. Now, everything mom said was annoying and it had been a long time since she'd talked about Dad.

Rayha sighed and looked around. Somewhere around here, the bus had taken a left onto this street, hadn't it? She stopped and turned slowly in a circle, waiting for the tug at her gut to tell her where home was. Once the familiar coiling in her belly manifested, she continued down the road. *Not here, I guess. Maybe I'll catch the bus at the next stop.*

The memory of Paige's lips brushing over hers hit her out of the blue and heat surged to her cheeks. Her knees went wobbly again. How could a single kiss do that?

Focus! More had happened than being kissed—much more. Paige was either a really good liar, or she saw demons in her dreams. Maybe she even got possessed by them, which sounded nuts, but all right. The Exorcist was based on a real story, so why couldn't Paige? It wasn't exactly the clear-cut sign Harut had promised her, but in a convoluted

way, it made sense. If demons existed, angels existed too, right? There were a lot of coincidences, and Rayha didn't believe in coincidences. Things happened for a reason, if they didn't, then why did her dad have to die? No, there was a reason they were dreaming what they were dreaming, and a reason Paige had been put into her damn history class where Rayha had to stand up for her and bond with her. There had to be. *But what?* She could already tell this was going to be a very long night with very little sleep.

Rayha passed another bus stop and checked both her watch and the sign with the departure times. Fourteen minutes. *Another bus stop it is.* She turned the corner when she recognized the restaurant they'd passed on the way to Paige's. The scenery slowly transitioned from big houses with acres of property around them to smaller houses with only small gardens. The houses were still large and well-maintained, nothing like the city blocks the trailer was surrounded by. She checked her watch again. Thirty-one minutes past six.

Mom's probably ho—

A shiver traversed her spine and flipped her stomach. The icy warning was familiar and unwelcome; her goddamn stalker was back.

Rayha breathed in and breathed out slowly, then cast a look in the windows she passed to see if anyone followed her. When the feeling didn't lessen and she'd passed four houses without seeing anything, she glanced around.

Four people were close enough to possibly pay attention to her: a man walking a dog, a woman and a man talking animatedly to each other, and a shop owner sweeping his stoop.

None of them paid even the slightest attention to her. She checked the windows of the buildings and even the rooftops.

Nothing. Of course, it was logical she couldn't see an angel—like the pastor had said, Harut wasn't going to come falling out of the sky, but he was there, she was sure of it.

"Are you there, Harut?" She tried to keep her voice firm and steady, but it wavered near the end. *Shit.*

Whatever sense told her where home was, easily pinpointed the source of attention paid to her. Maybe ten feet off, invisible, was the presence.

The man with the dog walked by, so Rayha stepped aside. She waited for him to be out of earshot. “Can you talk to me?” She waited for a reply that didn’t come. Rayha threw her arms up. “What, you can’t talk to me now there isn’t a burning bush in sight? Is that some sort of fucking perquisite?”

Again, no answer.

Irritation and fear forced her heart to a gallop. She flipped the space in front of her the bird. “Drop dead.” With that, she turned and started walking again.

The little hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she couldn’t help but wonder when something terrible would happen now she’d probably pissed up some divine being. The dream-repercussion of pure pain inside her skull didn’t come, but the gaze lingered on her all the way to the next bus stop. The feeling remained strong until the bus arrived and she sat down in the very last row.

As the bus drove off, the feeling lessened, until they passed a corner and it fell away entirely. By that time, Rayha’s shirt stuck to her back and she could smell the sharp stench of her own fear. She’d never longed for a bottle of Jack more than that very moment.

* * *

The trailer smelled like masala, which meant Mom had to have been home at least half an hour or so. *Shit*. “Mom?”

She needn’t have asked; Mom stood over the stove in her unflattering bluish grey work overalls, her hijab pinned firmly in place.

Rayha checked the clock above the door, seven thirty-five. Mom should have been out the door already. Guilt tightened her chest. “Sorry I’m late.”

Mom didn't turn around. She took a plate and filled it with two scoops of sticky rice and two scoops of something either meat or potatoes—Rayha wasn't sure from her position by the door—in a sauce colored orange by the powdered herbs mixture. She held it out for Rayha to take.

Rayha hurried to do so. Her stomach rumbled. She hadn't eaten anything but a few chips since lunch. Freaking the fuck out over a kiss and angel business had quenched her appetite for a while, but it roared back to life with a vengeance. "Thank you."

When Mom still didn't turn around, Rayha put the plate down and took her hand. "I'm sorry. Seriously. It's um, it's been a bad day. I'm sorry I didn't get here in time to have dinner with you."

That seemed to mollify Mom a bit. She turned and looked at her. Mom's eyes were dark, so dark that they appeared almost black. They reflected emotions like water reflected the world around it, and Mom was obviously hurt. "You had bad day?"

Rayha nodded. "Yeah. I don't wanna talk about it, though. Just... bad. Very bad." *But it was also good! So good!* Rayha was caught between the desire to throw out everything that pushed against the inside of her brain like food in a pressure cooker, and the desire to run to her room and hide from the world.

"Bad in school? With your friends?" Mom squinted, inspecting her.

"Mom! I just said I didn't—"

"Okay, okay, yes. I sorry, I won't ask any more about your bad day." Mom squeezed her hand. "It is okay now. You are home, yes? No more bad day?"

If only it were that simple. But the words did make her smile. She nodded and lowered her head before she pressed Mom's hand against her forehead. "Sorry. I'll be here for dinner tomorrow, I promise."

Mom opened her palm and rubbed Rayha's skin with her thumb. "Okay, Rayhana. It is okay. Tomorrow, yes?"

Rayha nodded against the hand. "Tomorrow."

Mom pulled her head against her shoulder and held her.

Rayha inhaled the scent of spices, sweat, and detergent. On a normal day, she would probably have blown off Mom's hug, but today, with everything that happened, Rayha wrapped her arms around her short, chubby body and buried her face into the crook of her neck. Tears welled up and this time, they wouldn't be stopped. First one sob racked her body, then another, and before she knew it, she couldn't stop anymore. She knew she had to, Mom had to leave, but she couldn't do anything but go limp and let everything out that had been building up since the dreams had started, but now brought to a head by Paige's kiss and her invisible stalker.

Mom's hand slipped to the back of her head and the other stroked down her back. "Shhh, meri bacchi. Shhhh... So unhappy. Always so unhappy." She kissed her hair.

Rayha cried harder. Everything inside of her was aching to let all of her secrets out. She wanted to tell Mom about the dream, about talking to Harut, about maybe, probably, liking girls. She wanted advice from a grown-up about all of these things in her life that she felt too young and inexperienced to handle.

She couldn't. Mom wouldn't understand and maybe she would never hold her like this anymore if Rayha told. Rayha tried to stop the tears. When she failed to do so on willpower alone, she gathered her resolve and at least pulled back, wiping the wetness from her eyes every few seconds to prevent tears from dripping down her cheeks. She avoided looking into Mom's eyes. "You'll be late." Her voice was raspy. "I'll be fine, promise. I'm going to eat, do my homework, and go to bed."

Mom hesitated.

Rayha could feel her gaze on her. Didn't mom believe her, or was she just worried? "You can go, I promise."

Mom sighed. Her gaze darted to the clock over the door. "I must go, Rayhana, but when I come back, maybe we talk? We talk about you?" She cupped Rayha's damp cheek and stroked.

Rayha stifled a whimper. She wanted to talk, she really did, but there was just no way. *Get a grip, okay?* She waved her hand dismissively. “Nah, don’t bother. I’ll sleep it off. Go, don’t be late.” She pulled away and sat down. Demonstratively, she picked up the spoon Mom had put there for her and stuffed her face so she wouldn’t have to talk anymore.

The mystery chunks were chicken.

Mom’s gaze lingered on her for at least fifteen seconds—Rayha counted—but then she opened the built-in closet by the door and pulled her coat and bag from it. “Maybe if you no sleep, we say goodnight.”

Rayha didn’t look up. She took another spoonful and bit back the pain as she burned her tongue and the roof of her mouth. Long before she’d properly chewed her chicken to mush, she swallowed the bite down with difficulty.

The door closed with a tiny little click.

“Fuck.” Rayha groaned. She dropped the spoon onto the plate and pushed both away so she could bang her head on the table without getting masala everywhere. One day she would stop feeling guilty about pushing Mom away, but today was not that day.

CHAPTER 9

"A fiery star, coming down, will stand in the middle of the roof and you will perceive the angel whom you besought, sent to you, and you will promptly learn the counsels of the Gods."

— *Papyri graecae magicae*

Rayha blasted the Red Hot Chili Peppers at the loudest volume her Diskman and the speakers in the living room allowed. It was the only thing that seemed to lull her racing thoughts into something that she could handle. Of course, being able to focus on her biology homework was too much to ask, so Rayha just doodled stick figure stories into the margins of her notebook. She was getting nowhere with her thoughts about anything other than biology either. There were just too many questions and not enough answers; she was stuck.

A little noise carried over the music, but just barely. It may have been her imagination.

Rayha looked up and tilted her head.

The sound returned, but it took Rayha a few seconds to identify: Someone was knocking on the trailer door. At this time of day, that could only be one person. An odd and unwelcome sense of guilt squeezed the acid up from her stomach at the thought of seeing Dale again after kissing Paige. She was also still pissed at him.

"Rayha?" He knocked again, a bit louder.

She could be a bitch and not open up, but that was not the kind of friends they were.

Rayha turned the music off and pushed the trailer door open. "What's up?" She folded her arms over her chest and stood straight.

He looked up at her and shrugged before holding up a bottle of White Ace. "Can we talk?"

She eyed the cider, then slid her gaze back up to his eyes. "Are you going to be an ass again?"

His shoulders slumped some more under the leader of his jacket.
“No. Sorry. I was—”

She arched a brow.

He pressed his lips together, then licked them. “No excuses.”

“Damn right.” She pulled on her boots, laced them up and shut the door behind her.

“Gimme that.”

Dale handed her the bottle.

She opened it and followed him down the park paths toward the trailer without having to ask where they were going. They always went to the trailer. The vile spirits scorched her throat, so she drank more to sooth the sting. As an olive branch, she handed the bottle over to Dale once she was done. “How’s the stephole?”

He lowered the bottle. “Same old. I spent the day with Rick, he says hi.”

“He’s out of jail?” That was news. The last time Dale had told her about his cousin was to tell her he’d been arrested for breaking and entering.

“Probation.” Dale shrugged. He waited for her to push through the row of hedges, then followed. “I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you.”

“You did kiss me.” She moved with the flow of conversation easily. “Jerk.”

Dale sighed. “I know. I did. I’m sorry.”

She wiggled her fingers for the bottle and got it. After drinking, she kicked the sleeping bag still in the middle of the trailer floor over to the wall and sat. She patted the space next to her and Dale lowered down. “I’m not going to be your girlfriend.”

“I know.” He sighed, miserably, then glanced at her. “Why?”

Paige. “Because.” She handed him the bottle. “You’re like my brother. It’s weird.” *And I kissed Paige!*

Silence fell as he drank.

Rayha stared at Mary on the wall. She suddenly realized how much of his mom Dale had put into the design. She even had his

bright green eyes, and she was fairly certain Mary's eyes had been brown in her dream. She must have told Dale that.

"How was your day?"

She took his question like the attempt at normalizing their interactions that it probably was and gave in. "School was boring. I went to Paige's house afterward, though." She licked her lips.

"Why?"

Rayha shrugged to pass the comment off as no big deal. "I kind of promised her I wouldn't tell." She looked up. "I swore on dad."

Dale inspected her, then exhaled deeply. "Right." He drank again, then handed her the bottle. "Is it bad?"

"It's...complicated? Maybe related to Harut?" She watched him as she drank.

"Did you tell her?" He sounded both impressed and pissed off.

"Yeah. After she told me some stuff about her. Don't ask more questions, I promised not to tell." She handed back the half empty bottle to smooth over the fresh rejection.

He didn't drink, just held the bottle by the neck. "Okay. Any other news on the angel front?"

"I felt him again, while I was heading home from Paige's." Rayha regretted saying it the moment the words left her mouth, because a shiver ran down her spine and ice filled her gut.

She tensed and sat up straighter.

"What?" Dale followed her gaze.

"Shut up." She looked around, then stood and looked around again. "He's back."

He stood too and scanned their surroundings. "Where?"

"Shh!" She turned around slowly to localize the feeling. "I know you're there."

Harut didn't reply, not that she had expected him to.

She took a step forward.

Dale moved with her.

"I'm getting really sick and tired of this. I know you are there,

okay? No more cryptic messages, just talk to me!” *Talk to me!*

Something rustled in her head, as if tickling the back of her forehead with a feather duster.

Rayha focused on the feeling and tried to grab it, link with it somehow. Another shiver ran down her spine. *Speak!*

Rayhana Kunza Kincaid, we shall speak.

Rayha gasped and took a step back. The voice had resounded in her head like a gong, and it was undoubtedly the same voice she’d heard before. She reached for Dale blindly and took his arm, for support more than anything. “He talked.”

“W-What? No, he didn’t.” He looked around, brows furrowed.

“It did, in my head. He said my name.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Probably. Shush.” She tried to find that spot again, that tickle on the inside of her skull. *I heard you. Is that you, Harut?*

We are He Who Is Called Harut.

“Jesus fucking fuck on a stick. It’s him.” Her heartrate spun out of control and threatened to drown out anything else inside her head. She took a deep breath.

“What did he say?” Dale stared solidly at her now, no longer at where she was looking, which was somewhere over the trailer.

“Just that, that it’s him”

Dale snorted. “Okay, great. That’s progress, right?” He was trying hard to be his usual sarcastic asshole self and Rayha was grateful for it. Without his support, there was no way

she would survive hearing voices inside of her head when awake. “I am awake, right?” She glanced at Dale to check.

He nodded. “Pretty sure.”

“Damn. Well, gimme a second.” She swallowed and formulated a reply, which she projected at the spot. *Can you hear me?*

We can hear you, both the voice of your soul and the voice of your physical manifestation upon the material plane.

Uhhh...whatever that means. Rayha arched a brow. “Wait, you

can hear me when I speak like this?”

Yes.

“Oh. Shit. Okay.” Rayha ran her hand through her hair and sent Dale a warning glance.

“Well, talking like this does make things easier...”

There are even easier ways, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid.

“Like how?” She arched a brow.

Dale gripped her arm. “Like this, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid.”

It was Dale’s voice, but it wasn’t. She turned to the source of the sound and jumped back.

Dale’s posture had become regal; tall and proud. His eyes glowed with energy from within, which was a look she knew very well from her dreams. This was what angelic possession looked like. Harut-in-Dale moved his jaw experimentally. “It has been a long time since we controlled a mortal’s shape. Such frail packages.”

“Get out!” The shrill shout rushed up instinctually. “Or I’ll make you!” Intense fear for her nearly life-long friend blocked out anything else and it transmuted into anger long before any coherent thought could be formed.

“We are not inside of this one’s body. We cannot ‘get out.’ At best we can release him from our control, but we will not do that. Your mind is improperly trained to communicate across planes. Continuing to do so would fatigue you and it would draw attention to yourself that I want to keep off. We will speak like this, for safety.”

It was terrifying to watch Dale’s mouth open wide to form words, as if he was gasping for breath on every syllable. Rayha tried to pack her frenzied thoughts into a single ball of confusion to unwind with questions. “Okay, we’ll talk then, but you need to be more gentle with Dale’s body. He’ll need it once we’re done.”

“Gentle?”

“Stop flapping his mouth when you speak; you’ll dislocate his jaw.” The insanity of that sentence—and her current predicament—hit with the force of a wrecking ball. She was alone here, Dale was under

Harut's control. Harut wasn't just in her head, he was real, and here, which meant everything else that had happened to her—and probably to Paige as well—was real.

Once more, Dale's jaw worked. His moth opened to the point Rayha feared his lower jaw would, in fact, pop from his skull but then his mouth closed. "Agreed." This time, his mouth didn't open nearly as wide.

Rayha relaxed the barest of a fraction. "Okay, good. That's good." *Direct crisis averted. Now to save my goddamned sanity.*

"Your sanity is intact, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid."

"Stop reading my fucking thoughts!" She clasped the side of her head with both hands and squeezed. "Or at least stop saying my name over and over again."

"What designation would you prefer then, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid?"

She pulled her hands from her head and threw her arms up. "What did I just tell you not to do? Call me Rayha. Everyone but my mother does, so why not an angel who hijacked my best friend? Unless you're a demon, because then you and I are about to have some words about my friend Paige."

Dale's face contorted in a grotesque attempt at human emotions which Rayha couldn't identify. "Do not ever mark He Who Is Called Harut as one of the shedim, Rayha. I would smite you for your impertinence if you had not been but an uneducated mortal!" Dale's vocal cords strained as the words were forced from his throat. He glared in a way that led Rayha to believe Harut had manipulated plenty of meatsuits' faces into showing either contempt or disdain. "You must be trained."

Rayha put her hands on her hips. "For what?"

"Obedience."

Even as a shiver of fear traversed her spine, she laughed. "Good luck. My mom's been trying that one fo—"

Quiet!

The word seemed to spit her skull in two. She dropped to her knees as her legs gave out under the sudden attack. Rayha clutched her head and groaned as wave upon wave of pain overtook her. *Stop!* Even in her head, it was a plaintive whimper. *Stop...please!*

The pain ebbed away. It took all her strength with it.

Rayha let herself fall onto her side and panted, still clutching her head. She could feel Harut-inside-Dale step closer but there was nothing she could do but cover her head with her arms in the weakest attempt of self-protection a person could be reduced to.

Her stomach revolted, but she clamped down on her gag reflex. She was not going to throw up, she refused. Shivering and gentle moaning was acceptable and unstoppable, but she wouldn't puke in front of him.

"Obedience," Harut repeated. "It is not only desired behavior from you but it's demanded."

She whimpered. "W-What? H-How?"

If you can't use your form to communicate, communicate with the voice of your soul.

Fine. Rayha tried to formulate a complete sentence with her stricken brain. *What are you? How did you do this to me?*

"We are of the Iyrin, and we are above you. Your form is fragile and your soul easily manipulated."

He sounded so damn smug, Rayha wanted to punch him. *What's an Iyrin?* She chose to ignore the rest of his answer for now.

"An Iyr is a servant of Elah. We rule heaven and earth in His absence."

Rayha carefully unclenched her muscles. The pain didn't worsen. She ran the words over in her head. *Iyrin, Iyr.* Her brain felt sluggish. *So, you really are an angel?* She would have laughed if she wasn't so afraid of how much it would hurt.

"That is a human term, but indeed, that is what we are called." The smugness lingered.

Rayha rolled onto her back and looked up at him through eyes

opened to slits. “Can you lie?”

Harut-in-Dale tilted his head. “Why do you ask this question?”

She bit back a snide remark which would surely have led to more punishment. “Because I don’t trust you. If you are who you say you are, you don’t have a good track record. Pastor Roberts said you aren’t a fallen angel, but he also thought you were probably just a story. He was wrong about that, so I am trying to find out if he was wrong about the rest as well.”

He squinted and stared down at her. “I can lie.”

“Oh.” She swallowed.

“...but I am not Fallen. Our misdeeds were recorded, as was Elah’s forgiveness of our sins. We have been awarded you, for we have proven ourselves loyal.”

Rayha tried to wrap her brain around that. “Awarded? For what? And who is ‘we’?” She got up, but carefully, just to make sure she was allowed.

Harut-in-Dale stepped back. “We are He Who Is Called Harut. Our reward for loyal service to the Counsel of Iyrin is you: our champion to claim fame in this plane and the High Planes as well.” He straightened Dale’s body proudly.

Rayha waited for the world to stop spinning. The trailer that had always felt so comfortable and sheltering now encroached on her; there was not enough oxygen in it to breath properly. “Fame?” Her voice broke. “What fame?”

Harut threw Dale’s arms up in a grand gesture that encompassed the many images on the walls. “You have seen the glory that was reaped by your predecessor!”

She scooted back, following a primal instinct to get away from the crazy. “T-The dreams are yours then?” Her back hit the wall.

“They are a result of our bonding.”

Rayha arched a brow. “We’re bonded?” She was painfully aware of how far away from the door she was.

“We are.” He loomed over her even from the center of the trailer,

even while in Dale's scrawny body. "You are ours. We shall teach you the ways of a champion and you shall proclaim the name of Elah and He Who Is Named Harut. Together, we will keep the balance between good and evil." He stated it without hesitation.

"Um, I object." She stared into his unnaturally blue eyes and tried to gather her courage.

"I belong to no one but my mom and I'm not proclaiming anything—whatever that means."

"Not yet, perhaps, but you have belonged to us as long as you have belonged to your mother. You were chosen to be ours." Dale's chest puffed up in pride.

Rayha swallowed. She pushed herself up along Mary's image on the wall. "Okay, so, question: what if I don't want to be yours?"

Harut-in-Dale seemed to ponder that. "Elah has gifted mortals with the right of free will.

If you decline I must, I suppose, accept."

"Then, I decl—"

"Know, though, that if you do, there will be consequences."

Rayha closed her mouth. Her father's decision to report from a warzone filled her mind. *There are consequences to every decision.*

Yes, there are.

What are they?

We not at liberty to reveal the future to you.

Then how do I decide?

He held her gaze throughout their conversation. The eerie glow in Dale's eyes remained uncomfortable to watch, even if she had seen it before in her dreams.

You won't be forced to choose until your seventeenth year of life starts. You have until then to make up your mind, we suppose, but you obviously do not understand our investment in you.

Rayha frowned. "Investment?"

Harut moved Dale's body forward.

She pressed herself harder against the wall. "What are you doing?"

“Stand still, mortal. we shall show you what you do not know.”

Rayha hesitated a second too long. Dale’s hand was lifted by the angel in control of him and it landed heavily on her forehead.

Instantly, images flooded her brain. Just like in her dreams, she witnessed events as they unfolded, and it only took her a few seconds to realize she was watching her parents have sex.

“Harut!” She clamped her hands over her eyes but it was useless, she was still inside his memory and Harut had not looked away from the couple moving together on the mattress on the floor. She could feel how unaffected he had been to watch this, heard a chorus of voices in his head as they murmured excitedly about the events taking place.

To Harut’s enhanced visual senses, the bodies glowed from the heat created by exertion. He could taste the salt of the male’s ejaculation in the air even before Dad jerked.

Rayha felt nauseous as she heard her father groan and sink down on top of Mom—Mom who looked so young and pretty. She focused on their faces as much as she could to block out what she was watching, even though she could only catch glimpses from her position to the left of the foot of the bed.

This was when you were conceived. Harut’s voice sounded different inside his own skull, warmer somehow. It overpowered a chorus of murmurs noting the alignment of stars and planets and the position of earth relative to the sun.

Rayha wasn’t fooled by his warmer tone. She knew there was nothing warm about him: he felt nothing but mild disdain for this human thing called sex. *Why are you showing me this? I don’t want to see this.* She knew Mom would be mortified if she knew Rayha had witnessed this moment of sin. As much as Mom had loved Dad, Rayha knew she had always regretted breaking Allah’s rules on women losing their virginity before marriage.

We were there.

Dad slid off Mom and tried to kiss her, but she ducked out under

his arm and rushed to cover herself up. She wound a shawl around her head. Harut's followed her as she slipped out of the hut and into the heat of the Thal desert.

Rayha knew the trailer should smell like paint and marihuana, but her brain only registered the stench of piss, and shit, and animals.

Harut had hated it too. He loathed this place. She could sense his wish to leave, but he'd been forced to stay and watch Mom pee into the hole in the ground that served as a toilet.

Rayha strained to hear her whispered words, but she didn't really have to hear them to know the gist of what was obviously a prayer: the tears sliding down her cheeks spoke volumes. A sickening feeling of rejection lodged itself in Rayha's stomach.

Absolution.

Inside Harut's skull, she could sense his loathing as he'd stared down at her.

She chose to partake in sin, now she begs for there to be no repercussions. There are always repercussions.

Anger bloomed inside her chest. "You did the exact same thing, you asshole!" She blindly pushed Dale's body, but he wouldn't budge. His hand seemed glued to her forehead. "You fucked some random woman and you even killed a man! Stop judging, she's ten times better than you are! A hundred times!"

The already familiar pain of punishment hit, but he didn't let her fall.

We have paid for our sins. Do not think we did not.

"S-So..." She gritted her teeth against the pain. "...did she."

He stirred inside her skull, which gave her vertigo as she was simultaneously watching mom collapse onto the floor.

Mom's sobs strengthened Rayha's resolve to stand up for her, no matter what.

Harut was silent long enough for Rayha to watch Dad jump up and wrap his arms around Mom. She pushed him off once, but then sank into his embrace so fiercely they both fell down onto the old rug. He

stroked her hair and murmured to her. When he tried to kiss her, she let him and they both smiled.

Her vision shifted as Harut bent down and reached out. *Don't you touch—!* But this was a memory and there was nothing she could do but watch an inhumanly pale hand without nails on the fingers push into Mom's back.

She shivered and looked up, but Dad soothed her and guided her head back against his chest.

"We'll leave," he said, while Harut stroked a tiny white dot that blazed inside of Mom's belly. "I'll take you to America."

This is when we were bonded.

Rayha tried to block him out; she wanted to hear this.

Mom slowly lifted her head so she could watch him. The hope and joy in her eyes broke Rayha's heart, because in three years, Dad would be dead. She'd be alone in America, with a baby and a family that hated her. For the second time today, Rayha's entire being longed to wrap her arms around Mom and never let her go.

Before she could hear Mom's reply, the image faded. Rayha jumped. "W-Wait!"

Dale's hand fell from her forehead.

She blinked her eyes open, feeling weak and queasy. Her legs only just held her up, but only because she had the wall to support her.

The glow in Dale's eyes was still as bright as ever. After what she had just seen, she was almost grateful that Harut was still there. She needed to process this with someone—and not just the fact that she had seen her dad's face again. It was seared into her brain even more than watching them have sex through the eyes and terrifyingly inhumane mind of an angel.

"We were there," he repeated. "When you were conceived."

"W-Why?" Her voice held only a smidgen of her usual bravado.

"You were chosen." He waved Dale's hand at the remnants of the trailer. "...so it shall be done."

Rayha's squeezed her trembling hands into fists. "You just said I

had a choice.”

He inclined Dale’s head. “You do have a choice, Rayha, but consider what would have happened if the other champions had not fulfilled their tasks.”

She did, pondering millions of conversions, millions of deaths. “I don’t think the world would have been worse off.”

He made Dale smile, patronizingly. “You do not see like we do. We protect the world from shedim, even though you do not know they walk amongst you. Think wisely about your decision, we shall talk again soon.”

Rayha felt him withdraw from her mind. Panic surged. She still had so many questions!

Protect how? Against what? The shedim? “Wait!”

But he was gone; the light faded from Dale’s eyes.

She half expected him to go limp and fall flat on his face, even though the dreams had taught her better, but he just blinked and looked around. “What were we talking about?”

“Uhhh...that depends.” Rayha scanned his face. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Huh? Why?” He frowned and smoothed his hair down.

“Could you please just answer the question?” She couldn’t keep the tenseness out of her tone.

He noticed; she could tell by the way he searched her eyes. “Sitting here, talking about your stalker. Rayha, you’re worrying me. What’s going on?”

Rayha hesitated. Should she tell him? Would Harut do something to him if she did?

“Rayha, should I?”

She shook her head. “Maybe. I-I need to think. Shit just went down but I don’t know how much more of it will come down if I tell you.”

He took her arm. “Tell me.” His gaze was intense but it was much easier to stand now his eyes were dull again. “If something happened

to me, tell me.”

She looked away. Her thoughts were too illusive to hold on to for more than a few seconds and they wouldn't come together into conclusions. Could she tell him? Would she put him in danger? Harut's presence had been terrifying, menacing even. If something happened to Dale, she wouldn't know what to do; when she'd told him he was like a brother, she wasn't lying. She watched his wide eyes, his shallowed breathing. His cheek was a mixture of green, blue, and yellow under layers of powder.

“Please tell me what's going on—me, your best friend.” He still held on to her arm, but the pressure lessened.

Rayha pulled it free. He was right, he was her best friend. She had to tell him at least something. “Harut talked to me,” she said. “Through you.”

“What?” He examined her eyes.

She sighed and shook out her hair. “I don't want to go into details but I think I can tell you that they—” She pointed upward. “Have some shit planned for me and I have to decide if I want to be a part of that plan.”

Dale reached out to her again, but when she angled her body away, he dropped his hand.

He watched her. “Will you?” His tone spoke of the same conflicting emotions she saw in his eyes.

“I don't know.” At least that she could answer truthfully and without fear of repercussions. Obviously, Harut already knew she was struggling with the decision. “I have until my birthday to decide, or at whatever time before. That's all I can tell you right now.

Please don't ask me anything else.”

“But I have a lot of questions.”

“So do I.” She took his hand and squeezed. “I don't have answers. I just have to think first. I think you're okay, if that counts for something? You were just convenient.”

His jaw set and his eyes watered ever so slightly. “I have to get

home.” He pulled his hand free.

Rayha chased it, but he stuffed it into his pocket. “Dale, don’t do that; don’t go away angry.”

“Whatever.” He shook his head and barged out of the trailer.

Rayha frowned. “The fuck? Dale!”

He didn’t come back and acid spread inside her gut, eating away at her. Her head felt like it would pop—there was too much in it, too much she couldn’t comprehend right now. Why was he so mad? What did Harut have in mind for her? Would people die if she didn’t do what he asked? She felt absolutely alone in a threatening world of uncertainty, and maybe it had been a mistake not talk to Dale after all. Whatever happened, she didn’t want to lose him as a friend.

Rayha grabbed the bottle of White Ace and closed the trailer door behind her. She needed to think, and maybe she needed someone to think with. There was only person other than Dale who could possibly qualify.

CHAPTER 10

“For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

— *Hebrews 4:12*

For the second time in as three days, Paige sat staring out the window at the barn. It had, after all, become the aggregate of her current predicament. What had she been thinking, kissing Rayha? She hadn't meant to, really. It had just been so long since someone had held her, and then Rayha had been right there, so tempting and inviting, and she hadn't pulled away. That, of course, did not make it okay to mess up a friendship before it could get properly off the ground!

“Why are you always so stupid, Paige? So incredibly dumb.” She shook her head and forced herself to look away from the barn. Her gaze landed on her bookcase instead, which sent a tingle down her spine. She dug her teeth into her lip. After a moment, she slipped off the windowsill and walked over to it.

Very slowly, she ran her fingertips along the cracked spines of her book collection. They lingered on *The Well of Loneliness*, which was as close to a book about lesbianism as Paige's collection held. Marguerite Radclyffe Hall was an author Paige admired and since *The Well of Loneliness* was perhaps her most famous work, Paige had gotten it for Christmas last year, as one of ten books on her wish list.

Her parents had always appreciated the classics.

She slid the book out and leafed to the page with the tiny earmark. One sentence was all that eluded to more that friendship between Stephen and Mary. *No, not “eluded to,” “confirmed their relationship.”*

“That night, they were not divided.” She whispered the words and read the sentence again before she leafed on.

“Inverts.” That word, she tasted too. Of course, times had changed since the 1920’s. *Well, hopefully.*

She hadn’t planned on kissing Rayha. It had just been so good to have someone in her life who believed her. Rayha had held her, had talked to her, had understood her. No one in her life believed her, and no one held her anymore.

Paige sighed. She put *The Well of Loneliness* back on her shelf. *You shouldn’t have kissed her. She’ll never talk to you again.* She’d be in the right too!

Just because they’d held hands once—sort of—there was no reason to assume Rayha was, well, an “invert” like her. She snorted into the silence of her room. “Just say it already, Paige.” She checked to make sure the door was closed. “Lesbian.” Just saying it made her cheeks tingle.

She inched *The Well of Loneliness* forward so it would align perfectly with the rest of the books on the shelf.

The phone rang downstairs.

Paige jumped. She stood stock still and listened. She couldn’t imagine who’d be calling at nine PM. *Well, maybe Harry, but—*

“Paige!”

Her heart simultaneously plummeted to her belly and shot up into her throat, which gave her horrible vertigo for a second or two. She froze as her mind ran away with her. *Maybe it isn’t Harry, maybe it’s the doctors and they’ve found a tumor.* Was she still waiting for results on one of her many tests?

“Paige? It’s your friend from school? Radja?”

Oh thank God! Relief washed through her and she hurried to her door. Then she froze again, hand on the handle. *What does she want? Is she going to say it was a mistake to kiss? Or threaten me to keep my mouth shut?* Both options worsened the knot in her stomach.

“Paige?” Mom’s footsteps carried upward.

She's coming! Paige yanked the door open. "No! Sorry, I'm here. I'm here." She hurried downstairs and forced Mom back down with her. "I've got it." She smiled sweetly and brushed past her mother to pick up the horn, then clamped her hand over the transmitter and waited for Mom to leave and close the door. She brought the horn up to her ear. "Hello?"

"Paige?" Rayha's voice sounded different over the telephone line, flatter and higher. The gruffness in her tone was the same, though.

Despite her worry, Paige couldn't help a small smile. "Yeah, it's me. Sorry about the wait. Um, are you okay?"

"I dunno. And I'm almost out of quarters. Um. Something happened, something to do with you-know-what. Can you come to school earlier? I need to talk to you."

She sounds tense. That was worrying, Paige supposed, especially if it had to do with demons and angels, but there was no mention of the kiss, nor were any threats made. In fact, Rayha seemed to pick up their interaction exactly where they'd left off—which dissolved most of the darkness swirling in Paige's belly.

"Paige?"

"Oh! Sorry, yes, I'll be earlier. I'm not sure how yet, but I'll ask Dad to take me on his way to work. I'll be at school around eight, is that all right?"

"Eight is good." The sound of metal-against-metal sounded a moment. "That was my last quarter. Paige, I—" Rayha exhaled deeply. "Don't tell anyone, okay? Stay safe."

Paige frowned and cupped her hand over the receiver so she wouldn't have to talk as loudly. "Ray, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll tell you tomorrow. Stay sa—"

"Rayha?"

The dial tone sounded in her ear; Rayha had been disconnected.

Paige hung up. She waited, just in case Rayha called back with money she'd found, but she didn't. The cut-off word was all she

would hear from her until 8 am tomorrow—if she could get her ride together.

What had happened to Ray? Why was she so scared? And how had Rayha gotten her number? She didn't have Rayha's and even if she had, Rayha had been at a payphone now.

Maybe they didn't have a phonenumber at the house? Her chest felt compressed, like something heavy pushed against it from the front. It made her a little short of breath.

The door to the living room opened and Mom appeared.

Paige startled and stepped away from the phone, as if it was evidence in a murder investigation.

"Your friend sounds nice." Mom smiled, but her eyes didn't light up.

Danger! Paige smiled and nodded. "She is. She's just a classmate, though. Rayha's the one who helped me with my essay for history. She wanted to warn me that there is another one tomorrow, for biology, and I should write it. Um, she asked if I wanted to go over it with her before school tomorrow, since she's going to be early to research something as well. I should be there at eight." It wasn't a complete lie. Well, the biology essay didn't exist, but Rayha had and wanted to help her. Besides, they were going to discuss things tomorrow, just not biology.

Mom hummed. She was no longer in her work clothes, like she had been at dinner. She wore jeans and a blouse now, and her hair was down. "'Radja' is a foreign name."

Paige resisted the urge to roll her eyes—but with difficulty. "It's pronounced with less of a D sound; Rayha. I don't know if she is foreign. Would you like me to ask her tomorrow?"

Mom seemed to actually consider the ludicrous idea. "No, I suppose that's not necessary. We knew the school was open to everyone."

Seriously? Paige stretched out her fingers so they wouldn't curl into fists. "Can Dad take me on his way to work?"

“Why don’t you ask him, Paige?” Mom pursed her thin lips, a clear sign of disapproval.

Paige nodded. She was eager to get out of this conversation anyway.

Mom stepped aside to let her pass.

“Dad?”

“Hm?” He was engrossed in the newspaper which had started arriving this morning but looked up after a short delay.

She missed the times when his eyes had lit up when he saw her. Now he just looked at her like a problem he had to fix. Paige wrapped her arms around herself. “Could you drop me off at school tomorrow? On your way to work, I mean?”

Dad looked at Mom over her head in a way that made Paige feel entirely invisible. “I suppose.”

She forced herself to smile when she would rather cry. “Thanks Dad.”

He hummed again, which had become his main reply—a non-committed, almost non-verbal, barely social acknowledgement of her existence. “Bedtime in an hour.”

The words landed like a slap to her cheek and the little hairs on the back of her neck rose.

Bedtime. Danger time. “I-I’ll be ready.” She escaped as soon as she could and restrained herself from running up the stairs. She also didn’t slam her door, even though she really wanted to.

Two years ago, she would have fallen onto her bed and cried over the unfairness of how parents treated their children, but her bed had become as unsafe as her parents. She sank down in her reading chair instead and pulled her legs up. Rocking gently, she tried not to cry. He would see the red rims around her eyes and get angry.

She felt so trapped, so horribly misunderstood and hated—by her own parents. That, combined with left-over tension and new worries for the day ahead made Paige feel worse about herself and her life than she’d felt since her parents had told her they were moving. She

sniffed, then wiped at her nose. *Sitting here is not going to make anything better.*

Paige put her legs down again. She would have to sleep, and tomorrow would come, no matter what she did. Her gaze was drawn to the bed without her permission. *If I wake up as myself, that is.*

* * *

Rayha was caught between a rock and a hard place and she straddled the divide by leaving her bedroom door open but turning the lights off. She knew she couldn't talk to Mom about everything that was going on in her life, but after meeting Harut and seeing her with Dad, Rayha did want to be with Mom for a while. By leaving the door open but appearing to be asleep, Rayha could decide when Mom got home if she wanted to spend time with her or not.

She stared at her alarm clock and watched the glowing red numbers tick on to ten twenty-six, that was when mom's bus arrived at the entrance of the park. It would take her another two or three minutes to walk home. Any second now, she would—

The door opened with only the minute creak of the handle as evidence, but Rayha still jumped. Her heartbeat rabbited as she waited for mom to get in, put down her bag, take off her shoes, and notice her bedroom door open.

“Rayhana? You asleep now?”

Hearing the softness in her tone, the touch of hope, made Rayha's decision easy. She rolled onto her back and pushed the blankets down a bit. “No.”

“Hm. My heart is glad, but sad too. You cannot sleep?” Mom unpinned her hijab as she walked over.

“Not really.” Rayha watched her as she sat down on the edge of the bed and folded the pins into the layers of fabric.

Mom laid the package by her feet and gave her full attention to Rayha. “That is not good.”

She smiled softly in the way only mom could, as if she knew what was wrong and it would all be better now she was here.

Rayha tried to stop the quiver in her bottom lip, and she tried to blink away the tears, but all these terrible and exciting and terrifying events were piling on and she desperately wanted Mom to make it better. She fought her arms free of the blankets and held them out.

“Oh, meri bacchi.” Mom did better than hug her, she drew the blankets up and slipped under them so Rayha could snuggle entirely against her. Mom’s arms closed securely around her. “My sad girl.” Mom stroked her back, her shoulders, her head.

Rayha inhaled deeply, hunting for the scent of masala under layers of bleach and toilet cleaner. She cried almost quietly as she listened to the sound of mom’s steadily beating heart and even breathing. For the first time in days, a feeling of safety blanketed her and it had never been more welcome than now, with Dale mad at her, a deadline to decide what the rest of her life would be like, and memories of kissing Paige on repeat in front of her mind’s eye.

“Do you want to talk?” Mom pressed her lips to the top of her head.

“No.” Being held was good. Then she thought better of herself. “Yes. Maybe.” She lifted her head up.

“Tell me, hm?” Mom stroked her hair out of her face and then brushed her tears away. Her eyes were kind and dark, polar opposites to Harut’s.

The smell of latex hit her nostrils. “You haven’t told me about dad in a long time.”

Mom tensed, but only a moment. Then she inhaled deeply and nodded. She let her breath escape. “I have not, but I should. It is always pain inside.” She tapped her chest, over her heart.

“I know, but I miss him.” The man in Harut’s memories was a man she had no memories of other than from mom’s stories. Now she’d seen him move about and she’d heard his voice, she was hungry to know even more about him.

“Hm...” Mom settled more comfortably on the one person bed and guided Rayha against her. “What do you want to know?”

Rayha played with one of the buttons running down Mom’s overalls. She didn’t like the memory of Mom’s sorrow, or her pain, or her fear. The image of her legs giving out under the weight of shame would stay with Rayha forever. “Tell me about when I was born? Were you both happy?”

Mom laughed, freely but softly, as if not to spook her. “When you was born, I was the most happy person. No, the second happy person, Tom was even more happy. More proud. You was all he sees, he forgets about me!”

“He did not!” Rayha smiled through her slowly drying tears. “He loved you.”

Mom hummed. “He loved me, and he loved you. Very much. And I love you just as much today.”

The tears renewed, but not out of sorrow this time. She buried her face in mom’s armpit. “I love you too.”

Mom stroked her hair. “I always know that, Rayhana. Always. No matter what.”

Rayha sniffed and chose to remain silent. As soon as all Rayha’s secrets were spilled, Mom wouldn’t say “I love you” anymore, but right now, that time was far away. She wanted to make the most of it.

CHAPTER 11

“Whatsoever the mind of him that is in vehement love affects, hath an efficacy to cause love; and whatsoever the mind of him that strongly hates, dictates, hath an efficacy to hurt and destroy. The like is in other things which the mind affects with a strong desire; for all those things which the mind acts, and dictates by characters, figures, words, speeches, gestures, and the like, help the appetite of the soul.”

— Francis Barrett, *The Magus*

Rayha fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. She was highly aware of the way her thigh almost touched Paige’s as they sat together on the low wall that had become their usual lunch spot. It was different at school without the throng of students. Only a few were mental enough to show up at eight when class started at nine. It didn’t make saying the words easier. “Okay, so, I spoke to Harut yesterday, outside of a dream.”

A tiny gasp escaped Paige’s lips. “You...he came to see you?” She closed the gap between their thighs with a little scoot.

Rayha's heart skipped a beat. “Well, something like that. I heard a voice in my head, then he took over Dale’s body and we talked.”

“Ray, that’s...that’s big. What did he say?”

“Long story short, that I’m supposed to be his champion and do his bidding, but I have until I turn sixteen to decide if I want to do it. If I don’t, there will be consequences but he didn’t want to tell me which.” She exhaled slowly, letting out some of the tension that had been building up inside of her.

“When’s that? When do you turn sixteen?” Paige looked at her, for once seemingly unperturbed by the people that happened by at irregular intervals.

“December twenty-first.”

“Three months, give or take.” Paige frowned and stared down at

her hands.

Rayha nodded. She felt so lost. The horrible sense of foreboding mom had soothed last night had returned with a vengeance come dawn. “I don’t think I can make this decision by myself.”

Paige hummed and pulled her legs up. She wrapped her arms around them and laid her cheek on her knees as she kept her gaze on Rayha. “How can I help?”

“I wish I knew.” Rayha sighed and put her hands on the stones of the wall. She dug her chewed off nails into them.

“Do you want to do it? Be a champion? And what would it even mean to be one?”

Rayha pressed her lips together and stared at her dangling feet. “Do you remember what I told you about my dreams?”

Paige nodded.

“I think all of the saints I dream of were champions, and they were at the start of these epic, history-changing moments in time.” Rayha licked her lips. “I think that’s what it would be like. It sounds important, but no, I don’t want to do it. I don’t even get why people join the army, let alone fight these...these...shedim.”

“Shedim?” Paige tilted her head to the side.

Rayha shrugged. “Harut used the term. It’s their word for ‘demon,’ I guess.”

“Oh.” Paige frowned. “Have you ever seen one? In, like, their true form?”

Rayha glanced up at her. “No. I know some of the bad guys in my dreams were possessed or whispered to by the shedim, but I’ve never seen them without a human shell.”

“I hope you never have to.” Paige wrapped her arms tighter around her legs.

“That bad?” She wondered if she could get Paige to give her a description.

“Yeah. Worse.” Paige stared at Rayha’s hands. “I can’t imagine fighting them.”

Rayha shook her head. “I don’t want to fight them, but what if the consequences are worse? What if I decide not to do anything and I set the end of the world in motion or something? Then what?”

Paige just looked at her, still curled up.

Rayha pushed on. “Harut said there was a balance between good and evil that champions maintain, but why should there be a balance? I mean, why don’t the angels just recruit a bunch of people or attack the shedim themselves and kill them all? Wouldn’t that be more useful than drafting fifteen-year-olds to fight for you?”

Paige worked her lip piercing as she drew her gaze back up. “I’ve been reading the Bible a lot since the dreams started. It says in James one, verses thirteen through fifteen: ‘Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.’”

Rayha arched a brow. “What does that mean?”

“I think it means that evil is in people, and that as long as there are people, there will be evil. We’re all messed up.”

Rayha snorted. “No denying that.”

“Well, that also means that the angels can’t just wipe out all evil, not without killing all humans as well. It also says in Luke four, verse ten that ‘He will command His angels concerning you to guard you carefully,’ which I assume means that the angels have to protect humans unless they sin and evil is brought into the world.”

“So it’s a catch-22, huh?” Rayha rolled her eyes. “The angels want evil out of the world, but angels can’t kill innocent people. Unless all people are dead, there will always be the potential for evil in the world.”

Paige nodded. “That seems to be the gist of it.”

“That’s messed up.”

“It is.” She unwrapped one arm from around her knees and took

Rayha's hand. Her wide eyes scanned Rayha's face, but she covered the touch with speech. "Can you talk to Harut again? Maybe get some more answers?"

Rayha glanced down, hesitated, then turned her hand around so they could hold hands properly. Butterflies drowned out all her worries, but only for a few seconds. Then Paige's words registered and she slumped. "Maybe. It's not like I have a direct line to him, though. Last time he just showed up and I double dared him to talk to me. I don't feel him now and I don't know how to get his attention until I do."

"Then maybe you should wait with making a decision. You have three months to make your decision. There is time to research and think." Paige's thumb stroked her skin.

Rayha tightened her grip a fraction. "I guess." She regarded Paige. "Do you know the whole Bible from the top of your head?"

Paige's cheeks flushed, which was pretty adorable. "No, just... relevant parts. Parts about God and demons and angels. I've been trying to understand why...why I'm being punished with the nightmares."

"Have you figured it out?"

"No." She sighed. "I think it might be a warning. I just don't know if there is also redemption in it."

Rayha watched her. "Do you need redemption?"

Tears welled up in Paige's eyes. "I-I don't know. Maybe? I've been causing a lot of people pain."

"Like who?"

"My parents. My brother, I guess. Friends I used to have...you?" She glanced at her.

Rayha frowned. "Why me? You didn't hurt me."

Paige glances around, then leaned in. "The kiss."

"Oh." Heat rushed to Rayha's cheeks. "Yeah, that happened. But it didn't, you know, hurt me." She didn't try to hide her smile.

Paige lifted her head from her knees and scanned her eyes. "Are

you sure?”

Rayha nodded. “Pretty sure. I’m confused, I guess, and um... worried, because my mom’s going to flip her lid if she ever finds out, but I um, I liked it.” She tensed, waiting for a reaction.

“Me too.” Paige squeezed her hand and held her gaze. “A lot.”

The admission caused another explosion of flutters in Rayha’s belly. She stroked Paige’s skin with her thumb, enjoying the softness. “You know, I think the person you’ve hurt most is yourself.”

Paige retracted her head like a turtle sinking into its shell. “W-What do you mean?”

“Trying to kill yourself, then going through all of this? I think the person who’s hurt most is you.” She glanced aside, trying to catch Paige’s eyes, but they were downcast, and moist.

“Maybe.” Paige sniffed.

“I don’t want to bring up ancient history, but why did you do it? Why did you try to end it?”

Paige swallowed and shrank even more. She held on to Rayha’s hand like a vice—no, perhaps more like a tether. “It wasn’t one thing, it was all the little things, you know?” She checked on Rayha, who nodded. “I was bullied a lot in school, so I started eating less because maybe if I was super thin, I would be prettier and people would like me, but everyone just teased me more so I started skipping school. I failed a bunch of classes and started to eat even less because I felt I deserved to feel bad and it just all—” She choked on a sob. Tears spilled down her cheeks when she blinked.

Rayha resisted the urge to reach out and brush them away, but Paige was letting things out, she didn’t want to interrupt that. She did lift Paige’s hand into her lap and held it tightly for support.

Paige offered her a weak smile. “It just all piled on. I couldn’t recover my grades and my parents were furious because no one in my family had ever been held back. The therapy they had to get me to eat more wasn’t working, so they threatened to have me committed. That’s when I did it. It felt like the only way out.” She shrugged.

“Everyone hated me. They would have been better off without me.”

The urge to comfort became too great to ignore. She leaned in and pulled Paige against her. “You’re wrong. I wouldn’t be better off without you. No one would be.” She pressed her head against Paige’s and held her close.

Even though the angle was awkward, Paige sank into her. She wrapped her free arm around Rayha’s neck and held on tightly. “Thank you.” The whisper brushed against her skin and left goose bumps in its wake.

Rayha rocked her gently, hating how thin Paige was even more now she knew why she’d starved herself. “Paige?”

“Hm?”

I’m not sure if Harut has that kind of power, and if he’ll listen to me, but if I can—if it’s possible—I’m going to make sure you get into heaven when you die.”

Rayha’s softly spoken words seemed to cracked the emotional walls Paige had put up; one sob set off a cascade that shook her entire body. She clung to Rayha for several seconds, then sucked in a gulp of air. “N-Not if it hurts you.”

Rayha stroked her back, tracing vertebrae. “I’ll try. If anyone knows how, it’s him.”

Paige nodded against her neck. She sucked in her breath and held it for several seconds before letting it go slowly, seemingly trying to calm herself down.

A glance around told Rayha they were being watched, so she shielded Paige’s face more firmly by finally letting go of her hand and wrapping her other arm around her too.

“Do you have time to go to the barn again?”

It took Rayha a few seconds to answer. “I want to, she said eventually, but I need to be home for dinner. I was late last time and I have class until four.”

“Oh. That’s okay.” Paige’s tensed and tried to pull back.

Rayha didn’t let her. “Tomorrow, maybe?”

Paige relaxed again and sank back. “I’d like that.”

“Good. Tomorrow then, it’s a date.” She’d intended it as a joke, but as soon as the word registered, she tensed.

Paige chuckled and now it was her turn to stroke Rayha’s back and sooth her—right until her lips found her neck for a fleeting kiss that Rayha may or may not have imagined.

Instantly, her whole body ignited.

“A date, then,” Paige murmured, and Rayha could hear the smile in her tone.

Rayha tried to reclaim her faculties. She released Paige’s shirt, which she’d apparently taken a death grip on. “A date.” She swallowed. Suddenly, she couldn’t wait for tomorrow to arrive, while she’d been dreading thinking of the future only a few minutes prior.

Paige eased herself back, so Rayha regrettably let her. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but a smile and a blush had settled on her features too.

Yeah, she really is pretty when she smiles. Rayha brushed a final tear away. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah.” Paige wiped at her eyes with her glove before she fished her wallet out of her bag. “Here.” She shook out all the coins she had and held them up for Rayha to take.

Rayha squinted. “What are those for?”

The blush on Paige’s cheeks deepened. “For the payphone. Maybe we can talk a bit longer...if you need to call me again?”

Rayha couldn’t hold back a smile. “I have money, you know?” Not a lot, and she’d probably use up all of Paige’s coins next time she called, but she also had a bit of pride left.

“I know. It’s just...incentive.” Paige handed the coins over. They added up to about a dollar fifty, but that was enough for seven and a half minutes of talking time Rayha wouldn’t otherwise have had.

“I’ll use it.” She smiled and stuffed the coins into the front pocket of her backpack.

“Come on, we have class soon.” She stood, shouldered her bag

and waited for Paige to catch up. “Besides, we need to get you presentable before class. Again.” She grinned when Paige's cheeks got even redder.

“Stop teasing.” Paige shouldered her bag with a playful smile.

Rayha glanced at Paige's hand, then took it. They didn't link fingers, but Rayha held her hand loosely as she guided her into the building. “Sorry, Mouse. It's what I do best.”

* * *

Rayha listened to the dial tone as she watched other residents of the park walk by. Some greeted her, most ignored her, a handful seemingly didn't spot her at all. Why everyone was out at nine PM was beyond her, but all right.

“Jennifer Guthrie speaking.”

Shit. “Hello Mrs. Guthrie. It's Rayha. Um, is Paige there? Please?” She cringed at her own awkwardness. At least she hadn't sworn.

“Ah, Rayha.” Mrs. Guthrie over-pronounced the D sound in her name, which made it sound like it belonged to a Bollywood star. “She's here, yes.”

In the background, she could hear Paige whisper something, then Mrs. Guthrie either pressed the receiver to her chest or clasped her hand over it, because Rayha heard interference and then murmurs. The interference returned.

“Ray?” Paige's voice was only fractionally louder than a whisper.

“Hey! Bad time? I can call back. Or hang up?” Ray checked her pocket watch.

A small pause followed. “No, I think it's okay.” Warmth had settled around Paige's voice, even though it sounded condensed because of the technology between them. “How are you?”

Rayha shrugged. “You know. But it's good to talk to you.” It was, it really was. She turned away from some prying eyes. “How about you?”

“Hm. Okay.” She paused. “I don’t want to go to bed.”

Rayha staired to hear her. “Oh. Right. You’re scared it’ll um... that the shedim’ll get you?”

“Always.” Paige sighed.

“If you get in trouble, just shout for me, okay? I’ll fly in on angel wings and get you out.” The words escaped before she could really think them through, which was unfortunate because they were lame as fuck.

Paige just laughed. “Yeah, that would be great! Just swoop in and smite them all.”

Pride at making Paige smile welled up inside Rayha’s chest. “Well, if I could, I totally would, okay? Just so you know. What’s the use of having an angel after your ass when you can’t count on him to save your—” She bit down on the word “girlfriend” with an audible click of her teeth. “...new friend. With demon problems. New friend with demon problems.” *Oh, fucking smooth, Rayha. Fucking smooth.* She banged her head silently against the metal of the payphone. How could she suck at this talking-to-Paige thing so incredibly badly?

Paige was silent a moment. “Well, I appreciate it.”

It might be her imagination, but it sounded as if Paige was smiling. Good, then she hadn’t messed up too badly. “Any time, Mouse.” A beep on the line reminded her to insert another coin. “You’ll be okay tonight, and maybe we can have lunch together tomorrow?”

“Definitely!”

“Then how about I save the rest of these coins so I can call you tomorrow, hm? I’ll be here if you need me.” Not that there was much Rayha could do, but she wanted to. And she really wanted Paige to know that she had someone in her corner.

Paige exhaled slowly. “I’ll remember that. Thank you. I mean it. It...it means a lot.”

Another beep sounded.

“No problem.” Rayha smiled at the sincerity that radiated from Paige’s voice. “You’ll be fine and I’ll see you tomorrow. And Paige?”

“Yes?”

“I really like you.”

Before Paige could reply, the call was dropped and an automated voice explained how to get it back. Rayha hung up the receiver instead and pressed first one, then the other overheating cheek against the cool metal of the phone. *Great, now she probably thinks you're lame.*

Despite her own admonition, Rayha all but floated back home with a smile on her face that even the thought of impending doom could not quench. She'd told Paige she liked her and she was fairly sure that if the call had lasted another few seconds, Paige would have told her she liked her too.

CHAPTER 12

“Oh, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, yea, a King over the whole world, protect me during this day and night, protect me at all times by thy five holy wounds, that I may not be seized and bound.”

— *John George Hoffman, Pow-Wows*

Its claws scraped the tiles by Paige’s head. The scaly toe lifted and the sharp end caught the light of the raging inferno out in the hallway. The demon hissed.

Paige squeezed her eyes shut and fought her rising panic. Above her, the massive snakehead would be moving side-to-side as the demon’s forked tongue tasted the air for any sign of her. She clamped her hand tighter over Goldie’s mouth reflexively; she knew the demon was deaf, but she couldn’t resist the urge to be quiet.

The girl struggled against her hold. Blood from Goldie’s cut wrists dripped onto Paige’s skin as she clawed at Paige’s arm.

Paige set her jaw as pain and panic flared. She intensified her hold and leaned in close to her ear. “Shhhh...” If Goldie didn’t calm down, Paige would have to let her go. She’d hate to let her go; Goldie was her favorite.

The demon turned to face their hiding spot. The massive, chicken-like feet stood wide apart. Nails dug into the stone and scraped chunks from it with such ease that Goldie panicked even more.

Paige pulled the girl back father into the crevice created by the debris of the ceiling as it had come down in slates and chunks. Something hard pressed against the side of her head but she didn’t dare take her eyes off of the green-scaled claws that were the only part of the demon she could see. She prayed passionately for the section above the demon to give way under the patient lapping of the inferno but so far, it had stayed in place.

Goldie pressed her back tighter against Paige’s front as she tried to

get farther away from the opening. Her small chest rose and fell rapidly. She stopped clawing, but gripped Paige's arm so tightly that Paige was sure she'd soon be bleeding herself.

Demons can smell blood. Paige knew it could smell Goldie; it always could. It was stupid to try to keep her safe. She was putting herself at risk over a dead girl but whenever she found Goldie in the maze of the Cathedral, she tried to get through the night without the girl ending up tortured on a cross. To her shame, Paige's desire to save Goldie hadn't stopped her from pushing her in front of a demon multiple times, just so she could get away herself. It looked like tonight would be one of those nights.

The massive talons on the demon's hands scraped over the wooden slate that was their main cover and protection.

Goldie squealed.

"Shhh!" Paige wrapped her legs around Goldie's, trying to keep her restrained.

It only made Goldie's panic worse. She twisted and bucked as she clawed at Paige's arm with renewed vigor.

Paige didn't have the muscle to hold her anymore; she had to let go.

Goldie didn't try to push out, like Paige had feared she would. She flattened herself against stone and wood and cried bitter tears.

Her terror was heartbreaking to watch; the other prey didn't seem to remember anything, including what a demon was. The sight of them terrified them, which she supposed was the point. It was how Paige had learned she was different: she remembered.

Paige pushed up on her haunches and grabbed what looked like the leg of a chair. She held it in front of her like a stabbing weapon. As useless as it was, she would try to fight her way out—especially if the demon went after her instead of Goldie.

The slate lifted slowly.

Dust and sand and ash drifted down onto Paige's face and into her eyes. She blinked and rubbed furiously to clear her vision.

The few seconds it took for the sting to clear was enough for the demon to yank the slate off in its entirety.

Goldie jumped up and ran.

The demon's massive, human bulk turned toward the source of movement. Its powerful legs pushed it forward with a speed that always terrified Paige most of all. The twisted cobra's head pushed forward eagerly. Its clawed hands reached out.

Goldie ran through the cavernous room as fast as she could on her bare feet, but Paige knew from experience demons were much faster than humans.

Her breath caught in her throat as the demon's claws dug into Goldie's shoulders and yanked her off her feet. She'd watched it happen at least a few dozen times but it never got easier to watch Goldie fly through the room like a ragdoll.

She landed with a sickening crunching of bone. Her tangled blonde hair covered her face. Goldie didn't get back up.

The demon didn't hurry now; it squatted and waddled closer as it tasted the air with its tongue.

Move, Paige. Move! She moved. As quietly as she could, she skirted the debris, counter to the demon's path. Every step was punctuated by her thumping heart.

She made it out of the room just as the demon's claw wrapped around Goldie's head and lifted her off the floor.

I'll try to save you again tomorrow, Goldie. I'm sorry.

Thus started another round of hide-and-go seek. It was just like the game Paige remembered from her childhood, but with far worse consequences upon discovery. With hurried footfalls, Paige dashed through the hallway. Fire licked along the walls and dissolved the last of the tapestries, paintings, and curtains in a roaring blaze. Paige covered her eyes to protect them from the heat as she pushed through with as much speed as she dared. She almost tripped over a toppled statue but managed to right herself before she went down.

Claws scraped the stone floor only slightly behind her. A breath

later, the head of the statue only just missed her as it spun past and shattered into pieces against the wall ahead of her.

How did it get here so fast? Paige threw herself into the hallway to the left. Every gasp of air burned in her lungs. Oxygen was in short supply. Her heart threatened to give out under the strain of running and terror. *Where's Goldie?*

The demon released the mixture of a hiss and a squawk that haunted Paige's waking life—a battle cry, a victory cry.

Paige's tears evaporated off her cheeks long before they could drop. The blur worsened her vision, but it didn't matter much anymore.

You can't outrun a demon!

She knew it was true but her legs carried her forward, regardless. She almost went down again, this time slipping over something unseen—*blood!*— and tore open her hand on a piece of blazing wood. Paige cried out and instantly hated herself for wasting the air. With her breathing thrown off, her side quickly stitched up. She pressed her fingers onto the skin and dug her nails into the flesh to keep the pain from spreading.

This time, the demon's cry sounded so close to her ear, she yelped. Panic spread furiously through her veins. It soaked her through—all the way to her very bones.

Then the floor disappeared and sharp spikes dug into her skin, her flesh, her organs.

Paige fought the hold. She raked her own nails uselessly over scaly skin, kicked the blubbery body behind her, and she tried to push herself off the claws that impaled her.

It was no use, the demon squeezed and only dug deeper. Its tongue flicked against her neck.

Paige shuddered. Wetness that felt cold on her overheated skin soaked her clothes. She had just enough of her mental faculties left to marvel at how realistic bleeding out in a dream felt before the demon tossed her quickly depleting body against the stone wall.

Bones creaked and cracked under the force. Pain overwhelmed her. She didn't have enough breath to cry out, and she wasn't intact enough to even attempt a getaway. Paige sucked in air and clawed at the widening pool of wetness under her as if that would get it back into her body.

The demon tore into her again and all her senses overloaded on agony.

Paige close her eyes as shame washed over her. I'm so sorry! She'd failed; the demons would have her body again. *Please, let the restraints hold, please let the restraints hold, please!*

Every step the demon took rattled her bones and sent the sharp edged of her fractures deep into her flesh. How long would it take for the demons to grow tired of her body? How long would she be tortured without ever dying? A day? A week? Forever?

Rayha! The thought shouldn't have surprised her, but it did. Her overwhelmed mind fled to a barn that had felt just as hot as this hell, to dark eyes, the scent of spices, and soft lips. To a low, uncomfortable wall, and rings that dug into her skin as they'd held hands. To an angel with wings and a champion on his back.

Exposed skin scraped along the roughly hewn stones that seemed designed to inflict damage as the demon dragged her along. Paige squeezed her eyes tightly shut and tried to maintain her focus on Rayha instead of the horrors being inflicted on her. It was a familiar strategy, but rarely had she been as successful. Focusing on her parents or brother was equal parts painful as desired. She would gladly spent hours thinking of Rayha, of the call they were going to have tomorrow, for example. They hadn't discussed a time—they should have, she now realized. Now she would have spent the whole day lingering around the house, near the phone, hoping to beat her parents to it when it rang.

She struggled to hold on to the image as sharp claws dug into her legs and lifted her up as if hanging her on meat hooks, upside down to bleed out. Paige knew what was coming next and escaped deeper into

the fantasies where the pain couldn't reach her.

Rayha would sound gruff as always, and she'd swear in the way that never failed to make Paige want to look around to make sure her parents couldn't hear. *Hey*, Rayha would casually say, as if she hadn't just walked deliberately to a payphone to call her; as if she didn't have a fist of coins that dictated the length of their conversation.

The first nail driven through her feet shocked her out of the fantasy. Her eyes flew open.

She caught a glimpse of half a dozen demons, salivating at the sight of her pain. Behind them and all around her were the other prey, enduring their reversed crucifixion on their own islands of despair.

Paige squeezed her eyes closed and sobbed. She flailed around in her mind for the fantasy, for the sound of Rayha's voice.

The hammer came down again, driving the nail through skin, flesh and bone into wood.

Again, Paige lost the fleeting glimpses of Rayha's face and voice. *Hey*.

There! She latched on to the casual greeting. "Hey." She'd try not to sound like she'd been waiting by the phone.

Another hammer blow.

The cry tore from her throat without permission, but she managed to hold on to the fantasy in which she clutched the receiver with both hands, held it close to her ear and mouth, and checked for her parents every few seconds. *How are you?*

You know. Still shit. And there would be just a little hint of amusement to Rayha's tone, because that was who she was.

Paige would bite her lip and press the receiver even tighter against her ear. In her fantasy she could pretend she would be brave enough to say *I miss you*, and *I want to kiss you*.

Of course, Rayha would be silent for a short while. She'd throw in another coin and then say something like *Yeah, me too*.

The claws retracted. All of her weight landed on one nail driven through her feet. "Gah!"

She knew that if she were anywhere else but in hell, she'd have passed out by now. That was not a reprieve granted here. Here, the only way out was to escape inside her mind.

Are you sure you can't slip out?

I can slip out. She wouldn't be able to in her real life, but she could in her fantasy. In fact, she could skip time until she would meet Rayha in the barn again.

Rayha would be waiting for her on the dirty rug, looking her perfect goth self with her black-painted lips, her heavy eyeliner, and black clothes that seemed to Paige like unnecessary torture in the Arizona heat. Her long, beautifully dark hair would be tangled and mused. Paige wouldn't be able to resist a lingering glance to the swell of her breasts and her copious curves.

The demons maneuvered her arm in place and drove the second nail through her hand.

The shock dissolved the fantasy, but she refused to be present for this. She fought the fog of pain and flashed forward again.

Kiss me.

Rayha's whispered words sucked her back in. She could imagine her saying it so well. She could hear the rasp in her voice and picture her wide eyes with badly hidden fear in it.

Are you sure? She would stroke Rayha's cheek as she lay against her body. She'd search her eyes until Rayha would nod and say something like *I want it*, or *I'm sure*.

Paige tried to picture which would fit Rayha better when the nail was secured with a second blow. The pain set her hand, her arm, her whole being on fire. Rayha disappeared.

The barn disappeared. "No!" Panic flared.

I'm here. Look at me.

With a sob, Paige did. She was back in the barn, back in Rayha's arms.

Why are you crying? Rayha stroked her cheeks to wipe the tears away.

I-It hurts. She realized vaguely this did not match with the fantasy, but she leaned into the touch anyway. It became so hard to hold onto her thought that she sank into whatever her mind could provide to alleviate the pain.

Shhhh... Rayha kissed the tears away. *I know. But It'll stop soon. I'm going to come for you and I'll save you.*

Hope surged in Paige's chest. Not even the third nail, driven through her other palm, could quench it. *Y-You will?*

Rayha smiled and nodded. *Of course. The angels chose me to save you, remember?*

I remember. Paige sobbed out the words. She remembered something like it, anyway, something with angels.

Good. Then stop shaking. No more crying. Rayha smiled and kissed her. Soft lips, light pressure.

The second blow landed onto the third nail.

Rayha disappeared.

"Nnnnngh!" Paige fought. She fought so hard to get back to the fantasy but it slipped away in a haze of pain that seemed to tear her sanity apart. *No! Nononono!*

Light seared across the inside of her eyelids. Her eyeballs stung as if she'd stared into the blazing sun. A sea of blue overtook her and refused to budge even as sharp claws cut her open. The pain only seemed to strengthen the presence of the shadow without a body.

On the wings of an angel.

Paige couldn't tell if it was her thought or that of the blue-eyed shade. All she knew was that she knew only one person who knew an angel, and it was the same person who'd promised to save her if she got caught. She took the deepest breath her mangled ribcage would allow and let it out in a howl that didn't sound human to her ears at all.

"Rayha!"

CHAPTER 13

“And all shall be smitten with fear, and the Watchers shall quake, and great fear and trembling shall seize them unto the ends of the earth.”

— *The Book of Enoch*

The hard wood under his body pained him. He had lost most of his meager stores of fat over the weeks on his sickbed. The barren cell he had called his for his many years in the order was his sanctuary, but it did not offer much reprieve from the bedsores. Gaetano shifted just a touch, hoping for a relief he knew he should not be hoping for—after all, wasn't Jesus's suffering at the cross a much more terrible fate than his own? He'd lived sixty-seven good years; fruitful years in the service of the Lord and his holy Son. Could he not suffer a touch of agony now his days were ending?

A soft knock on the heavy wood of the door broke his train of thought.

He huffed ever so slightly, but could not help send a small bit of praise on high for the distraction from the silence. “Yes?”

The door opened to a crack and revealed a young man, clean shaven and in brown robes.

Gaetano recognized him; brother Antonius, one of the newest arrivals and a very religious young man. “Father Gaetano, apologies for disturbing you.”

“Quite all right, brother. Quite all right. State your wish of me.” He held out his boney hand for the young man, who hurried to take it and kiss knuckles.

“Dinner, Gaetano. I came with dinner and with the announcement of the arrival of your doctors.”

Gaetano worked his jaw, but practiced the temperance his Lord had instilled in him. “Ah, yes. Please let them in.”

“Before or after the soup?” Brother Antonius remained on his knees by the bed as he awaited the answer.

“Let’s have the doctors first, even though I am sure they will spoil my appetite.” He gave the brother a small smile. *Not that I have had an appetite for many weeks now.*

Antonius chuckled. “I shall let them in.” He stood and hurried out the door.

Gaetano used the few spare moments to gather his thoughts before they could slip from his mind like they so often did these days. They fluttered to the many lost souls in the world, to the poor, downtrodden, and ill. His heart ached with the longing to do more, to provide more, but the Theatines were a strong and giving order. They already gave much.

They entered three strong this time. He knew only Matteo Fontana, whom he had installed as head doctor at one of the hospitals the order had founded. It was good to see a friend, even one twenty years his junior and because of that incapable of understanding the intricacies of dying of old age.

“Gaetano dei Conti di Tiene, my friend.” Matteo knelt by the bed and kissed his hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a man who is close to meeting his maker should feel, Matteo. Besides, you know better than to use my full name or call me ‘father.’ To you, I am just Gaetano.” He squeezed the fingers in his with as much force as he could muster.

The assistants, who undoubtedly knew they were useless in this room where death had taken a seat to bide his time, took their turns kissing his hand once Matteo stood.

“Gaetano, then, and answer my question without deflection, please. Until you meet our Lord and Savior, I am still your doctor and I wish you well.” He smiled throughout the kind reprimand.

Gaetano decided to reward Matteo’s friendship with honesty. “I grow weaker, Matteo. I have no appetite and no strength to eat. The sores on my hips and shoulders are becoming more painful and

infected. There is a rattle in my lungs and worry in my heart. This body is old and the soul it houses longs for release from it.”

Matteo looked pained and knelt back down. He took Gaetano’s hand in his and pressed the fingers to his forehead. “I wish it were different, my friend,” he said softly. “This world needs you.”

“I have done what I can, my Lord knows that. I feel I have taken up and answered His call well enough to rest, wouldn’t you agree?” As much as it pained him to see his friend dismayed over his impending death, Gaetano knew his words to be true. Divine voices had spoken to him for many years, urging him to seek priesthood and then the establishment of orders. He had done all they had asked. Now they had promised him rest.

Matteo nodded against the hand he still pressed to his forehead. “I would, my friend, but for purely selfish reasons, I wish it wasn’t so. I wish you would stay with us for much longer. We shall miss your wisdom and piety.”

“It lingers here, within these walls. You’ll never be without.” Gaetano smiled too broadly; his dry lips cracked. He licked blood off them with an equally parched tongue.

Matteo helped him drink a sip by holding his head up with unquestionable reverence and love. “At least let us bring in a mattress and lay you on it, my friend. You deserve some comfort in your last days.”

Gaetano shook his head. “I have slept on wooden boards since I took up the call, and you know why I do. That’s what the Lord requires of me and have I not always listened to Him?”

“You have, of course.” Matteo smiled.

“Thank you.” Gaetano squeezed the warm fingers in his cold ones. *Such life in these hands.* He marveled at it. That had once been him, after all. “My savior died on a cross. Let me died on wood, at least.”

The softly spoken words received a nod as reply and another kiss to skeletal fingers. “Then let us tend to your sores and leave you to your ponderings. We could not rob a man like you of his last wishes.”

The devotion in his voice left Gaetano's eyes moist. He was still pondering the wonders of friendship after Matteo had left and the soup had gone cold on the nightstand. Antonius had fed him a few bites of it but the taste was bland. He longed for the ambrosia of God to sustain him.

Patience. He shifted on the board once more, despite his better intentions, then adjusted the ragged blankets as much as his weak grip allowed. They'd left the widow open, letting the sounds of Naples's busy streets and the warm August air drift in. He was still chilly, covered by his blanket, but he supposed August was a good month to die. Perhaps even the best month.

His lungs filled again.

The sheer curtain in front of the window lifted up with another gust of wind.

He exhaled.

Perhaps some rest will—

A sharp pain tore through his legs, emanating from his feet.

Gaetano jumped as much as his old body would allow. His heart struggled to hammer in his chest. He moved his feet and found them working. Seconds later, another bolt of pain set his body ablaze. The stabbing shoots left tingles throughout.

He fought his lungs for air and pulled at the blankets. They slipped over his toes finally, then he pulled them up inch by inch and performed the herculean feat of lifting his head long enough to check his feet. *No outward damage.*

He dropped his head again and panted. A mixture of relief and disappointment filled his aching heart. Of course, no one longs for the stigmata but—

The flaming pain seared through his left hand next, twice in rapid succession. Now he became fearful—truly fearful—for the first time. “Lord?” He turned his gaze upward from his intact palm. “Is this a sign of Yours?”

His vision flickered from his brightly lit cell to somewhere dark.

The scent of foreign spices filled his nostrils. Before he could inhale a second time, the Italian sunlight streamed over him once more.

His right hand endured the first of the bolts of pain Gaetano had secretly expected. This was the stigmata, but there was no blood. His eyes filled with tears of gratitude and reverence, but as he turned his head toward the nightstand, the sight that greeted him was not of a bowl of soup and a bell to ring in case of need, but of radiant red lettering in the darkness that spelled out *05:38*.

He stared at the numbers in wonder. What could burn so brightly, yet so entirely clear as to form a number with nothing more than seven small lines in a rectangle?

The second expected bolt of pain caused him to squeeze his eyes shut. Once he opened them again, the image and the scents were gone.

Is it time for school?

The thought surprised him; he hadn't gotten any form of education since finishing his law studies in 1505 and he'd enjoyed his lessons. The complete reluctance and resistance that filled him now at the thought of attending was both unfamiliar and unwanted.

Are these the final hours then? Is this what befuddles the mind upon death's doorstep?

The noise swelled outside; a small disturbance of shattering pottery and angry voices.

Gaetano looked at his wrinkled but intact hands again and turned them over in the sunlight. *Death is such a strange—*

“Rayha!”

The animalistic cry was so close to his ear that Gaetano rolled aside to get away from it. The darkness overtook him again and he squeezed his eyes shut.

Rayha hit the floor hard. Disoriented and dazed, she pushed up, stumbled, hit her head on something unyielding and went down like a ton of bricks. Where was Italy? Was she dying?

Everything hurts!

She pressed her forehead into the carpet and ignored the scent of

old socks, barbecue flavored chips, and mold. She had basic questions to answer, like *who am I?* and *what happened?* and perhaps most importantly: *What the fuck is going on?*

No, the most important one was who she was right now. She was not an old priest about to die in an Italian convent. She'd dreamt about Gaetano before, and Encyclopaedia Britannica had an article about him, even though they called him "Saint Cajetan" instead. Gaetano had been dead since fifteen forty-seven or something; she was not him. She was Rayha and her mother was going to come in any second now.

Shit!

Rayha pushed up on hands and feet that hurt like a mother fucker and fell into bed.

As predicted, Mom pushed the door open just as Rayha pulled the blankets over herself again. "Rayhana? I hear a bang? Are you okay?" She made her way over in her colorful nightgown, her hair loose around her head like a dark halo in the bright light pouring in from the living room.

Rayha blinked to clear the image from her mind. She didn't need even more weird shit in her life right now. "I'm fine. I just..." *Maybe honesty's best?* "...fell out of bed. I had a weird dream."

She did have a weird dream but what had it been? What time was it, anyway? She turned her head to check the bright red numerals on the alarm clock. *Five forty-three, Jesus.* She'd seen the numbers of the alarm clock in her dream too, but that didn't make any sense. Had there even been electricity in fifteen hundred-something? Doubtful. Rayha was always stuck living the life of some saint—always. So why had Gaetano experienced a part of hers instead?

Mom sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked her leg over the blanket. "Fell out of the bed? What did you dream, meri bacchi? Tell me, please?"

Rayha was too deep in thought to respond or pull her leg away; she had to simultaneously make up a lie for her mother and hold on to

the last wisps of a dream that was quickly fading into oblivion. It left behind a churning ball of emotions in her gut. “I was late for the bus. I had to run after it and I think that’s why I fell out of bed.”

“Do you have pain. Hurt?”

Rayha shook her head, even as she became aware of the throbbing sore spot on the side of her head and a lingering cramp in her hands and feet. *Didn’t Gaetano feel like he was being crucified?* A shudder ran down her spine. “I’m fine. It was just stupid.” She smiled as best she could as she tried to follow the threads of thought back to the dream. What the hell had startled her—or Gaetano—so much that she’d ended up on the floor?

“You are sure?”

Annoyance surged along with her unease. “Yes, *Mom*, I’m sure. Go back to bed, okay? I’m fine. It’s, like, the middle of the night. Let me sleep.” She was losing the images of the dream, the threads that she needed to unravel. The worry in her gut solidified into a cold and jagged stone. It let no room for guilt as she squinted at Mom. Yeah, she’d promised to do better, but not right now. She didn’t have time for it.

Mom visibly flinched. Her hand on Rayha’s leg jerked, then withdrew. “Are you su—?”

“Yes! Totally sure. Please go to bed, Mom. Please, okay?” She sat up and opened her arms. “Do you want a hug?” It was usually the fastest way to get rid of Mom.

After a moment of hesitation, Mom scooted closer and hugged her tightly.

Spices. The scent triggered Gaetano’s wonder at smelling the scents. Then she remembered the inhuman scream of her name. She tensed. *Paige! Oh fuck, that was Paige!*

“Rayhana?” Mom pulled back. The concern was thick on her voice again.

“I’m fine. Sorry. I did hurt myself a little, a bump on my head. It’s nothing, I promise. Please, I just want to go back to sleep.” She forced

herself to hold Mom's gaze and smile, but her heart hammered in her chest to the tune of *go away, go away, go away!* She all but forced the thought into Mom's skull. "I'm going to sleep in, catch up."

Mom nodded, but she continued to frown. She stroked strands of hair out of Rayha's face and inspected her. "Sleep a long time, yes? You have been sleeping no good."

There was too much wrong with that sentence to even start correcting her. "I know. I'll sleep more." She cupped Mom's hand on her cheek and leaned in. Then she let go and laid back down. "See?" *Please go, come on!* "I'll be fine."

"Yes." Mom smiled again, appeased, it seemed, and pulled the blankets up over her before leaning in and kissing her cheek. "Sleep well, meri bacchi. May Allah watch over you."

"Thanks Mom, you too." She tried not to tense too badly in anticipation of Mom leaving. Instead, she got comfortable and closed her eyes to the red glow that now spelled out five fifty-one.

"Blessed sleep." Mom took the four small steps it took to get from the bed to the door.

"You too, Mom." Rayha balled her hands into fists under the blankets. She listened for the click of the door as Mom pulled it shut, then tracked her footsteps down the trailer, to the other side. She forced herself to wait for that door to close too.

One...two...three... Every second felt like a second she shouldn't be wasting.

Four...five...six... Rayha pushed the blankets off already and put one tingling foot onto the carpet.

Seven...eight...nine...ten!

Rayha tested her footing before she fumbled around in the near-dark for pants and a shirt. She pulled them on without checking if they went together. She didn't bother with make-up or jewelry. Something was wrong—something was wrong with Paige. Rayha didn't know what and she didn't want to question how the information had come to her. She just had to check, consequences be damned. If it turned out

she was just being insane again, she could always pretend to be drunk.

Rayha pulled her socks and boots on as quietly as she could, then inched her bedroom window open with as much patience as she could muster. Every little sound of metal scraping on metal sounded like she was taking an angle grinder to it. Still, the loudest sound of all was her heartbeat in her ears.

She had one leg out of the window when she remembered payphones needed coins to operate. Quickly, she got back in, fished the few she had left out of the front pocket of her bag and transferred them to her pants. Then she slipped out of the trailer, inched the window nearly shut and ran as fast as her legs would carry her down the paths to the front gate of the park where the only phone for miles beckoned her.

CHAPTER 14

“The demon has power over him, and he ruins and exterminates him in such a manner, that we can only say that he himself is the sole cause of his own ruin and misery.”

— *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*

“Come on, come on, come on!” Rayha could barely hear the coins go into the machine over the blood pounding in her ears, in tune with the thumping of her heart. She dropped one of the quarters but didn’t bother looking for it in the flickering light over the payphone booth; there were more in her pocket. She held the receiver pressed between her cheek and shoulder until the instruction came to dial.

For a few terrifying seconds, Rayha’s mind was too fuzzy to recall the number. She groped around for it inside of her brainpan. Relief flooded her system as soon as the number she’d spent a fortune on getting from an operator service resurfaced. She punched it in with a trembling finger. “Come on, Paige, pick up. Anyone, pick up.”

The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

The line went dead.

Her coins tumbled into the container at the bottom of the machine.

Rayha rushed to insert them again, dial, and wait.

Again, the call ran out without being picked up.

She tried one more time, but she knew the call wouldn’t be answered. Darkness spread inside of her veins like acid and seeped into her very bones. Whatever had happened in the Guthrie household either had everyone too occupied to pick up the phone, or something terrible had happened.

Rayha threw the receiver on once the call broke off. *Now what?* Her mind raced but none of her thoughts came to fruition. Then the

one solution to all her problems surfaced. *Dale!*

Yeah, he was pissed off at her and they hadn't exactly spoken after he'd gone AWOL after Harut had taken over his body, but even if he was pissed off, he'd help her. She wasn't sure how she could be helped, how Paige could be helped if she was, indeed, possessed again, or how she was going to explain all of that to him, but she needed her best friend right now.

Rayha turned away from the payphone before it got through spitting out her coins and balled her hands to fists as she pulled into a run. Dale's trailer wasn't as far from the park's entrance as hers, but her side stitched up only a few seconds in. Her lungs burned. Still, Rayha ran, because every second made it more likely that either Paige was killed or the demon who'd taken over Paige's body killed Paige's parents.

The thought of demons still caused a flutter of doubt, but she'd met Harut in person now. If angels existed, if her own story was true, Paige's could be too. No one slept soundly enough not to be woken up by minutes of a phone ringing in the middle of the night. With a kid away at college, Paige's parents wouldn't disconnect the line either. No, something had kept them from answering, and after hearing the absolute terror in Paige's voice, it could only be demons.

She decided now was not the time to question how she could have heard Paige's voice inside her head; with angels in the mix, everything was possible, after all.

Rayha ducked into the path toward Dale's house. Her leg muscles spasmed painfully. She wheezed. She almost ended up flat in the dirt the second she left the paved pathway as her foot caught something unyielding, but caught herself on her hands and knees instead. She paused to catch her breath, but only long enough until she felt she had the strength to go on.

Up, Rayha, up! She pulled her feet under her and made it to Dale's.

There weren't any lights on in the trailer and she hadn't expected

there to be. She tapped her nails against the plastic of Dale's bedroom window and waited.

Nothing.

She tapped again, harder. *Wake up! I don't have time for this— Paige doesn't have time for this!* Harder, again.

Finally a light came on and two seconds later, Dale pulled the curtains away.

It had been a really long time since she'd last seen Dale without his make-up and half a jar of gel in his hair. He looked so much younger than fifteen without both; like a boy.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. He wiped sleep from his eyes, blinked, then seemed to check if she was still there.

Rayha angrily tapped the window again. "Open up!"

Dale looked over his shoulder, then unlocked and slid open the window. "What the fuck, Rayha? It's, like, six am. What's your—"

"Put your clothes on. Something's happened."

He opened his mouth for what would probably a million questions she didn't have time to answer.

"Please, please, just trust me? I need your help. Please." She bounced from one sore foot to the other. "Paige and her parents are in danger. I need to help them—we need to help them."

His scowl turned into a frown. "Why? What danger? How do you —?"

"Please!" She couldn't keep her voice to a whisper any longer. "Please, please, please, please, please just come out? Does your cousin still have bikes?"

He scanned her face, then took a deep breath, seemingly leaving his own shit in the past for now. "Yeah. Keep your voice down, okay. Tommy has bikes." He started looking around for things apparently on the floor.

"We need them. We need to go to Paige's house and—" She faltered. *Do what, exactly?* What the hell were two teens gonna do against a demon?

“And what?” Dale pulled on his boots. “Is this a-n-g-e-l business?”

“Why are you spelling it out? Yes, probably, sort of.” Rayha bounced. “I’ll tell you on the way. Hurry, okay?”

Dale ran his hands through his hair in a doomed attempt to emulate his usual hairstyle. Instead, his fluff sprung every whichaway again the second his hand pulled up. He held her gaze, then nodded slowly. “Only for you, Kincaid.”

Suddenly her throat felt too constricted to talk. Some of the panic that had been rising, rising, rising, ebbed away. “T-Thank you.”

“You’re telling me everything that’s been going on.” It wasn’t a question. He thrust his arms into the sleeves of his coat and proceeded to lower himself down from the window.

“I will.” No promise should be upheld in a situation like this, not even one sworn on her father.

He smoothed out his coat and caught her gaze. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. Her vision blurred as the tears she’d been holding back welled up. *You don’t have time for this, Rayha! Come on!* But Dale stood in front of her at six am, dressed in his long leather jacket, his thigh high leather boots with six inch plateau soles, jogging pants and a ragged *Grateful Dead* t-shirt; without make-up, hair gel, or anger. He was willing to be seen by the world looking like that, just because she’d asked.

Then he opened his arms for a hug and she fell into it with a sob. He smelled overwhelmingly like sweat, pot, and whatever it was that made Dale smell like Dale.

She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed tight. He was just her friend Dale, no threat of kissing. “W-We need to go.”

His warm breath tickled her hair. “I’m here.” Dale pulled her close one more time, then let her go. “Come on.”

Rayha didn’t resist when he took her hand and let him guide her to his cousin’s place.

Wobbly on the bike at first but soon gaining confidence as the skill to ride returned, she followed him out of the park and into the night.

He didn't question her route, nor her story as she told it. He didn't interrupt, judge, or question and put his hand on his back to push her along when she got too tired to paddle.

She loved him for it.

* * *

Rayha came to a stop, lost her balance, but got her feet on the ground just before she'd tip over bike and all. She took in the farmhouse as she tried to catch her breath.

Dale laid his bike down on the cracked earth and walked over. "There's a light on 'round back."

She nodded; she could see the glow but not the source. "We'll check that out first." Rayha guided the bike down and stepped around it as she swept her gaze over the house once more, then looked around. Nothing moved. There weren't any screams or other sounds that could be interpreted as those of a struggle. Everything was eerily silent. *Either they're all deep asleep and I'm a fucking crazy person or —*"

"Do you think we're too late?" Dale kept looking around too. He held his hands up in front of him like a boxer; balled into fists, ready to strike. "Maybe we need a weapon?"

"And what? Kill Paige?" She passed him and slid along the side of the house until she could look around the corner. The circle of defuse light was empty. A few cacti cast shadows into darker shadows beyond. "Shitty plan, dude." She looked up to find the source of the light; a small window on the first floor. "Someone's awake."

"Yeah, or dead."

Rayha glared at him.

He didn't smirk like he usually would. In fact, he looked paler now than with his standard make-up. "Sorry."

"Let's just find a way in."

It was a very short search: one of the downstairs windows had

been shattered. Glass littered the ground in front of it.

“Is that blood?” Dale pointed to the tips of the jagged shards still stuck in the wooden frame. Something dark did seem to coat them.

“Well, shit.” Rayha leaned in to look inside, then over her shoulder, out into the meagerly illuminated desert. “She got out.” Her stomach plummeted. *What if someone sees her? She’ll get shot on the spot. Or what if she hurts someone? A person as fragile as Paige wouldn’t know how to handle that.*

“Let’s check inside first. Maybe she came back. Maybe, I dunno, something else happened.” Dale didn’t sound very convinced, nor eager. He hesitated, but then slipped his coat off his shoulders, wrapped it around his fist, and used it to clear the shards. “I’ll go first.”

Before she could stop him, Dale threw his coat into the house and hopped up onto the windows sill with far more grace and skill than she’d have given him credit for. For all his agility, he landed with as much noise as a baby elephant.

Rayha winced, but so far, none of the noise they’d made had amounted to a reaction.

“Gimme a chair.” There was no way she was going to be able to push herself up. A minute or so later, she stumbled in.

Dale caught her and helped her up, looking around all the while. “Um, so, do you want to stay here and have me check it out or...?”

She shook her head. “No. I’ll help.” Rayha tried to prepare herself for the worst, that the upturned kitchen table, the scattered picture frames and broken vases meant that once they got upstairs, they’d find two people mauled to death by a demon holding the body of a anorexic teenager captive. It refused to become real inside her skull, even as she walked ahead of Dale into the hallway and followed the small light upstairs.

Like the Tasmanian Devil came through. The destruction was complete. Everything that could have been upturned or broken had been. Rayha braced herself.

The door directly opposite the stairs had been pulled clean of its hinges and thrown back inside the room that had to Paige's.

Rayha felt herself pulled toward it like a magnet. She flipped the light switch, bathing the room in a soft, golden glow. The door had landed on and had subsequently crushed a small table beside a very comfy looking chair. Paige didn't have posters up, but she had more books than Rayha had ever seen outside of a library. They had once been neatly arranged in bookcases but now littered the floor. Most of them were torn and shredded. Rayha's gaze slid to the bed. Two broken shackles dangled from the bars of the headboard, two of the cast-iron bars at the feet end of the bed had been ripped clean off. The shackles lay on the floor beside a pair of socks and a pair of gloves, both ripped.

Rayha shuddered. Dale lay his hand on her shoulder and she jumped.

"Come on, the light's coming from the other room." His voice sounded strained, as if he was only barely holding on to his sanity and the content of his bowels.

Like me. She nodded and retreated from the room.

Dale was right, the door to one of the rooms stood half-open. The glow emerged from there. Rayha extended her hand long before she reached it. If she didn't, she wasn't sure if she'd be brave enough to lift it once she'd arrive.

"Blood." Dale's voice pitched up even more.

She glanced back at him and followed his pointing finger down. Quickly, she stepped off the trail of smears and drips. *Shit, shit, shit!* Every thump of her heart made her dizzy with the force and speed of it. *Shit!* She avoided the rest of the spillage as she inched closer and closer to the door. She knew what she was going to find; all of what they'd found only confirmed what Rayha had already know but hadn't wanted to believe was possible: Paige had lost the fight to the shedim and one of them had overtaken her body. They'd broken free of the restraints and they'd headed straight for Paige's parents. The only

question was, how terrible was the damage? What were they going to find in there? Had the demon killed her parents? Had her parents killed Paige's body? Would that have been enough to stop the demon?

Her head hurt from the tension in her neck and shoulders. Who was to say the demon was even gone? Maybe they'd come back to finish the job? Maybe they'd just shattered the window for some ungodly reason Rayha couldn't interpret? One thing was certain: she now believed every word Paige had ever said to her.

Rayha was about to put fingertips on wood when Dale yanked her back. "Don't leave prints."

She stared at him, not understanding why he would be worried about something like smudging a door at a time like this, then realized what his words implied. "Oh." If there are dead people in there, the last thing they'd need was for their fingerprints to be all over the crime scene. "Thanks." She closed her hand to a fist and pushed the door open with her knuckles.

Blood colored the once-white walls in colorful lines of spatter. The bed was a mess of dark stains and crumpled sheets. A chair had been knocked over. The still-shining lamp that had once hung over the bed, now dangled just above the pillows, ripped down.

A mixture of nauseating dread and head-dizzying relief crept in. Yes, there was blood, but there weren't any dead people. Maybe Paige hadn't hurt her parents too badly, maybe they'd gotten out.

"There." Dale pointed again. All tonality had drained from his voice.

No no no no no. Rayha stepped around the bed without consciously making the decision to move; she simply had no other choice but to look. She spotted a bare foot, a female foot, judging by the red nail polish. Thank fuck it was still attached to a leg. That leg went up to a body, held by another. Paige's mom and dad, wedged between the wall and the bed. Her dad held her mom against him in a loose hold. Their eyes were closed, their heads slumped, and their pajamas were stained red and glistening.

“Are they...” Dale swallowed. “...dead?”

Rayha couldn't talk. She felt numb. Her feet carried her forward. She'd know you were supposed to check for a pulse, but she didn't know how. Just putting her fingers onto the skin of one of their necks and hoping she'd spot something didn't seem useful; she could barely feel her own pulse in her neck, let alone someone else's. She also really didn't want to touch dead people. “Call 911. Don't say your name.”

“Rayha, I—”

“Go, tell 'em to hurry.” She didn't lift her gaze from the bodies. The sight of them held her captivated. Paige's dad had scratches along his cheek and torso, deep gashes that slowly trickled blood and showed the white of bone. Paige's mom's nightgown was mostly gone, torn off by vicious claws that had left marks. Lacerations littered her exposed breast and chest, but also up along her legs. She'd clutched her arm against herself. Blood slowly pooled under the appendage from something that looked terrifyingly like miniature shark bites, with the flesh torn off.

Dale walked out and down the creaking stairs. A few seconds later, she caught the murmur of his voice, only it sounded deeper and darker than usual.

He's probably throwing it. It was a fleeting thought; most of her brain was occupied by controlling her revolting stomach and taking in the scene before her. She managed to hold bile down and reached out with a trembling hand. Rayha held it in front of Paige's dad's mouth and nose. Seconds ticked away as she held her own breath, hoping to feel his. She inched her hand closer when she didn't feel anything.

Her fingers tapped against Paige's dad's skin by accident. Rayha jumped. She stumbled back as she furiously wiped her hand on her pants, but then got her legs tangled with Paige's mom's and she tripped. She landed ass-first, then crawled back from the limbs that she'd stumbled over. Her skin crawled with disgust and terror. She'd just touched a dead body! *Oh fuck!* Rayha set her jaw in an herculean

effort not to cry out, which was the sole reason she caught a small moan coming from one of the two bodies tangled together on the floor.

Rayha froze. She held her breath.

A small tremor went through Paige's dad's eyelids.

"Fuck!" Rayha jumped up. "He's still alive! Tell 'em to get here faster!" She hurried forward now. "Paige's dad. Paige's dad!" She didn't dare reach out, because his whole body seemed hurt in some way, but she snapped her fingers beside his ear. "Wake up!"

Her excited cries disturbed not just one person on the verge of dying, but Paige's mom whimpered as well. Her lips parted, then pursed. A tiny frown tugged at her brow.

Is she trying to talk? "No no no, don't talk, okay. Don't talk. The ambulance is on its way."

Paige's mom tried to open her eyes and maybe she tried to say something again too; her lips worked, but she didn't make a sound.

"I know what happened to Paige, okay? I'll find her. I'll try to keep her safe." Rayha pushed up and lifted the blood-soaked covers from the bed. "Here, to keep you warm." She draped them carefully over Paige's parents and made sure her mom could breathe well. "We have to go now, before the ambulance and the cops arrive. Um, please don't die." With that, Rayha stepped back.

Dale ran up the stairs. "They're on their way. Are they really still alive?"

Rayha nodded as she turned toward him. "We have to go. We can't be here when they arrive. We'll leave the front door open."

Dale nodded but tried to look past her. "How are they still alive?"

"I dunno. Maybe when I called, the demon freaked and it ran. Maybe it just got bored." She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled, urging him to turn around and go back down.

"It doesn't matter right now, okay? Go! Grab your coat, don't leave anything behind." Rayha cast a single glance back. Now she knew what she was looking for, she could just see the top of Paige's

dad's head. *Hang in there. If you don't, Paige is so thoroughly fucked.* She pushed Dale. "Go, go, go!"

Dale finally dislodged from his spot and gained momentum as he hurried down the stairs, careful not to touch the bannister.

Rayha followed his lead and grabbed one of Paige's mom's scarfs from a hook by the door to wrap her hand in before she turned the lock on the door and pulled it open. "Dale!"

"I'm here!" He emerged from the living room with his wadded up coat in his arms. "Go!"

She did; Rayha legged it down the double steps leading to the driveway, righted her bike and got on.

"Where are we going?" Dale was right behind her and straddled his.

Rayha thought furiously. Tiny specs of strobing red light appeared on the road. "That way!" She pointed at the opposite side of the light source, roughly in the direction the demon in Paige's body would have gone if they'd headed straight on, squarely into the desert. "We have to catch up with it before it hurts anyone else!"

Dale didn't hesitate a second. He put his boots on the pedals and sped off, leaving Rayha to catch up as best as she could over the uneven, sandy terrain.

To their left, a blood red glow announced the first light of a new day. Rayha glanced at it only briefly and wondered if either of Paige's parents would ever see the sun again. *Don't think about that, think about Paige!* Paige's parents were about to be cared for by professionals, Paige's fate, on the other hand was solely in the hands of two teenagers who had no fucking clue how to even find her.

CHAPTER 15

“Mary, God's Mother, traversed the land, holding three worms close in her hand; one was white, the other was black, the third was red.”

— *John George Hoffman, Pow-Wows*

The dry sand seemed solid until her bike tire hit it. The bikes, although made for rough terrain riding, were small and old, and Rayha had a terrible time keeping it upright, let alone rolling. Her lungs felt shredded and her leg muscles screamed out with every push. “S-Stop!” She gasped for the oxygen she’d lost with even that one word and slowed already. She was done, spent.

Dale came to a halt in front of her and got off so he could walk back. Sweat pearly on his forehead and drenched his hair. He ran his hand through it, then smoothed it down over his head in a mock version of his usual hairdo. “A-Are we far enough away?”

He’s out of breath too, thank fuck! Rayha felt marginally better about her poor physical condition because of it. She stumbled as she got off the bike and lowered herself down onto the sand with a groan. “Dunno. Dead.” She fell flat under the blood red sky and panted.

Dale got his bike settled, then joined her. She could hear his ragged breathing from here.

“We need...” Breath. “A plan.”

He hummed, but didn’t offer one.

“We can’t just keep riding around. Every cactus looks like a person at the best of times anyway.” She turned her head toward him. “Ideas?”

Dale stared up at the sky. “Just one and you won’t like it.”

“Hm?”

He pointed upward. “Ask him.”

“Him?” *Oh. Oh no! Hell no!* She sat up with another groan. “You

want me to ask Harut?”

“Why not?” Dale looked at her. “Angels probably have a demon tracker or something. Having one loose must kind of upset the them, right?”

“Maybe, but who says he’s gonna be careful with her if we find her? I mean, usually it’s lightning strikes and world covering floods, you know, when someone pissed Elah off.” She wrapped her arms around her legs. He had a point, though; if anyone knew how to track a demon, it was an angel like Harut.

“Maybe you can bargain?”

Dale sounded as out of his league as she felt. Rayha snorted. “Yeah, maybe.” *Not that I have much to offer besides my eternal servitude.* “I dunno how to do get in touch with him, though. He just sort of showed up last time.”

“How did the people in your dream do it?” He watched her quietly, hands folded across his belly like he was dead and about to get buried. All the scene was missing was a wilted rose.

Rayha shuddered and focused on the situation at hand instead of the vision of her dead friend. “Um. Usually they just call out and poof, insta-angel, but, you know, those were all champions, not whatever the hell I am.”

He shrugged and motioned to the open space of the Arizona dessert all around them. “You’re supposed to become a champion, right? Give it a try. I’ll be over here, all quiet and shit.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “If you laugh, I’ll kick you in the nuts.”

He grinned, but since she’d arrived at his trailer, his grins hadn’t reached his eyes anymore. “No worries. I know the stakes.”

Rayha’s cheeks prickled. He didn’t, not entirely. She’d told him absolutely everything, except for the kiss. When it came time to share that, she just couldn’t. He didn’t understand that Rayha wasn’t just trying to save a friend, but maybe the girl she was a teeny, tiny bit in love with. Instead of replying, she got up on legs that felt like they had

hot wires running through them. She shook them out and walked away from him a few paces. This was going to be awkward enough as it was. A quick glance around assured her no one but Dale was within earshot, so she inhaled deeply. “Um, Harut?” She winced at her own lameness. “Harut!”

“Maybe you should say please!” Dale’s voice held bemusement.

She glared at him. “Shut the fuck up, Dale, or I’ll ask him to smite the fuck out of you.”

Dale threw his hands up in surrender.

After a few more seconds, Rayha closed her eyes and thought back to her dreams, to the many saints whose head she’d lived in for the night. Joan of Arc’s passionate pleas for aid and signs were the first to pop up. She cringed inwardly as she raised her arms up. “Oh mighty Harut! You, um, Iyrin of Elah who watches over us puny mortal!”

Dale snickered.

Rayha ignored him. She felt like a fucking moron but persevered. “It would be really fucking awesome if you could come down from your cloud or something, because I really need your bloody help!”

She awaited Dale’s criticism, but it didn’t come.

Then her stomach did the hauntingly familiar backflip that indicated the angel had landed.

“Have you made your decision already, mortal?”

A shudder coursed down Rayha’s spine and she turned around slowly to face what she already knew she would be facing: Harut-in-Dale.

He stood beside the bikes, Dale’s arms limply by his side, blazing blue in his eyes.

“No.” *Let’s get that out of your head right away.* “I need your help.”

Harut cocked Dale’s head, as if listening for something far in the distance. “Help?”

“Yeah, you know? Advice? Aid?” She walked back but kept the bikes between them. The glow in Dale’s eyes still spooked her—hell,

the whole of Harut spooked her. She couldn't shake the cold disgust she'd felt from him in the vision he'd shown her of her parents.

"We cannot and will not give you aid, Rayha, until you become our champion. That is the bond we were destined to have. Why would we lend you aid before that time?"

Rayha squinted angrily at him. "Uh, because not helping me makes you an asshole."

He cocked Dale's head back. "That is a derogatory term."

"Just an accurate description of someone who only cares about himself. It's basically the dictionary definition." She put her hands on her hips. Standoffishness came easy when she felt like pissing herself. "Besides, you haven't even asked what I need help with."

"What do you need aid with, then?"

"There's a demon on the loose in the body of my friend. I want to save her." She tilted her chin up to appear more certain than she sounded.

"The fallen one? Is that whom you speak of?"

Harut made Dale's face do something Rayha couldn't interpret into a human emotion—as usual. "Uh, I guess? She has these fucked up nightmares of going to hell?"

He nodded. "That is the one, the sinner."

Hearing him describe Paige that way made Rayha's blood boil. She stepped forward until her shins were pressed against the tire of the bike. "Don't call her that! She made a mistake, okay? She's sorry, and even if she is a sinner or whatever, there is still a demon inside of her. Don't you care about that?"

He seemed to ponder her question. Dale's head tilted to the side, once more seeming to listen to something or someone in the distance. The voices she'd heard in her vision, maybe, or just the wind.

"Uh, hello?" She waved her hand in front of his face.

The angel's ethereal gaze settled upon her once more, even though it was hard to tell when she couldn't make out Dale's pupils. She felt his attention more than saw it. "We care, but we will not interfere

unless you agree to become ours.”

“Ugh!” Rayha dropped her hand and kicked the tire. She didn’t have to accept this extortion; there were still options, including calling the cops and begging them not to shoot Paige on sight because she had mental issues or something. They’d bring out a helicopter for a rich white kid, right? She put her hands back on her hips and glared at Harut-in-Dale. “Fine, then *please*, oh great angel of uselessness, fuck off.”

Radiant blue eyes met her gaze and held.

Rayha was sure she’d be smote on the spot, but after a few seconds, Harut inclined Dale’s head. “As your wish, Rayha. We will be listening, should you change your mind.”

Rayha didn’t like the look of the smirk that touched the corner of Dale’s mouth before the light faded from his eyes and he blinked.

“Woa. How did you get—” He stopped himself. Realization flitted across his features in the form of a scowl. “Fuck.”

Rayha sighed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Was the anghole at least useful?” Dale shook himself out, then worked his jaw, wincing.

“Uh, ‘anghole?’” Rayha arched a brow at the unfamiliar term.

Dale grinned through his annoyance. “Yeah, like ‘stephole’ but for angels. What, not good?”

Rayha mulled the word over. It did have a certain ring to it. “Not sure yet, I’ll get back to you. Anyway, no, the ‘anghole’ wasn’t useful at all. Basically, I have to buy into the bullshit if I want any help.”

“Anghole.” Dale rolled his eyes.

She couldn’t help chuckle just a bit. It was better than the alternative, which was to start crying. “Yeah, pretty much.” She looked around, saw nothing but sand and cacti, and sat. “I still don’t know how to find her.”

Dale walked around the bikes and lowered himself down beside her before he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in. “We’ll find a way,” he said, but then fell silent.

Rayha rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm scared."

His hold tightened. "I know."

"She's really nice."

"I know."

He didn't know; he couldn't know. He'd never met her outside of that one time in class.

How long ago was that anyway? Four days? She jumped. Had her life really changed so much in only four days? From just a normal kid with fucked up dreams to sitting in the desert, chasing a demon inside of the body of the girl she liked? Her eyes stung and the world went a little blurry.

Dale turned his head to check on her when she sniffed. "Are you okay?"

Under any other circumstance, she might have blown him off, but now she shook her head. "No. No, I'm not okay at all." Rayha squeezed her eyes shut and wiped away the tears that escaped. "I'm really scared." She reached for and squeezed his hand. "So, so scared."

"Talk to me."

It all seemed to crash down at her at once; not just the dreams that had systematically robbed her of so much sleep, but the image of Paige's mauled parents as they held each other protectively against the attack of their daughter, talking to an angel, being told that whatever life she'd have liked for herself most likely wouldn't happen because beings she hadn't even believed existed wanted her to storm castle walls and die at a stake in what couldn't be more than a few years. And then there was Paige. Paige who wanted to kill herself, Paige who was possessed by a demon, Paige who could be anywhere and whom Rayha really wanted to be okay. Paige, who had kissed her.

"I-I—" She tried to get the words out but a sob stole them.

Dale pulled her in more and freed his hand so he could hug her. Nothing in his body language gave off warning signs. She was quite sure he wasn't going to kiss her. He was safe to be physical with now

he wasn't high and wallowing in self-pity.

Rayha pressed against him and cried tears that seemed to come from a pool deep inside her gut. It took work to get them out, hard work that exhausted her more with every sob. Every tear that fell down on Dale's shirt made her feel lighter, like she was crying out all the inky blackness that had been stored inside of her. *No, not all. Just a bit.* But a bit was enough to make room for more air in her body, for her chest to rise and fall deeply instead of forced shallow breaths that left her constantly deprived of fuel for her brain.

"It's going to be okay." Dale rocked her gently.

Did he really believe that or was he just saying it to make her feel better? Did it make her feel better? It didn't, but it helped her cry more freely about the unfairness of it all. *Growing up is not supposed to be this fucking hard!*

But maybe it was. Dale had his own demons, not shedim but the human kind; those infected with anger and hatred by shedim, like Dale's stepdad. Mom's shedim came in the form of the people who'd blown up the hospital her dad had died in.

Deep-seated hate and anger boiled up and stole her breath again. Not hatred for the people committing these acts but for the angels—Iyrin, *sorry*—and however-the-fuck the Big Guy wanted to be called. Their fucking catch-22 was a farce! They could just murder all the demons and people would no longer be angry and afraid and do all this terrible stuff to each other.

"You're trembling." Dale's voice was a whisper. "You're scaring me."

Rayha sniffed and sat up. "Sorry. I just—" She shook her head. "I'm starting to like 'angholes.'" She shoved him lightly, mostly to steady her emotions with the familiarity of the motion. "Come on. We need to find Paige." She scrambled to her feet and wiped at her eyes, carefully at first but then more firmly one she remembered she wasn't wearing make-up.

Dale got up as well. "Do you have a plan?"

She hadn't had a plan but as soon as he said the words, a stray thought entered her head. *Maybe I can feel her out, like I can feel out where home is.* "Maybe, but it's weird."

He snorted. "Yeah, cuz the rest of the night has been so normal." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Tell me."

Rayha kicked a rock. "I'm going to try to feel in which direction she went." She only glanced up when he didn't laugh right away. She found him frowning.

"Feel?"

"Yeah. I think it's a preparatory angel-champion thing, like the dreams. I couldn't do it as a kid, I think, but I can usually tell where home is." She closed her eyes and focused on the little tug. It came to her within seconds. She pointed across the desert, then adjusted by a fraction until it felt right. "There."

Dale turned to check out the direction she pointed in, then looked around. "Uh, okay, if you say so. I'm fucking lost."

Rayha smiled. "I'm sure. A hundred percent." She lowered her hand again. "But I've never tried it with anything or anyone else. I could just have whatever those pigeons have? The ones who always know where home is?"

He shook his head. "They don't fly home, they fly to wherever their, like, wife is."

"Oh." Heat rushed up to her cheeks and she looked away, desperately trying not to emote the explosion of feelings in her gut at the word "wife."

"Uh, why do you suddenly look like—oh. Oh!" Dale's voice raised an octave. "No way!

No fucking way!" He laughed. "D'you have a crush on Paige? For real?"

She sent him—what she hoped—was a withering glare. "Oh shut up!" But she didn't deny it—she couldn't deny it. *Might as well come clean now.* "We kissed. I liked it. She did too."

That killed his laughter. "You...kissed her? When? You've only

known her since, like, Monday.”

Rayha nodded. “Wednesday. When I went home with her, after she told me about the

nightmares.” She plucked on the hem of her shirt. “Are you pissed?”

“Uh, I’m uh...I have no idea what I am.” He stepped away a few paces, drawing her attention. Dale ran his hand through his hair and turned back. “That’s after—”

“You kissed me, yeah. The day after. I know.” She sighed. “I’d understand if you, like, don’t want to help me anymore.” Her heart pounded in her chest. *Please, please, please, please, don’t leave. Please!*

He stared at her, his shoulders tense, his eyes cloudy. Then he inhaled deeply and his posture relaxed. “Who’s going to play puppet for your anghole if I left, huh?”

Relief broke through the terror. Her eyes watered again and she nodded as she hurried forward and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He didn’t hesitate to hug her back, which made her feel like a million bucks. She hugged him tighter. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Dale nodded against the side of her head. “You’re my best friend. It’s always you and me, right?”

She nodded. “No one’s gonna come between that, not even, like, Paige or angels.” Even as she said it, she feared it was a promise she wouldn’t be able to keep. She held on to him just a little tighter, just in case this was the last time she would be able to hug him and be his best friend in the world. After a few more seconds of reprieve, Rayha finally gave in to the inevitable. “We have to get going.”

Dale let her go, but slowly. “Yeah.” His hands disappeared into his pockets again. “So, how do we do this?”

Rayha dried her eyes on her sleeve. “I’m not sure. I guess I just try to focus on her and see if something clicks?”

He nodded. “I’m here.”

Rayha closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *How do I do this?* She decided to focus on home instead, just so she was reminded of the feeling.

The small tug came and she turned toward it until it became a steady pull at her navel. It was a slightly uncomfortable feeling, similar to pushing your finger in, but she persevered.

“Okay, that’s home...” She slowly filled her mind with images of Paige—messy hair, mousey features, the scars on her wrists—and then pictured her face when she smiled. That had Rayha smile in turn.

The tug wavered but refused to give up the hold of home so easily.

What else? Sitting on the old carpet in the barn, streams of light on her skin. Paige’s breath on her neck, her fingers gripping her shirt as she refused to be watched. Soft lips with just a little edge where her piercing was. Just a few, fleeting seconds that had left her dizzy and weak. Holding hands on the low wall, her pounding heart as they spoke about angels and demons and things no one else would ever understand. *Please don’t die.* The thought seared through her mind and down to her heart from where it radiated out to every fiber of her body. *Please.*

The tug held steady low in her gut.

Rayha sighed in frustration.

“I don’t know if this is working.”

“Open your eyes.”

Rayha did. The landscape bobbed up and down in front of her and it took her a moment to realize why: she was walking. She stopped and turned around to discover Dale following her across the desert with a bike on either side of him.

He smiled.

“Oh.” Rayha couldn’t help but grin. “Maybe riding is quicker?”

“If you can follow your gizzard without crashing into a cactus, I agree.” He pushed her bike forward and she took it.

She got on and pushed off, trying to keep her eyes open as she held on to the tug. It wasn’t a very quick ride for the first few minutes,

but as she grew more confident, she also dared increase her speed.

“Well, champion or not, this is pretty cool, Kincaid—unless, of course, we end up dying in the desert because your gizzard sucks.” Dale kept a bit of distance between them, probably in case she veered.

Rayha shrugged. “I could just be hungry and following my stomach to pizza.” She knew she wasn’t. This was a familiar feeling and it wasn’t leading her home. *Well, maybe it is.*

Rayha couldn’t help but smile at the flutter in her stomach totally unrelated to the tug. *If a person can be a home.*

“Since I didn’t know we’d be cycling in a desert for hours and I didn’t exactly bring food, or water for that matter, that sounds pretty good to me.”

Her excitement crumbled in the face of reality. She couldn’t help but worry, despite the concentration it took to hold the tug steady. “I didn’t think of that.” Of course, there wasn’t much they could do about it now.

“Maybe next time, you can ask your angel pal for a cloudy day.” Dale swerved aside when she adjusted course to hit him.

CHAPTER 16

“Turn to me, dear one, turn thy face, and unveil for me in thine eyes, their grace.”

— *Sappho*

“How bloody fast are these shits?” Dale’s coat dangled from the handlebar and his shirt was soaked through.

Rayha wasn’t faring much better. Sweat poured down her back and dripped from her forehead. Every bit of skin that could rub together felt like it was on fire, not to mention the cramps in her leg muscles and the soreness of her ass. “Dunno.” Her eyelids were heavy with a primal desire to just fucking sleep. She paddled through the sand and looked out across the wide open stretches of absolutely nothing on all sides of her but the one direction they were heading in: Phoenix city, right there on the horizon and coming closer.

“Does your gizzard tell things like distance from target?” Dale stood on his paddles and jumped a bit as an alternative to stretching out his legs.

I wish! “Nerd much? And no, it doesn’t. Not as far as I can tell, unless Paige’s body has been going exactly as fast as we have.”

Dale sighed. “Then I am going to hazard a guess and say that demons in meat puppets are faster than people when not possessed.”

“Ya think?” She arched a brow in his general direction. As much as she appreciated Dale for his attempt at banter, it did nothing to alleviate the worsening ball of urgent tension inside of her gut. *If she makes it to the city before we do...* Not only would it be much harder to hunt her down, but there were people in the city—people the demon could hurt, people who could call the cops, people who could bash Paige’s skull in with a baseball bat or shoot her if she tried to attack them. She pushed up on her paddles as well and forged on.

Before long, the buildings drew closer and Rayha’s heart sank

down into her gut, right down to where acid tried to eat away at it. *Not good. Not good at all.* She dared a glance over at Dale.

He had his jaw set and his gaze forward.

She cycled straight into a pothole and groaned as her sore ass and privates crashed down onto the saddle once more.

The bike creaked and groaned dangerously, but it stayed intact.

Rayha's heart pounded in her throat. *If my privates are sore, how bad must Dale's feel?*

"Road." Dale gritted the word through clenched teeth.

She tried to spot the road he was talking about but didn't see it until Dale veered and she followed him, putting the small strip right in her peripheral vision. The tug in her belly wavered like a spun about compass but she ignored it in favor of more solid ground beneath her wheels.

Dale's tire hit the slope up to it first and he groaned when he landed hard on the saddle.

Preemptively, Rayha lifted her ass before she attempted the same.

The sandy but solid stretch under her wheels was a blessed reprieve on her scorching calves and thigh muscles.

"How much longer?" Dale looked like a drowned rat in his soaked through PJ's, with his hair sticking to his skull and his tomato-red face and neck.

She shook her head. "Dunno." The tug came back into focus, guiding her forward and left. Since the road ran on completely straight, she ignored the urgency of the tug to change direction and stayed on the road.

Dale muttered something underneath his breath, but sucked more air into his lungs and paddled on.

Rayha had lost track of time. Judging by the sun, it was maybe ten am? Eleven? No wonder she was so tired. Once they hit the city, Rayha felt entirely exposed without her make-up. Dale probably fared worse. She couldn't remember seeing him without his goth attire since they'd both sort of transitioned into it when high school loomed. Now

he was without his usual clothes, his make-up, his jewelry and he looked like someone had dragged him across the desert for a few hours—which she pretty much had. She felt sorry for him, but not enough to forget about the fact that Paige could be dead right now.

No, she's not dead, I can feel her—her body anyway. If she were dead, I wouldn't feel the tug anymore, right? She swallowed. *Right?* But the truth was that she didn't know for sure what the possibilities and limits of this new-found power were. For all she knew, she could be leading Dale to a corpse. The thought sent shivers down her spine even under the scorching Arizona sun. Rayha leaned forward to stretch out her aching lower back and pushed on. She couldn't keep entertaining thoughts like that. Paige was alive, entertaining any other possibility would only slow her down.

* * *

“Oh, fuck!” Dale's words were encompassed in a groan.

Rayha reluctantly expended the energy required to look at him.
“What?”

Dale nodded toward something in front of them.

Rayha looked. *Oh, fuck.* She recognized the area instantly and skidded to a halt. The road had brought them to a very familiar crossing, the one their bus to school took every weekday. She squeezed her eyes shut and checked her gizzard. Two and two came together to form a very bleak scenario.

Dale looked pale under his furious blush. He checked on her, seemingly for confirmation, because he groaned and let his head fall back. “Kincaid!”

There was nothing she could do about it. Had the demon found the school by accident or had it beelined for it because Paige's brain held memories of it? Was that how it worked? Was there still a part of Paige in her body even though her soul had been driven out, and did it remember the school and all the horrors it had bestowed upon her? If

only Harut would be a little more helpful with either information or just fucking anything, really!

“Come on.” Rayha peddled with leaden limbs and swerved before she found her balance.

Dale caught up, but he looked close to tears, whether from exertion or what would soon be the exposure of his very non-goth self with everyone he hated, Rayha didn’t know.

Screams and running kids greeted them long before they actually reached the school.

Dale was almost knocked off his bike by a crying girl Rayha vaguely recognized but couldn’t place. She wasn’t in any of her classes.

Rayha steered Dale’s nephew’s bike through the throng. By the time she drove up onto the curb and dropped her bike by the low wall in front of the school, the sound of the blaring fire alarm filled her ears. *Someone must have pulled the handle to get everyone out.* Or maybe the demon had set a fire. She ran her gaze along the roof of the school, but didn’t see smoke.

Dale stopped beside her and wobbled as he got off the bike. He put his hand on the wall for support.

Rayha could guess what he was feeling; her legs pricked painfully and sharp stabs tore up the muscles when she walked. She forced herself forward, through the circle of kids outside, looking at the entrance as if it was a mouth that would soon puke something vile out.

For now, the school only regurgitated terrified children.

“Hey!” She pulled on someone’s arm, a kid she knew vaguely enough to at least name.

“Troy, what’s going on?”

He stared at her, seemingly unable to place her for a few seconds. “Oh. Yeah, dunno. Someone says a shooter?” He shrugged. “Or a fire. We just went out.”

Rayha shook her head and let go. *This is useless!* She shouldered her way forward and listen in on the conversations, but no one

mentioned demons, nor did she hear Paige's name. It only offered her a mild sense of relief.

Dale followed her with his head down. He'd put his coat back on, perhaps to hide the outfit underneath, and he'd managed to get some semblance of control over his hair as well.

Rayha supposed that, upon cursory inspection, he would pass the test of posing as his usual self. She couldn't be bothered; she was sweating like a pig and her hair was probably the worst mess in the history of hair, but who cared when Paige was inside of the school, doing fuck knew what to a bunch of kids and ruining her life forever—or getting it ended.

“Get out of the fucking way.” She accentuated the curse with a firm shove and suddenly, she was out of the ring of onlookers. The steps in front of the school awaited her and the entrance beyond. Rayha pushed the pain of acid spreading through her muscles aside and pulled into a shaky jog without looking back. There were far more important things than pain and shouted warnings to worry about now.

They dodged Principal Valez on their way in. Under normal circumstances, a trophy case would have been a terrible place to hide behind, but Principal Valez wasn't exactly paying attention to anything but her expedient departure.

Rayha tried not to inhale too deeply to spare her nose the stench of her and Dale's sweat as they sat huddled together in the corridor, but there was really no way of getting around it.

They pulled apart the second Valez passed with a look that implied they would never speak of that moment again.

“Where to?” Dale hissed the words as they hurried down the hallway.

“Um.” Rayha tried to identify the direction of the tug, but it was much harder inside of a building because it seemed to disregard things Rayha couldn't; things like walls and floor levels. She hurried on until the tug no longer came from in front of her but moved to the side.

“In here.” She turned right and crouched to stay out of sight of the

people outside of the windows.

The fire alarm was deafening indoors. It howled outside and seemingly inside of Rayha's skull, setting her brain matter on fire.

"We're getting—"

"I'm going to beat you down, you little witch!"

Dale's head came up with a jerk as the bellowing roar reached their ears over the alarm.

"The butcher!" The hairs on Rayha's arms stood on end. *Oh no! No, no, no!* She didn't pay her confused gizzard any more heed as she pulled into a sprint. She knew exactly where Paige was: the very worst place she could possibly be, the butcher's homeroom.

"Shit!" Dale pulled into a run to keep up.

Rayha gripped the door handle before she'd gotten a proper glance through the small window in the door. There wasn't time to strategize, just time to stop the butcher from literally axing Paige. "Don't hurt her!" She yanked the door open to a sight that rooted her more firmly in place than a stake ever could.

It was her group, the ones she was in history class with. All of them looked at her wide-eyed as she stumbled into the room. They'd huddled behind a barricade of haphazardly stacked tables and chairs with the butcher in front of them holding, of all things, his briefcase by the handle to swing as a weapon.

He's protecting them? The thought only flitted through her head a second, because Paige turned around and the shock of seeing her almost buckled Rayha's knees.

Paige was always skinny, but she looked skeletal now. Her limbs seemed to have extended and the hands had curled into bloody claws. Her skin pulled taut around her skull as her mouth—no, maw—stretched to hiss at them like a hellcat.

Rayha's heart arrested as lightning bolts of fear coursed through it. *Is that really her?*

The demon inside of Paige's body licked her lips—no, it just kind of...tasted the air. Saliva dribbled down Paige's chin and onto the

blood-smeared front of her baby pink sleep shirt. Her shredded toes dug into the floor as if trying to dig talons into the linoleum.

Rayha's heartbeat pounded in her ears and drowned out anything else. She couldn't move. Her memories of Paige in the barn, smiling through her tears and of the way Paige had held her hand on a wall no more than a few hundred feet from this very spot held her captive as she tried to mash the two together.

Paige shook herself out like something much larger than her. Her eyes were not black—why had Rayha expected them to be black?—but Paige's lovely green ones, which made the whole image ten times worse. The demon controlling Paige slid its gaze from Rayha to Dale and back as if trying to decide which to have for lunch first. All humanity had drained from those eyes, all of Paige's uncertainty and fear, all of her pain. They were cold, lifeless.

The cold seemed to translate one-on-one to the inside of Rayha's belly. *What are we going to do?* "Paige?" The word left her mouth unbidden. She cleared her throat. "Paige, are you in there?" *Please be in there. Please.*

Behind Paige, the butcher crept forward, briefcase in hand. His eyes were trained on the back of Paige's head. She didn't have the be a mind reader to know what he was planning.

"Don't do it, Mr. Hayes!" She held up her hand in a universal stop sign she knew he would ignore. Her gaze slid back to her friend. "Paige, please!" Her heart would give out soon, it couldn't take the strain she'd put on it today.

The demon eyed her and hissed again, like a snake. It pulled Paige's foot high up and took a step toward her. Nothing changed in Paige's eyes, nor her posture; no sign of recognition or life beyond that of the demon whom her body was housing.

She's not there. The realization was crushing—and terrifying. Rayha took a step back. Some part of her had been sure that as soon as they came face-to-face, Paige would re-emerge, that she would make her way back to her body just in time to avoid the grand finale, just

like in the movies. But this wasn't a movie and it dawned on Rayha that there might not be a happy end to this story either.

More saliva dripped down Paige's chin, adding to the froth that had crusted there.

Rayha swallowed down a lump in her throat. "Please!"

Paige's toes curled. Her body hunched. Her fingers twitched and solidified into claws on which ends bloody nails peaked.

The butcher swung his briefcase but missed as Paige's body rushed forward.

She lunged at them—at her—ready to do to Rayha what the demon inside Paige's body had done to Paige's parents.

Rayha brought her arms up over her face in a useless survival instinct, then something knocked her aside. She sprawled on the floor, but other than the arm she roughly landed on, she didn't feel any pain. No lacerations, no bite. Rayha scrambled to get up and find out why she wasn't mauled yet.

"Dale!" Of course it was Dale who had pushed her aside and he was paying for it now.

Paige's scrawny frame had lifted him off the floor. His feet dangled uselessly, the noses of his boots just scraping the tiles. He tried to claw at Paige's hand, to get her to loosen the hold of his neck, but Paige held on like a vice. Her cold eyes stared at him, then the demon-in-Paige cocked her head inquisitively—just in time to get bashed with a suitcase.

"No!" Rayha pulled her legs under her as she held up her hand. "Don't hurt her!"

The demon shook Paige's body out, turned, and used Dale's body as mass to put behind its blow.

The butcher was twice the size of Paige at least, but her strike lifted him straight off his feet. He crashed into the wall with a sickening thud that Rayha felt all the way down to her own.

Some of the girls cried out from behind the barricade. The fearful cries were just loud enough to top the fire alarm, but they died out the

second the demon turned Paige's body in their direction.

Rayha's gaze slid from them to the butcher to Paige and—
Dale hung limp in Paige's clawed hand.

Paige shook him as she reeled him in, then licked the air in front of his face.

Like a snake. Like a goddamn snake. The thought sparked another. *Harut.* Her heart pounded almost loud enough to draw out the shrill cries of the alarm. She took Paige in again, the briefcase that lay by her side, the butcher on the floor, her terrified classmates and Dale's lifeless body. *I can stop this. Right here, right now.* But at what cost?

A slow trickle of blood made its way down Paige's neck, seemingly from the side of her head. Paige's nails dug into Dale's neck, drawing blood of their own. *She'll tear his throat out.* "Please, Paige! Please!"

It was useless. The demon in Paige snarled at her, but then went on playing with Dale's body, watching how his limbs dangled when it shook him. *Decision time!* Tears welled up.

Was there really a decision to make here? She had no weapons and no plan. Dale was about to be killed and Paige—who knew if Paige would still be alive once the demon left her body.

This was Paige, *her* Paige. Paige who had kissed her, who'd just wanted to die before all of this had started. She would never hurt anyone, but here she was, about to tear through a classroom full of kids, not to mention the damage she'd already done to her parents.

No, there wasn't a choice. Either she stopped this with Harut's help, or thirty people would be dead in five minutes, herself included.

She stopped a sob before it could well up. "Harut!" The cry reverberated off the walls with an echo that didn't seem entirely of this world. "I have a proposition for you!"

CHAPTER 17

“And for all of you sinners there shall be no salvation, but on you all shall abide a curse.

But for the elect there shall be light and joy and peace, and they shall inherit the earth.”

— The Book of Enoch

You called?

The voice inside of her skull pulsed from the same point Rayha remembered from their previous “chats.” Along with the voice came the feeling of his presence, upsetting her stomach even more.

Instantly, the demon snarled and tossed Dale aside like a discarded ragdoll as it twisted in place and scanned the classroom.

It senses him!

Again, muffled cries went up. Someone shifted, a table fell over and crashed onto the floor. The cries turned into screams that were cut off by shushes and hands wrapped over mouths.

The demon ignored her classmates and clawed at the air in the same direction Rayha sensed Harut’s presence.

She only now realized how similar sensing Harut was to the tug in her belly when localizing home or Paige. *Yes, I called! Help Paige! And Dale!* Rayha took a slow step back as the demon’s gaze slid over her.

You know what we require in return. The voice sounded smug, which pissed Rayha off. A shiver of warning coursed along her spine. An unformed sense of wrongness teased her brain, but she was too preoccupied to work out why. *I do, and I’m willing to talk terms.*

Terms? Now he just sounded bemused. *A serf of the Iyrin does not discuss her fealty. Fealty is given freely.*

Rayha huffed. *Yeah, maybe goddamn religious peasants in eighteen hundred-something did. It’s nineteen ninety-six, Harut. I*

have terms.

The demon jumped forward like a kangaroo and clawed the air where Rayha had pinpointed the presence of Harut. It snarled and slashed wildly, distracted—thank fuck—by his angelic presence.

All right, name your terms. He sounded bored. Obviously the demon's efforts didn't harm him.

Term one: freeze the demon before it hurts someone else. She checked on Dale, but he still lay in a crumpled heap under the blackboard. *I need to make sure he's is okay.*

We have told you, we do not help you un—

Call it a token of goodwill. She tried to put as much annoyance into her mental voice as she could. Meanwhile, she stepped carefully to the side, eyes on the demon but physically inching toward Dale.

Hm.

The demon clawed at the air with such reckless abandon that Rayha feared for Paige's shoulder joints. It snarled and spat, seemingly enraged by its arch enemy's presence and its own inability to harm him.

Now Rayha could finally see the gash on Paige's head or, more accurately, the widening pool of red that coated her hair from a spot just behind her right ear. *Is her skull intact? Her brain?* Again, stabs of fear tore through her ligaments. "Harut!"

Paige's body froze. From one second to the next, she turned into a panting statue with saliva and blood dripping onto her ragged shirt.

We accept your idea of a token.

Thank you! And she meant it too. She rushed over to Dale and ended up hovering over him just like she'd hovered over Paige's parents—useless and afraid. "Dale?" She held her hand up to his mouth.

His warm breath hit her skin. She exhaled in relief. He looked like shit, though. Little crescents ran all the way down his neck. Now-drying trickles of blood coated his skin. He'd gone pale and he was still out cold. At least he wasn't dead, and probably not dying.

“Rayha?”

Rayha.

Two different voices called her name. One was easy to identify. She had to look up for the second. *Kelly*. Cheerleader-fucking-Kelly had stood up behind the wall of tables and looked straight at her.

Wait, please. “It’s okay, or it will be. I’ve got it handled, okay? Just, if shit hits the fan, take care of Dale?”

Kelly frowned. “What’s happening? Do you know?”

“Stuff.” She shook her head. “Just stuff. Take care of Dale?”

Rayha. A warning underlay the tone now.

Kelly glanced at Dale, then at Paige, then back at Rayha. “Okay.” She nodded. “Okay.” After another look at Paige’s still form, she climbed over the barricade with ease and hurried along the wall to crouch by Dale’s head. She pressed her fingers to a slightly less damaged part of his neck and glanced at her watch.

Good, she seems to know what she’s doing. That settled Rayha more than she had expected.

Across the homeroom, the butcher rose.

Fuck, the last thing I need is— Then she recognized the glowing blue in his eyes. *Harut.*

She stood and faced him. “Shit. Sorry for making you wait.”

The angel in the towering body looked down upon her. “We will no longer be made to wait.”

“I know.” She glanced back Paige. “Sorry.”

“Your conditions.” The butcher’s arms hung limply past his side, like tentacles Harut didn’t have a use for.

For the first time, Rayha wondered what he looked like, but the doubt about his nature had disappeared. Now she’d seen the horror of a demon and its reaction to Harut, she was confident he could be nothing else than an angel. The thought gave very little comfort.

“Paige. You exorcise her or whatever and she never gets possessed again. Ever! No more nightmare punishments, and a one way ticket to heaven when she dies.” *Hopefully in eighty or so years.*

Harut-in-the butcher didn't move, nor made the butcher emote. "It can be done. Are you finished?"

"No. If I agree to this champion thing, you or some other Iyrin protect her, and Dale, and my mom forever, not until I die, not until something else shitty happens to me—forever. Until they die and afterward too. They get the perfect ending to life, okay? All of them." Her heart hammered in her chest.

She caught the class talking amongst themselves, still huddled behind the tables. They must think she was crazy—and that the butcher had turned insane on the spot. That's what she would think if the roles had been reversed.

The fire alarm cut off mid-wail. The silence it left behind was even more deafening than its blaring had been.

Harut made the butcher nod. "That can be arranged, too. Are those your terms?"

Rayha thought frantically. *Are they?* She knew she should ask for more, that she should protect herself better, but the dreams had prepared her for one very simple reality: except for the very rare few, untimely deaths befell champions. Horrible, painful deaths that Harut wouldn't be able to protect her from. She slowly shook her head and glanced at a still petrified Paige. There was always the very slim chance she'd end her life like Gaetano. Then another thought slithered into her brain like a snake and left her cold to the bone. "No, I want an honest answer to this question: Did you set this up?"

Harut had the butcher arch a brow. "Clarify."

"This, Paige coming into my life, her getting possessed, her..." She swallowed. "Two years of nightmare torture?"

It was hard to tell where two pupilless glowing orbs were directed at but Rayha could feel Harut's penetrating gaze on her. The silence stretched into seconds—seconds only pierced by police and firetruck sirens.

She didn't need him to answer anymore, she knew.

Harut realized that she realized what he'd done, she could see it in

the way he straightened the butcher's body out. "If we let her go, she will kill you all."

"I know." A numbness seeped through her body. She'd been played in a way that was so incredibly beyond her that she didn't have a retort. "Was she just insurance or were you always going to use her against me? And how did you know I'd—" She stopped herself. A haze of tears made Paige's outline fuzzy. Rayha wiped them away and shook her head. *That I'd like her? Love her, maybe?*

Harut cocked the butcher's head. *We gave you someone weak to protect. It is in your nature to protect innocent life, else you would never be able to champion. We did not plan this possession, nor could we have. We make use of her failure.* The butcher's lips pulled into a clownish smirk. "Give me your answer now, Rayha. Your enforcers of law will be here soon. If we let her go then—"

He didn't have to finish the sentence, she knew what they would riddle her with bullets, right before she tore their heads from their bodies for the minor inconvenience they'd caused.

She stared at the side of Paige's face for another few, agonizing seconds, then glanced back at Dale.

Kelly stroked his hair, which undid some of the darkness in Rayha's heart. *I hope you have a better life, Dale. You don't want to live mine, I promise.* She turned her head back to face Harut. "I agree. I agree to become your champion."

Harut straightened the Butcher's body out and inhaled deeply.

He looked so smug that she wanted to punch him in the face. *You can still say no!* Only she couldn't. There was no way to say no to this—not with Paige about to face a hostile police force, not with Dale still out cold and all these kids—and herself—in danger.

"Stop gloating and do it already." She swallowed and relaxed the hands that had balled into fists.

He leveled the orbs at her again. "Rayhana Kunza Kincaid—" She rolled her eyes.

"Do you agree to become the champion of He Who Is Called

Harut, Iyrin of Sorcery. To serve faithfully as champion of the Iyrin, of your own volition and desire?”

She didn't know what “volition” meant, but she got the gist. The answer was a resounding “no,” of course, but there was no such answer possible. “Didn't I just say I would?”

The bolt of pain was instant and as unrelenting as the previous ones. It seemed to turn her brain to mush, shattered her thought process and dropped her to her knees. She was probably screaming, but she couldn't stop. Rayha grabbed the sides of her head and dug her nails into her scalp to feel something else—anything else—than the pain of her head imploding. “Yes!” She felt the word fall from her lips more than she heard it. “I agree!”

The pain ebbed away.

Rayha curled into a ball and sobbed. She didn't care who saw, her entire system was rattled and in pain. This was exactly how she imagined she'd feel after a lightning strike, right down to the jerking of her limbs and the blood in her mouth from biting her tongue.

“Then stand, champion! Stand so you may be claimed!”

The butcher's rumbling voice fitted Harut perfectly, Rayha decided. The whole thing would have been far less impressive from Dale's mouth. Of course, she might also have been less scared than she was right now, which was a pants peeing, staring down a lion type of scared.

Every nerve ending flared as she rolled onto her belly, scrambled like a bug to get up on her hands and knees, and then pushed up. She wobbled, but stood. Rayha couldn't get her breathing under control. Her heart beat so fast that it could only be another panic attack.

When he stepped forward and steadied her with a hand around her neck, she was sure his “help” was only secondary to a greater purpose. She sank into the hold regardless. Holding herself up was a task her muscles weren't up to. She stared up at him and didn't resist when the butcher's large, calloused hand landed heavily on her forehead.

Her head fell back, neck muscles too weak to accommodate the

added weight. This up-close, she could see the butcher's eyes through the glare and focused on his pinprick pupils. Her arms were too heavy to use; her head was still reeling. The only thing that resisted was her brain, which was screaming at her.

"I hereby claim you, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid." The blue light that radiated from the butcher's eyes flared. It sent needles through her eyeballs, straight into her already screeching brain, but she couldn't close her eyes; she couldn't look away from him.

The light expanded until everything around them was blue. *Just like in those travel commercials; like swimming in a sea in Tenerife or Greece or something.* The thought should have soothed her, but it only made her homesick for a life she hadn't even abandoned yet. Rayha didn't want a sea in Tenerife, she wanted her mom!

The hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end. If the hair on her head had been any less sweat-drenched, that might have rose as well. A million ants seemed to race crisscross over her skin. After no more than a second, they filled with purpose and raced toward her neck, to where the butcher's hand still held her firmly but without choking her.

The skin underneath his hand heated up like a warm woolen scarf, but then it got hotter and hotter and hotter until she couldn't help but squirm. "S-Stop."

Harut didn't stop.

The heat became searing, like tea spilled on bare skin. Then it became hotter than that.

She expected her skin to start sizzling and inhaled with the expectation of smelling burning flesh. She only smelled sweat and urine. *Oh fuck, did I piss myself?* She couldn't tell, the hold claimed all her attention.

Hot pressure looped around like a necklace. No, not a necklace—*a collar!* The realization pushed fire through her blood and chased away the numbness. She struggled against the hold in an almost animalistic desire to get away. She wasn't a slave, she was...she

didn't know what she was, but only now did the reality of what she had agreed to seep into her brain. Her stomach revolted, but her sick was held down by Harut's firm hold. She begged for release with her eyes, but the butcher's eyes were lifeless and his hold unwavering.

Then the world fractured.

For a single second, Rayha could taste the air, touch the color blue, smell time passing, hear fear, and see an angel. Harut wasn't inside the butcher, he stood behind him with his nailless fingers over his ears and temples. "He" had been incorrect; as the butcher's body went transparent, it became obvious Harut didn't have a penis, but he also didn't have breasts.

As far as she could tell, he didn't have primary or secondary reproductive organs at all, and no body hair. She didn't see nipple, no belly button, just blue eyes, a strong nose and jaw, and a muscular body that could be either male or female. He was blank, featureless, like he'd been popped out of a human-shaped mold. *No wings*. She was surprised by how disappointed she was by that fact.

Harut met her gaze and nodded, as if confirming all she was in the layers beyond her own reality. Planes, he'd called them. Planes.

The world reknitted. Her senses returned to normal. She'd definitely pissed herself. A shudder tore through her at both the knowledge of that shameful event and the cold sensation of the wet insides of her wet pants against her legs.

The butcher's hand unclasped from around her neck and she stumbled. She managed to hold herself up, but only barely.

"It's done."

Rayha sucked in a shaky breath. Her throat felt like it was on fire both inside and out but she didn't dare reach up and find out what Harut had done to her. It would be too much reality to face at once. She lifted her head to look at him. "G-Good, then do what you promised."

CHAPTER 18

“As you go, preach, saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Freely you received, so freely give.”

— Matthew 10:7-9

Harut turned the butcher’s body toward Paige’s still frozen, still bleeding one. He waved his hand and said only a single word that sounded something like “oaeruoq.”

She dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap.

“Paige!” Rayha rushed forward, past Harut, or the butcher, or whatever, fell by Paige’s body and forgot all about being careful; Paige was already so broken, there was not much more damage Rayha could do. “Paige?” The word disappeared in a choked sob. She guided Paige’s head and shoulder onto an unsoiled part of her thigh and used her shirt to wipe some of the spit from her chin and blood from her neck. “I’ve got you.” She rocked the lifeless body in her lap gently. “You’re going to be okay, I promise.”

Paige’s arm slid limply onto the floor, in a puddle of her own blood.

Rayha rushed to pull it back up and held it, smearing blood all over herself and Paige in the process. “I promise.” She pulled her closer and made sure to support her head and neck. That’s what you were supposed to do, right? “I promise.” It had become a mantra, one that felt impossible to break.

We will depart now, but shall return once arrangements are made. We will let the enforcers come.

Fuck off! Rayha pulled Paige’s pale, frail body against her protectively. *Just fuck off!*

The butcher fell unconscious once more and impacted the floor with much more noise than Paige’s body had caused.

The heavy thump set off a cascade of events Rayha was only dimly aware of.

Her classmates erupted in chatter and movement. They emerged from behind the tables and rushed out the door as one. Their echoing screams bounced off the hallway walls and magnified tenfold.

Cops in bullet proof vests swarmed in, guns drawn.

Kelly yelped.

Rayha only now realized she'd stayed behind with Dale. *Thank you.* Dale shouldn't be alone right now. Rayha didn't have time to dwell. She looked up through the tears at a dozen firearms and leaned forward to cover Paige's body more with hers. "D-Don't shoot." Her throat still felt like it had been sanded down. "It's over."

The words shook something loose in her. Everything she'd held back during the last five or so hours rushed up in a wave that pulled her under. She felt herself losing control of herself but was powerless to stop it. The tremble that had started up inside her core intensified to a tremor. She rocked Paige's body back and forth, back and forth, as she gave into her breakdown.

Shock. This is shock. Realizing it was happening didn't mean she could stop it.

More people filed in.

Kelly was talking.

Someone touched her.

Rayha shrugged them off. When the hand returned, she swatted at them.

More hands grabbed at her, then touched Paige neck, her chest, her head.

"N-No! Don't hurt her! Don't hurt her!" Rayha shouted to get over the noise inside her skull, an all-consuming cacophony of emotions and a frantic heartbeat.

Someone took a hold of her cheeks and slowly angled her head up. "It's okay. We're going to take care of her. Let us take care of her, please?" A woman's voice, gentle and calm.

Rayha opened her eyes; she didn't remember closing them in the first place. It was a lady cop, a bit younger than Mom but much older than Rayha. She was white and she had a nice smile, one that didn't make it seem like she was mocking Rayha. All around her were legs of other cops, but as soon as Rayha looked at them, the lady guided her head down and brought Rayha's gaze back to her.

"I'm Agnes. What's your name, sweetie?"

Rayha tried to inhale more slowly, more deeply. "Rayha."

Agnes nodded. She had knelt down in front of her and had stretched out her arms over Paige's body to reach Rayha's cheeks. She rubbed lightly. "Hi, Rayha. What's her name, hm?" She nodded toward Paige's body.

"Paige. She's hurt. Hurt bad." Her voice trembled. She sounded—and felt—so young. "I want my Mom." The longing was so deep that it caused another crying fit. Rayha tried to stop it, she really did, but the tears came unbidden.

"I know." Agnes stroked the tears away. "I'll make you a deal, okay?"

"Hurry up, Paulson." One of the men that stood over them with his hands under his bulletproof vest shifted his stance. The gun was back in its holster on his belt. "Capt'n wants the scene under control."

Agnes sent him a glare, which Rayha liked. She settled her gaze on Rayha again. "Sorry, ignore him, okay?"

Rayha nodded.

"Good." Agnes smiled. She had blue eyes too, but normal once, human ones. They still sparked memories and Rayha shuddered.

"I'll make you a deal, if you let the doctors take care of Paige, I'll take you out of here myself. After some exams, I'm going to let you shower, change into some clean clothes, and I'll personally make sure you get to call your mom, okay?"

It sounded so good—the shower, clean clothes, and most of all: Mom. Rayha nodded. "Okay." She looked down at Paige and willed her arms to move. Very carefully, she guided Paige's head away from

her chest and rested it in her lap.

Agnes let go of her cheeks after a soft pat. “Thank you, Rayha.”

Rayha nodded and wiped her tears on her arm. Her thoughts had slowed to a crawl and she was so tired. She couldn’t keep up with what was happening as people in reflective clothing shifted Paige’s body onto a board and lifted her onto a gurney. She watched it happen, but it didn’t register. “Dale?” She turned her head to where she’d left him. Her view of him was blocked by more medics. Kelly stood close by.

Their eyes met.

Kelly smiled and nodded. She would take care of him.

The knowledge that he was safe worsened the lethargy tugging at her mind and body. She fought sleep from her position on the floor.

“Rayha? Are you ready to go?” Agnes had stood and held out her hand to her.

For a second, Rayha didn’t know what that meant, but then she remembered. She took it and let Agnes pull her up. When she faltered, Agnes held her against her body and wrapped an arm around her.

“Do you want a gurney too?”

Rayha shook her head. “Is there something around my neck?” She was too tired to really give a shit, but she needed to know.

“No. nothing.” Agnes smiled at her and guided her out. “You’re perfectly unharmed.”

I’m not, Rayha wanted to say—to shout. *I’m harmed. I’m hurt. I’m in trouble!* But she didn’t, because she would have to explain that—and so much more. A shiver coursed down her spine. She would have to be very careful what she told the police. In fact, she shouldn’t tell the police anything. Maybe she shouldn’t even have told them her name, or Paige’s, but they would probably have found out anyway. She pressed her lips together as a reminder to herself to stay quiet from this point on.

Agnes guided her down the hallway.

Rayha walked through here five days a week, but it was foreign to

her now, lit by flashing lights from outside and littered with what appeared to be every single police officer in Phoenix. They all watched her as she passed.

Despite her promise not to entrust Agnes—or anyone else—with any more information, Rayha turned her body toward her on instinct, looking for shelter.

Agnes slid her arm up over her back and rested it gently along her shoulders. She guided Rayha's head against her shoulder as they walked. "My car is close by, don't worry. Do you want me to cover your face?"

Rayha nodded without even thinking about it. She rested her head, but only because her neck hurt. That's what she told herself, at least.

"Okay." Agnes slowed them down. "Alvarez, gimme your jacket!"

Alvarez was maybe in his early twenties. He was the only one Rayha had seen so far who didn't wear a vest. He slipped his jacket off as he walked over.

Rayha caught a flash of golden lettering on the back: CSI. *Ah. That makes sense.* They came in after the danger was over, right?

Agnes and Alvarez made sure her head was covered well before Agnes wrapped an arm around her shoulders again and walked her out. "Steps."

Rayha could just spot them from under the jacket that smelled like eau de cologne and a bit like guy sweat. She remembered how many steps there were and she made her way down without tripping.

Outside of the protective bubble of the jacket, people were shouting questions. "Officer! Who's that?" "Is the situation under control?" "What happened?" "Do you want to comment?"

"Please let us pass." Agnes's voice sounded harsh now.

Since no one touched Rayha and they moved forward, Rayha figured the reporters had either obeyed or had been restrained by someone else. She was extremely grateful for the jacket now. Not only didn't she want to see anyone, she didn't want anyone to see her either.

“Wait here a second.” Agnes’s voice had become gentle again. She let go of Rayha and stepped forward. A few seconds later, her voice sounded again. “The car is just two steps away.”

Rayha held out her arm and crossed the distance.

Agnes guided her hand onto the top of the door. Touching cool metal shocked her system. It was too real, too sudden. She forced herself to grip it and felt her way into the car.

The door closed behind her and shut out most of the noise. The sirens became duller, the voices muffled. Some of the tension in her cramping muscles fell away. Rayha decided to leave the jacket on over her head and buckled up by touch alone. It was nice to be in the dark and she was grateful for the reprieve of her own bubble, her own world. She had so much to think about and maybe she could do that in the dark, before there would be people with questions she wouldn’t be able to give them answers to. If only her thoughts didn’t flutter around inside her brainpan like hummingbirds, too quick to grab a hold of and examine. She only caught fleeting glimpses of them before they disappeared.

The car shook as someone sat in front of her. “Buckled up?”

Rayha nodded, then realized Agnes couldn’t see her. “Yes.”

The car started and pulled away, shaking her as it drove off the curb. “Good, then we’re out of here!” Agnes sounded cheerful—too cheerful for having just walked in on a scene of horror—and most likely out of an even more terrible scene before, at Paige’s house.

Paige’s parents! Rayha had her mouth open before she realized that if she asked how they were, she’d give away she’d been at the house after they’d been hurt. She clamped her mouth shut. *Thank fuck for the jacket!*

“So, do you want to tell me what happened?” Agnes’s tone was friendly, casual. Just a nice lady asking someone an innocent question.

Rayha knew better; she stayed quiet.

“I heard someone say that your friend tried to hurt them?”

Agnes was on a fishing expedition and she’d brought a mighty fine

piece of lure. No, that wasn't what had happened. Paige had nothing to do with it! *And she's going to be so confused when she wakes up! And terrified!* A lump formed in her throat. She tried to swallow it down. "How's Dale?"

"Is that the boy who got hurt?" She could feel Agnes's eyes on her and had to remind herself of the jacket.

"Yeah, Dale Anderson. Don't contact his stepdad, he's an asshole." Rayha bit her lip. "Did anyone find my mom?"

"We're trying to. Someone's telling Mr. Calhoun about what happened to his stepson too, we have to because Dale is a minor. Do you understand?"

It didn't escape Rayha's notice that Agnes didn't mention trying to contact Paige's parents. She shrugged. "I guess. Just don't be surprised if he's too drunk to talk. Or if he throws a bottle at someone. Wilbert hates cops."

"I'll be sure to let my colleagues know."

Rayha didn't care if Agnes believed her or not, Wilbert would be a grade-A asshole no matter what. She shifted and leaned her head against the headrest. Her wet pants chafed her thighs. *Disgusting.* Even with the reminder of her little accident, her eyelids fell shut of their own volition. *So tired.*

"Did Paige try to hurt you too?"

Rayha set her jaw. She was tired, but awake enough to want to defend Paige's honor, and that was a shitty plan. Rayha inhaled deeply to sooth herself but smelled only sweat and piss. Her stomach protested. She swallowed down the bile.

"Some people saw you and your friend run into the school. That was very brave of you." Agnes paused. "Why did you do that?"

Rayha remained silent. She focused on sleep; just a few minutes of it would help clear the fog. Hopefully, anyway, else she was fucked.

"Was it because your friend was in there? Paige?"

Rayha shut Agnes out as best she could. A few memories and thoughts were coming together now and she wanted to hold on to that.

How had she known Paige was in trouble for example? Had she really heard Paige or was that another one of Harut's tricks?

Guilt tugged at her insides. If Rayha hadn't been chosen as a champion, Paige would have just been like any other messed up teen who'd tried to kill herself, not punished with hell and damnation—literally. What had Harut said? No, she'd called Paige that: insurance. Just insurance in case Rayha didn't cooperate on her own come her birthday. The timeline had simply been pushed up because Paige had broken loose instead of riding out the storm of possession tied down to a bed.

Agnes asked her a question again, one which she didn't even catch. *Good, makes it easier not to reply.* A lightning bolt thought had her jump. Paige had cried out for her in her dream and Harut had probably made sure she'd heard it. *She thought I could save her.* The thought weighted heavily on her chest. In front of her mind's eye, Paige's parents held each other tightly in a pool of their own blood. The image of Paige's tormented body as the demon inside pushed it past its natural limits would haunt her forever.

In a way, she had saved Paige. There would be no more possessions, no more hellish nightmares other than the ones born of her own mind and memories. Paige was free. Even if she didn't survive the fallout of her possession—the thought sent heat through her veins even as her flesh turned stone cold—Paige had her ticket to heaven.

Tears welled up again. How she still had any left was beyond her, but there they were. She wiped them away and sniffed to stop the flow of the watery snot that threatened to drip from her nose.

“Are you okay, Rayha?” Agnes sounded genuinely concerned.

Fuck you. “Fine.” Rayha sighed and settled her head against the backrest more securely.

She really didn't want Paige to die, but if Paige lived, would she stay alive anyway? What if her mom and dad hadn't made it? What if they had but they never wanted to see her again?

Her thoughts ran away with her again, leaving nothing behind but a fluttery mess that worsened the headache that had developed after she'd hit her head on a shelf in her bedroom.

Shit, was that only last night? Just a few hours ago, even. "What time is it?"

She cut off something Agnes was saying, it seemed, because she faltered. "Um, two pm, give or take a few minutes."

"Oh. Thanks." *Eight hours.* It was later than she'd thought but even then, in just eight hours it was done and over with. She was an angel slave now, four people were seriously hurt, and even if everyone lived, Paige was in serious trouble. *Not to mention that there is no way she can come back to school.*

Dale probably wouldn't want to come back here either after this, and she wasn't very inclined to submit herself to stares and gossip.

If Paige gets to go home and her parents want her there, she'll probably move again. The thought filled her with sadness again. There really was no way she was going to end up with Paige, was there? She remembered the feeling of slightly greasy hair between her fingers and soft lips with a small ring through them, pressed against her own.

The tears were back. Before she even had a chance to dry them, the car came to a halt.

"We're here. Do you want to take the jacket off now?"

"Not really." She wiped her eyes. "Where are we?"

Agnes shifted in her seat, making Rayha question the wisdom of blocking the cop from view. "The hospital. They're going to check you over and collect some samples."

"Samples?" Rayha frowned.

"Evidence. Things under your fingernails and on your clothes. You were at a crime scene, after all." Agnes was tempting her to commit to something. Both Paige's house and the school were crime scenes, right?

"Ah."

After a few seconds of silence, Agnes seemed to give up on

waiting for more information.

She got out and opened the door for Rayha. “All right, out you go then. Let’s get you checked.”

Rayha slid out with a sigh. *Good luck finding anything. I think I’m far more fucked up than modern medicine can handle.*

CHAPTER 19

“Give unto me, Thy servant, a wise, understanding, penetrating, and subtle heart, to acquire and comprehend all Sciences and Arts; give unto me capacity to hear, and strength of memory to retain them, so that I may be able to accomplish my desires, and understand and learn all difficult and desirable Sciences; and also that I may be able to comprehend the hidden secrets of the Holy Writings.”

— Key of Solomon

Rayha held on to Agnes’s arm as they walked through the halls of the hospital. The scent of cleaning supplies reminded her of Mom and made her even more homesick.

Agnes was pretty good at guiding her along. She led her past every obstacle and warned her about every step, even though Rayha could see most of them if she leaned forward a bit. Either she had a lot of experience walking criminals around with jackets over their heads, or Agnes had a blind family member.

It didn’t really matter, but thinking about stuff like that was far easier than worrying about how much trouble Paige was—not just biblical trouble but real people trouble.

Paige wasn’t the only who was possibly in trouble. *Did we do something illegal?* That was the question Rayha kept cycling back to. If Dale and her had done something illegal, they could end up in jail. Maybe the cops could get them on breaking and entering. They hadn’t done the breaking, but they had entered Paige’s house without permission, after all. Perhaps it would help that it had been for a good cause? *Shit. Isn’t it illegal to run away from injured people?* Maybe that was only when you hit people with your car, or maybe your bike too, but they hadn’t done that. Besides, the ambulance had been almost there and they had to stop the demon—not that they could raise that as a defense. They had called 911, that had to count for

something, right.

“We’re here. To the left.” Agnes guided her into a room and closed the door behind them, unknowingly also cutting off Rayha’s train wrecked thoughts.

A metallic rattling noise Rayha recognized from school told her that Agnes had lowered the blinds and closed them.

“All right, we’re alone. You can take the jacket off now.” Agnes’s voice sounded nice enough, but the message that she didn’t have a choice in the matter was conveyed in a clear edge to her tone.

Rayha slipped the jacket off, handed it over, and smoothed her hair down. They were in a small examination room. Nothing special, just the usual bed, chair, poster with letters in increasingly tinier print, and a cop. She focused her attention on Agnes. “We don’t have health insurance.” *Best get that out of the way first.*

“We’re paying for the examination, don’t worry.” Agnes folded the coat over her arm, then seemed to reconsider and laid it on the armrest of the chair by the door instead. “The doctor will be here soon.”

Her pager went off. Agnes checked it, then clipped the device back to her belt.

“Not important?” Rayha hopped onto the bed; standing made her already sore legs feel worse. She’d never cycled that much in her life and she’d have one hell of a muscle ache tomorrow.

“It can wait.” Agnes stood by a few moments, then lowered herself into the chair.

Rayha dangled her legs. “So, um, am I in trouble?”

The answer took a few seconds to formulate, apparently. “You seem like a smart kid, so I’m not going to lie, you might be in trouble.”

Rayha’s heart plummeted. *Cop talk or truth?* She fought to keep her expression neutral, just in case Agnes was trying to manipulate her into a confession by saying she was fucked.

“Oh. Why?”

“Well.” Agnes rested her elbows on her knees and clasped her hands together. Her gaze remained solidly fixed on Rayha. “A lot of very disturbing things happened in a very short time span and you and your friend were there.”

“Hm.” Rayha held Agnes’s gaze. “If I’m in trouble, aren’t there supposed to be charges?” She was basing this off nothing but Dale’s and Dale’s cousin’s words, because Rayha didn’t even have a TV to watch cop shows on. She regretted that now.

“Well, if we charge you, we have to be reasonably sure we can prove it. That’s why we’re here. Before you ask, no, this exam isn’t voluntary.” Agnes smiled, which didn’t lessen the impact or meaning of her words at all.

Rayha huffed. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Good then.”

Before either could get another word in, the door opened without a knock. A nurse came in. *Doctors wear white coats, right?* It was another woman, which Rayha decided was to make her comfortable. If Dale had been here right now instead of her, Agnes would be Angus and the nurse, who introduced herself as Bree, would be named Bill, or something.

“Hi, Bree.” Rayha decided to smile at her. Smiling people didn’t have things to hide, right? Bree was maybe her mom’s age, with thin brown hair and almost blonde eyebrows, which made Rayha suspect she’d dyed one of the two, and most likely her hair. Why she was noting tiny details like that, Rayha didn’t know, but she couldn’t stop soaking up every bit of information she could just in case it would give her an edge later on.

“I’m going to be performing your examination. Detective Paulson will stay here and make sure I do a good job with you, okay?” Bree smiled too, of course.

Rayha nodded. “Sure. What do I do?”

“Well.” Bree walked to one of the cupboards above a kitchenette and pulled out a few sheets of hospital paper. She unfolded them and

laid them out on the floor in a six by six square. “You can hop on down and stand on these. Then I’d like you to take your clothes off.”

Rayha climbed down. It wasn’t like she had much of a choice anyway, with Agnes Paulson right there and cheerfully smiling Bree between her and the door as well. She wasn’t sure if Harut would interfere, so she’d best try to figure her own way out in case her new owner didn’t. Just the thought of him brought back a rush of emotions she didn’t need right now. She had a hard enough time staying focused as it was. “All of my clothes?”

“Yes, please.” Bree knelt down and opened another cupboard. She glanced back. “What size pants and shirt do you wear?”

Rayha felt her cheeks flush. “Um. Large, probably.”

Bree turned back and pulled out a gray sweater and jogging pants. “For when we’re done.”

Her supposedly comforting smile already grated on Rayha’s nerves. “Right.” She focused on the task at hand. Rayha didn’t even get naked in front of Mom, let alone two women she didn’t even know. “Why?”

“Why what, sweetie?”

“Please don’t call me ‘sweetie,’ I’m fifteen. Why do I have to take my clothes off.” Yes, that smile was definitely grating. It was satisfying to see it waver.

“They’re evidence,” Agnes said. “There’s blood on them, sand, fabric. It tells us where you’ve been.”

“Oh.” *Well, duh!* “Right.” She pulled her shirt off and attempted to hand it to Bree.

Bree hurried to slide on gloves, gave some to Agnes—who donned them too—and fetched a brown paper bag from a drawer. She handed that off to Agnes as well, who opened it.

All the while, Rayha stood there in her bra with her shirt held out.

“Over there, sw—Rayha.” Bree nodded toward Agnes and the bag.

Rayha squinted, but slowly turned and deposited the shirt.

While Rayha crouched down and undid the laces of her boots,

Bree handed Agnes another bag. Lots of sand fell onto the sheets as she pulled first one boot, then the other off. These were bagged as well.

A new bag was exchanged and opened.

Rayha struggled to get out of her pants. As much as she hated being almost naked, getting her urine soaked pants off was a relief.

“Um, when do I get to shower?”

“At the station.”

Agnes said the words casually, but the introduction of “going to the station” paused Rayha’s progress. She stopped with one leg still in her pants. “Station?”

“The police station.”

Oh, thank you, detective smarty-pants. “Right. Got that. Why?”

“Your pants?” Agnes shook the bag. “We want to ask you a few questions you haven’t answered yet.” She didn’t add that it was a formality or something, which was worrying.

Rayha finally got her pants off.

More sand fell down on the paper below her feet.

She handled the bundle to Agnes, who held the bag open for her. “Underwear too, right?” Now she was dirty, uncomfortable, and cold to boot. *Great fucking day. Just a great fucking day.*

“Those too,” Agnes said.

“Right.” She bit her lip and hesitated for a few seconds more, hoping this would all go away on its own, but of course it didn’t. She unhooked her bra with a sigh. Before she slid the cups off her breasts, she paused. “Do these go in the same bag as my underwear?”

“A bag for each.” Agnes held up the bag Bree had handed her—a smaller one.

Bree pulled out a new one already.

“Okay.” She slid the bra off and dropped it in the bag while she pressed her other arm over her breasts as best she could.

“Don’t worry we’ve both seen breasts before. We have all the same parts.” Bree winked.

“Right, then you strip.” She hadn’t meant for it to come out quiet as rebellious, but she also didn’t regret it. Fuck Bree and her cheerful attitude.

Bree just smiled—of fucking course!—and got out some sort of medical kit. “While you finish up with the clothes, I’ll tell you what comes next, all right?”

Rayha didn’t bother replying, she was going to get the lecture, regardless. Besides, she kind of wanted to know.

“You have a few blood stains I’ll be taking swabs off. You know what a swab is, right?”

Rayha nodded. She had no idea, but she didn’t want to let Bree or Agnes in on that.

Agnes kept her gaze on a point on the wall just right of Rayha’s head as Rayha slipped her panties off. They were drenched and they smelled horrible. Handing those over was by far the worst part of this experience. So far, anyway.

“Thank you.” Agnes got to work sealing and labeling the bags.

Rayha’s legs were getting really tired and trembly. Between trying to keep up right and worrying about the stench coming off her panties, she’d missed some of Bree’s explanation. She fought to focus back on her.

“...we’ll swab those spots, scrap under your fingernails, clip them, and I’ll have a look for any injuries you may have.”

Injuries. Right. “None, just a lump on my head, but that’s from um, last night when I hit my head on a shelve. My bedroom’s tiny.” She shut herself up.

“All right, good to know. We’ll have a look in a bit. Do you have a headache?” Bree laid out a few sticks with plastic tubes on them.

Rayha eyed them suspiciously. “Yeah, why?”

“Did it start after you hit your head?” Bree also laid out a needle and some tubes.

That, Rayha was quite sure what they were used for. “Um. Dunno.” She glanced back at Agnes. “Can I put on clothes yet?”

“After the examination.” Her pager went off again.

“Is that about my mom?” Rayha couldn’t help herself. Everything would be better if Mom could just be here with her. *Wait.* “Can you even interrogate me without my mom here?”

Agnes didn’t look up from the pager. “No, and no. But this is not an interrogation, just an examination. We don’t need your mother to be here for that. Do we?” She smiled again, oh so sweetly.

Rayha vowed that from this point on, she would never trust anyone who smiled more than once every five minutes. People who smiled all the time were to be avoided at all costs. “I’d like her to be here.”

“We’re looking for her.” Agnes clipped the pager back onto her belt and nodded at Bree.

“All right well, after we’ve done the swabs, I am going to take a few tubes of blood—not much, I promise.”

Rayha swallowed. “Why?”

“To see if there is anything in your blood—chemicals, drugs.”

Again, that goddamned smile! “Seriously, could you stop smiling? It’s starting to freak me out.” Rayha shifted on the paper. It stuck to the bottom of her foot, so she shook it to get it off.

“Sorry.” Bree smiled, the twisted then expression into something entirely mangled once she realized she was doing it. “Sorry.”

Rayha snorted.

Even Agnes gave a short chuckle. “Let’s get a move-on, nurse Sheffield?” She arched a pointed brow.

“Right.” Bree hurried to get ready.

“Swabbing” apparently meant that an oversized Q-Tip was rubbed on Rayha’s skin wherever there were blood smears or dirt stains. Bree also rubbed one of the things against the inside of Rayha’s cheek and even inside her nostrils and ears. Rayha let it happen. She also withstood drawing blood, but she got really woozy afterward and had to sit down. “Are we done?” She was tired. So tired. She could sleep for a week, at least.

“Almost. Just a few more little things.”

Bree did not smile, which made Rayha feel better. She stepped onto the cold tile when requested, then let Agnes fold the paper on the floor so she could bag it. Then she shook her hair out in a big brown bag when asked. Rayha underwent the probing of the lump on her head stoically, had her neck inspected because she’d been stupid enough to ask Agnes to look at it in the history homeroom, and dodged questions about that request by either not saying anything or shrugging, which basically amounted to the same.

Finally, she was allowed to pull on her new clothes. The sleeves and pantlegs were too long, but they both had elastic on the ends, so they stayed in place around her ankles and wrists. At least they fit; dealing with the mortification of switching to an extra-large size would have ended her right then and there. “Right, so now I’m property of the Phoenix Baptist Hospital—” Both her sweater and pants had the logo boldly printed on it. “What happens next?” She dangled her ice cold feet off the side of the bed. “And does it involve socks and shoes?”

“I’ll get you some. I have to drop these off anyway.” Bree had collected all the tubes and swabs in a neat package, labeled and sealed.

Agnes gave her the detective nod of approval, so Bree slipped out. “Once she comes back, I’m going to ask her to wait with you so I can make a couple of phone calls. Then we’ll go to the station.”

“I’m tired.”

Agnes’s features relaxed a touch. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s been a long day for everyone.”

You have no idea! “Do I get to sleep when we get there?” How messed up were things when her apprehension about going to a police station depended on the availability of a bed?

Pretty damn messed up.

“Not for a while. We want to ask you some questions before the details get lost.”

Rayha sighed and played with the edge of her sweater.

Agnes had bagged the brown paper bags inside another brown paper bag, which now stood by the leg of the chair. “Am I getting my clothes back?” Replacing her entire outfit would cost a small fortune they didn’t have. Those boots alone had cost her and Mom a year to save up for.

“Hopefully.”

Great. Rayha decided that as long as she had something that somewhat felt like a bed at her disposal, she should make use of it. She laid down on her back and wiggled one cold foot under the pit of her knee. After a few seconds, she also pulled her sleeves over her hands to keep them warm. Now she only had one cold extremity, an improvement.

She couldn’t get her muscles to relax; Agnes would pounce on her if she dropped her guard. Not literally, of course, but Agnes was obviously itching to ask questions. She was holding back now but she wouldn’t for much longer.

Rayha figured Agnes wanted to keep her cooperation as long as possible, but once she got Rayha into a room at the police station, Agnes would double down on getting some answers. *Maybe I should get some information on her first.* She turned her head to the side to look at her guard.

Agnes sat back in the chair with the CSI’s guy’s jacket on her lap. She fiddled with the pager and her gaze was on it.

“Have you been a cop long?”

Agnes brought her head up. “Hm?”

“I asked if you’d been a cop long.”

She nodded. “Twelve years.”

“Why?”

“You really like asking that question.” She didn’t sound pissed.

Rayha shrugged. “Like you said, it’s been a long day.”

“That it has been.” Agnes sat up. “My dad’s a cop. My brother too. Joining the force was in my blood.”

“Do you like it?” Rayha switched out her legs, straightening one

and guiding the foot of the other under it. “Being a cop?”

“I usually say ‘detective’ because I worked hard for the title, but yes, I like being a cop.”

“Also this? Days like today?” Sensation returned to her toes in the form of icy prickling.

Agnes pursed her lips and scanned her face. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought that was my line?” Rayha didn’t put amusement into her tone.

“It is, but I’m asking anyway.”

Rayha shifted. “I guess I’m asking because it was a bad day for me, but I guess it’s just another Friday for you.”

Her personal guard shook her head. “No, today was a weird, bad day.” She caught Rayha’s gaze. “That’s why I am trying to get you to tell me what happened.”

Shit. Rayha rlooked up at the ceiling and pressed her lips together.

“It’ll be easier if you just tell me. You can go to bed, I can close the case, we’ll all be happy.”

Not Paige. She ignored the bribe. “How are Paige and Dale?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is that why you keep checking your pager?”

Agnes paused. “Amongst other reasons, yes.”

“Hm.” Rayha thought a moment. “If you hear something about them, will you tell me? Or are you going to use it as a carrot if the stick doesn’t work?”

“What do you mean?”

Rayha turned her head back; Agnes was frowning. “An ‘I’ll tell you about your friends if you tell me what happened’ kind of thing?” She arched a brow.

“Ah. Well, I’d like to think we could have a good talk without playing bad cop.” She smiled just a touch. It seemed genuine.

Suddenly, Rayha felt sorry for her. Agnes hadn’t asked for angel business either, but here she was, knee deep in it. *Fuck it, this is going to end up a shitfest anyway.* She sat up and turned her body toward

Agnes. “Look, I think you’re nice enough. You just want to solve this case, I get it. Lemme tell you something so you won’t waste too much time on it.” She leaned forward and held Agnes’s gaze. “This is a case you aren’t going to solve. Paige is innocent of everything you think she did and when she tells you she doesn’t remember anything that happened, it’ll be the truth. It’ll haunt you forever if you lock up an innocent girl, okay?”

“I told, you’re not bei—”

“Not me, Paige. You’re going to try to pin this on Paige and maybe you’ll succeed too. If you do, if you manage to lock her up, then let me tell you right now that you’ll never have another perfectly restful night because deep down, you’ll always doubt if it was the right thing to do.” Rayha tried to impress the truth of this on Agnes by sheer force of stare. “Paige is not to blame, okay?”

“Then who is, Rayha? Because I have two people in the ICU, barely hanging on to life and two crime scenes that don’t make a lick of sense.” Agnes set her jaw as she leaned forward fully now, mirroring Rayha. “What are you not telling me?”

Paige’s parents are alive! They had to be the people Agnes was talking about. Rayha’s heart swelled a few sizes. She lost her trail of thought. “I uh...” She frowned and tried to rally her brain. Then her stomach lunged. She looked around on instinct. *Harut?*

He didn’t answer her, but Agnes got up. Unsurprisingly, her eyes were lit in a bright blue.

Hot and cold flooded Rayha’s system in waves, spiking both her fight and flight reflexes in equal measure. Harut could get her out of this mess, but after everything that had happened, the last “person” she wanted to see was him.

We are leaving.

Rayha set her jaw and planted her feet firmly onto the tiles.

CHAPTER 20

“For who is there that shall put on thy grace, and be hurt? For thy seal is known: and thy creatures know it: and thy heavenly hosts possess it: and the elect archangels are clad with it.”

— Rutherford H. Platt, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of Eden*

Harut cocked Agnes’s brow. “Fealty was sworn, Rayha. Terms were met. Obey.”

Rayha was torn. Her window to escape was closing rapidly. Bree would be back any second, see a messed up version of the detective she knew—blue eyes and all—and, well, it wouldn’t be good. There were too many unknowns to say how disastrous it would turn out, but “very” was probably a good descriptor. *Unless he’s actively keeping people out, like with the cops at school.* Whatever the case, there was something keeping her here other than the fact that running away from the police was a really bad idea. “I want to see Paige.”

The sinner?

Stop calling her that! Yes, Paige, whom you made demon-free, right? As per our agreement. She glanced at the door as some ruckus started up in the hallway beyond.

No one came in.

We are not going to her.

Rayha faltered and slid her gaze back to Agnes’s body. “Why not? She’s here, right? They must have taken her here.”

“They did.”

So? Let’s go see her—get her!

Agnes’s body did not budge. “We shall not, Rayha. She is not of our concern. Only you matter to us.”

“But Paige matters to me!” She tried not to sound like she was pleading, but she was. Of course she was. “They’ll hurt her, lock her away for attacking her parents and the butcher and maybe even Dale!”

“The laws of mortals do not concern us either, only the laws of Elah do. Those laws dictate your fealty to us, so obey.” The monotone held a sharp edge now.

“Or what, you’ll punish me again?”

A tiny smirk tugged on Agnes’s lips.

It was only there a second, but it sent shivers down Rayha’s spine. She backed up against the examination table. *Do you like punishing me?*

No.

That didn’t make her feel better. “Then what?” *Because I’m not afraid of you.* Which was a bluff. She was; how could she not be afraid of him and the power he wielded over her?

You are, which is good. Agnes stood straighter. “Punishing you is an ineffective tool, although it might be a good reminder for you about whom you should respect.”

She glowered at him, to no visible effect.

“But you are mortal, and mortals can be manipulated in other ways. If you do not come with me, we will end the life of this host.” He said it like he was threatening to swat a fly.

Rayha felt her eyes widen. Her chest constricted. “W-What? How?”

“We control the muscles in this host’s body. If We tell the heart to stop beating, or for its lungs to stop inhaling...” He let Agnes suck in a large and audible breath, then made her hold it.

Seconds ticked by.

“Please stop.” Rayha didn’t manage more than a whisper. She watched in mortification as Agnes slowly turned red.

“Will you obey?”

Agnes turned redder. Nothing in her body betrayed tension or fear. Her arms hung limp by her side.

Rayha’s stomach revolted again. “H-How can you do this? Aren’t you supposed to be one of the good guys?” Her mind reeled by the implications of this moment, ones she couldn’t fully grasp nor,

perhaps, did she want to.

“We serve Elah. We serve the greater good as laid out by the Counsel of Iyrin. If you fulfil your destiny, it will save more lives than if this one lives. The greater good is served by claiming your obedience, even if it means the end of this body’s existence.”

Very slowly, Agnes’s lips turned blue. Her skin paled.

Rayha felt like she had been nailed to the ice cold floor. Her mind shut down in the face of this display of what she could only consider to be pure evil. She couldn’t handle this; not him, not this responsibility.

“A few more seconds and there will be damage to this hosts brain. What will it be, Rayha. Will you come with us?”

Her heart thumped against her ribs too fast, too irregular. Rayha felt like peeing herself again. She closed her eyes and thought of Paige, of how they had been in the barn, together, kissing, and then slowly let the memory fade away. *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.* She knew Harut would hear, and that he might interpret it as an apology to him but she didn’t care; she had to say goodbye. Rayha willed her eyes open again. “I’ll come with you.”

Agnes exhaled and inhaled deeply. There was no urgency in the breaths, they were under Harut’s control, after all. He filled her lungs deeply a dozen or so times, then leveled them out. Rayha watched color return to Agnes’s cheeks. The blue drained out of her lips.

“Is she going to be all right?” Even the whisper was too loud in the room filled solely with gentle breathing—one of the best sounds Rayha had heard in her life.

Most likely.

Rayha swallowed. “Oh. Okay.” She licked her lips. “Where am I going?”

“The city mortals call Chicago.”

Her brain shut down again, then went into overdrive. “What?” She had thought he was taking her away from the hospital, to a place to hide out until this blew over, not—“That’s half way across the

country!”

“It is. 1,748 miles apart, to be exact.”

“W-Why?” She knew they had to hurry—if Bree came back and tried to stop them, Harut would kill her in the span of one of Agnes’s heartbeats—but she couldn’t stop herself from asking the question.

“You are needed there.”

“But...” *Paige! My mom! Dale!*

You are a Champion of Elah, Rayhana Kunza Kincaid. Have you not seen the lives of other champions? Have you not experienced their sacrifices? Your name will be an exalted one in the minds of mortals and immortals alike. You will be hailed as a hero for centuries to come. With that kind of glory comes sacrifice.

Like Joan leaving her home behind and dying at the stake? Like Margaret of Scotland losing her husband and son to your religious war? Anger raged around the words like a storm.

Indeed. As always, his words reverberated inside her skull without any emotion swirling around them. *That is the price and you agreed to pay it. Now come.* He made Agnes reach down for the bag with Rayha’s clothes and swept her gaze over the room. Her other hand closed around Rayha’s upper arm like a vice.

When he tugged, she obeyed. She opened the door for them and let him all but drag her out. His steps were robotic and stiff.

Agnes was at least a head taller than her and Rayha struggled to keep pace. She didn’t dare object, the memory of blue lips and pale skin was too fresh in her mind. Rayha let him drag her outside. Hot air hit her like a slap in the face. She must have slowed because of it, because Harut yanked her forward.

No one had stopped them. The security guard at the door had even tapped his cap.

Are you controlling them too?

He pulled her toward the police car. *Controlling?*

They’re not stopping us. She dared a glance back, but the security guard already had his attention elsewhere.

Why would they? This host is a person of the law, is it not? You are her charge.

Rayha frowned and looked up at the glowing blue pouring from the sockets of Agnes's eyes, completely obfuscating the eyeballs. *You don't exactly fit in.*

He released her arm and pulled the car keys from Agnes's pocket with meticulous motions. *You are referring to the outward projection of divine grace?* Harut unlocked the car and opened the door for her.

Uh, I guess? I'm talking about your eyes. Rayha scooted into the backseat and onward so she could sit behind the passenger seat instead of on the driver's side. She didn't think Harut would actually be sitting once he got Agnes to drive, but he'd be invisibly behind her and Rayha didn't want him to touch her, even if he wasn't really there, not on this plane anyway.

Harut put the bag with her clothes on the backseat. *Only those with a bond to the divine can see divinity.* He leaned Agnes's body forward with one arm on the roof of the car as he peered at her. *Iyrin, shadem, and any mortal who has received Grace, like you.* He closed the door of the car and sat Agnes's body down in the driver's seat.

Grace? Rayha opened the bag and pulled smaller bags open until she found the one with her socks and boots. He hurried to put them on her stone cold feet.

Harut had Agnes start the car and drive away from the hospital. *I have bonded us at your conception, so you have received a sliver of divinity. That allows you to see manifestations of divinity in turn. Now you have sworn fealty, I have increased that blessing. Be warned, others who sense the divine will now also be able to identify you.*

Identify me? She halted half way through putting on her boot. That didn't sound good at all. *Dem—shedim too?*

Indeed. Agnes looked at her through the rearview mirror. *Behold your reflection.*

Rayha took a deep breath in the hope it would force her rabbiting heart back down her throat, then did as told, sitting up so she could see

herself in the mirror through the divider between the back and front of the car. She jerked back on instinct. She'd expected he'd meant her eyes would be blazing too, but they weren't. It was worse. Around her neck was a flaming blue collar with a loopy little mark at the center of her throat that she recognized as the Arabic *H*. "Oh." She swallowed. The loop danced in the rearview. *You branded me*. Her stomach lunged up. If she'd eaten anything in the last day, it would have come back up.

Harut did not reply.

"Demons can see this?"

"Shedim," Agnes said, in Harut's monotone. "Yes."

Rayha rubbed over the mark. She could block the glow, but the collar refused to be erased. "Won't that get me into trouble?"

"Undoubtedly. That's why we start your training now. You will be able to handle lower shedim like the one who overtook your friend with ease then."

Rayha's gaze slid away from the mirror; there wasn't much use in staring at her collar. Instead, she finished lacing her boots. "Are we already going to Chicago?" She tried to keep the quiver she felt at the thought of just leaving everyone behind—leaving Mom behind—without a word of where she was going or what had happened to her out of her voice.

We are taking you to what mortals call a Greyhound bus station. You will plan your journey there, buy the required ticket or tickets, and board the bus.

"I don't have money for that. And I need some stuff. I can't just walk around in these clothes, people will notice." She slid her shirt over her sweater to hide the logo. *And I really want to—need to—say goodbye to my mom at least. Please?*

Harut was silent. Light from outside hit Agnes's face, leaving odd angles and shadows that made her look even more chiseled than Harut's rigid hold on her made her out to be. *Will you fuss if we allow the detour?*

No. She even meant it. As much as she was hurting, she could see there wasn't a way out.

She wanted to fight, and scream, and throw the car door open and tumble out, but what was the use? Besides, she was in a police car, she doubted the door opened from the inside. No, she couldn't outrun Harut and the destiny he'd set out for her. All she wanted now was to hug her mom.

Then you are allowed.

As much as relief wormed its way into her chest at the thought she would get to say goodbye to her mother at least, her stomach threatened to rebel again. She felt ice cold. The tremble that had slowly worked its way from her hands and feet to her very core seemed unstoppable; even regular breathing was hard. How was she going to explain this to Mom? She'd already lost her husband and now she was going to lose her only child too.

Rayha's heart hurt. It was physically painful to think about the pain she was about to cause her mom over a conversation she'd hoped never to have with her. It also hurt for Dale, because she would miss him more than she could imagine and she felt terribly guilty for leaving him behind now the angel had come. He was better off, that much Rayha knew.

Dale—if it turned out he was okay—would be much better off than Rayha, even if it meant staying with his stephole in the park forever.

She thought of Paige and felt butterflies, but only a moment. Then they turned into writhing worms in her gut. Rayha pulled the hood of the hoodie Bree had given her over her hair and stared outside.

“Harut?”

“Yes?”

“Is Paige going to be okay?” Her heart pumped blood so fast she felt dizzy.

“Clarify.”

“Um. Her body, I guess. You said she was in the hospital. Is she

going to be okay?” She didn’t want him to answer. Well, she did, but only if it was positive, and all she remembered was getting Paige’s blood all over her while her broken body lay limply in her lap. The image hit her with such force that bile finally pushed up into her throat. She clamped her hand over her mouth just in case she couldn’t swallow it back down. It left an acid taste behind.

Agnes glanced at her in the mirror. “Why do you concern yourself with her? She was merely a pawn used to usher you toward your destiny. She is meaningless to you.” A curious lilt colored his tone.

Rayha lowered her hand and glared at him. “She’s not! She’s my friend! And...and we kissed and I thought maybe we could be girlfriends.” She felt so stupid saying it; childish.

Harut’s gaze through the rearview and Agnes’ eyes only made it worse. “I know, I have a greater destiny or whatever. That doesn’t mean I didn’t—” She caught herself, horrified by her own use of the past tense. “Do! Do like her.” The cold inside of her spread inward even further. Was it that simple, saying goodbye to someone who just a day before you couldn’t wait to see again?

“We do not know what her condition is, but we are willing to reward you for your loyalty. Once we depart from the woman who birthed you and we have used this host to take you to your destination, We shall mend her body.”

It was obvious blackmail, but since she had already decided to cooperate, she just nodded.

“Thank you.” She didn’t even feel disgusted for saying the words. Tears pricked in her eyes, but she blinked them away. She could say “thank you” to her owner, but there was no way she would allow him to see her cry. There wasn’t much of her old self left in her, at least not right now, but she had some pride, still.

“We can sense your emotions. You feel what mortals describe as “sadness.” Why? Did we not vow to help your Paige? Did we not promise you a future filled with glory, in service of Elah?”

She huffed. “You said your boss had left the building, so mostly

I'm stuck in service of you." Rayha didn't have the energy to put venom into her voice. She'd been up for what felt like a week now, and so much had happened in that time. "Paige is also not 'mine.' You're dragging me away from her, remember?" *And humans aren't things you're supposed to own.* She managed bitterness in her mental tone, at least.

Harut-in-Agnes cocked an eyebrow. "You remain..." He paused, seemingly to search for a word. "Difficult."

Rayha snorted. "You'd get along splendidly with my mom."

They slowed, so Rayha looked around. This wasn't the trailer park. When the car made a left turn, Rayha spotted the shopping mall and Harut drove toward it with impunity.

"Please don't rob anyone." Her stomach dropped. "Please don't make me rob anyone."

We are not robbing anyone. Harut stopped the police car and turned it off. Keys in hand, he had Agnes get out, leaving the door open.

Rayha shivered but leaned forward so she could track Agnes' progress across the parking lot and toward the building. Only then did she see the *ATM* sign. "Oh. Well, shit." She sat back and pulled her knees up. She sat like that, in the corner of the backseat, inside the oppressively silent car until Harut brought Agnes' body back.

Agnes sat down heavily and turned to push a roll of bills through the grate that made up the divider.

Rayha took it. "I'm pretty sure this is theft, you know?" She unrolled the bills and nearly dropped them. "Harut!" *That's a thousand dollars! She's a cop, she has bills to pay! You can't take this much from her.*

Harut turned the car back on and circled back to the road. "Laws of mankind, Rayha. They have no meaning to us."

Rayha clamped her jaw shut. After a few seconds, she peeled five hundred dollar bills from the roll and dropped them to the floor by her feet, then pushed them under the chair. She could live with taking five

hundred—she'd need a lot of it for the bus anyway—but Rayha knew exactly what it was like to have two weeks to go in the month and no way to cover the stretch financially. She just couldn't take this much from Agnes.

Without talking to Harut to distract her, Rayha's thoughts quickly returned to Mom and their impending goodbye. She still couldn't wrap her head around it. If it was up to Harut, she'd never see or talk to her mom again. A cold hand seemed to reach inside her chest and squeeze her heart. As much as they clashed on occasion, Rayha loved her mom and the thought of not having her in her life anymore terrified her. She was just fifteen! How was she going to make it in Chicago? Alone? She glanced at Agnes in the rearview. "Harut?"

"Yes?"

"How am I going to live in Chicago? Are you going to keep stealing money for me?"

He glanced at her through the rearview. "You are a Charge of Elah now. You should not worry about such petty things. Arrangements have been made." He returned his gaze to the road.

The explanation didn't settle Rayha one bit. "Arrangements? Harut, please." She sat up and slid her fingers through the grate, holding on. "You're taking me away from everything I know. I'm scared. You need to tell me more, okay? Please?" Tears threatened to well up. She hated it, but they were so hard to hold back.

Harut was silent for a while. "The sisters of the Order of Saint Anne will provide shelter and sustenance for you until your basic training has been concluded. This will be as you enter your nineteenth year of life, in two years and three months. Then you will be able to provide for yourself by offering your services to those who need it as you develop your skill further. We will have missions for you to complete, but in the meantime, there are many people in the world like your friend who suffer under the influence of shedim or magic. You'll be able to restore the balance."

He sounded so calm, so certain. All the words did was gut Rayha's

already hollow belly more. She let her fingers slip from the grate and sat back. Two years with nuns, then a life of demon fighting and angel missions. It wasn't a bright future to look forward to.

At least now she knew.

CHAPTER 21

“Thou must make every effort to procure peace amongst those who are at discord, and sworn enemies among themselves; and it is imperative to do good unto every one, this being the sole and true means of rendering favorable unto thee, God, the Angels, and Men; and of making the demon thy slave, and obedient in all and through all.”

— *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*

The second Rayha pushed the creaky door handle down on the trailer door, she could hear sounds from inside. *Mom!* Without permission, tears welled up and she yanked the door open, only to be embraced a second later by her mother.

“Rayhana, meri bacchi, kahan thi tum? Kya hua tumhe? Kya tum thik ho? Tumhare soch me ham pareshan ho rahe the!”

The words fell from her lips with a speed too great for Rayha to comprehend. Her Urdu was shamefully rusty after years of disuse, but the gist of the words was clear. Rayha sank into the embrace. *Spices and bread.* She allowed herself to cry. If she didn't, she'd explode. “I'm okay, Mom. I'm sorry.” She sobbed at the apology, because it was going to get so much worse. “I'm sorry.”

Mom held on tightly for a few seconds longer, then tensed.

Rayha sighed. She must have spotted Agnes—detective Paulson. Harut.

And, indeed, Mom withdrew, but she stayed close enough to press Rayha's head protectively against her chest while she stroked her hair.

For the first time in almost as long as Rayha could remember, she didn't feel the urge to resist. She gripped the fabric under her hands, felt the curves of Mom's body underneath, and soaked in her warmth as sob after sob shook her body. She was never going to have Mom hold her like this again, and there wasn't pride enough in the world to

keep her from breaking down in the face of that knowledge.

“Yeh police wala yahan kyun hay, Rayhana? Kya kiya tumne?” Mom hissed the words against the side of her head, but not angrily.

Her concern was much worse than any anger could have been. Now shame darkened Rayha’s heart as well. Was Mom still using Urdu in the hope the police didn’t understand? If only she knew! Harut probably understood her ten times better than Rayha did. *I didn’t do anything, Mom. I swear this wasn’t my fault.* She was crying too hard to form the words.

Mom switched tactics. “Officer. Hello. My daughter, is she in trouble with you, no?”

Rayha grabbed Mom’s dress even harder. Any other day, she would have corrected her broken English, but right now, it was the best thing about her mom—a constant that Rayha was going to miss terribly, even though it had infuriated her just this morning, despite her better intentions.

Deal with the mortal who carried you to term. That was not part of our agreement.

Rayha jumped as the words invading her skull. *Sorry.*

“Officer?” Mom pulled Rayha to the side, as if trying to protect her from the silent statue of a woman, dressed in an outfit belonging to the Phoenix police department.

“Mom.” Rayha sniffed and tried to stop her tears. She tried to push away, but it took a few tries for Mom to allow her enough space to do so, space she also used to take a deep breath. “I um...I need to talk to you. Inside? Please?” She met her mother’s gaze through a blur of still-escaping tears. It killed her to let go, but she knew Harut wouldn’t give her much time for this meeting and she wanted to at least make sure Mom understood why she had to go—in as far as anyone could understand that.

Mom cupped her cheeks and frowned at her. She glanced at Agnes once, then back. “Kya tum musibat me ho, meri bacchi?”

Rayha felt a dangerously hysterical laugh well up from deep inside

her chest. Yes, she was in trouble. She was in so much trouble, but not the kind Mom was talking about. “Inside, please?” She took a hold of Mom’s wrists and rubbed the weathered skin, caused by exposure to too many gloves and too many chemicals. *Mom hands*. The tears welled up again.

“Please?”

Seconds ticked away—precious seconds—but then Mom nodded. “Inside.” She let go of Rayha’s cheeks but took one of her hands to guide them back in.

Harut followed and had Agnes close the door. He didn’t look around the trailer, he just propped Agnes up by the door and waited.

It was super creepy.

Mom seemed to think so too, as she squinted at Harut-in-Agnes with clear mistrust. When Agnes did not move, nor looked to engage her, she seemed to realize the only person she would be able to get answers from was Rayha. She fastened her gaze on her. “Yeh kya ho raha hain?”

Good, bloody, question. What is going on? Rayha ran her fingers through her hair and crouched down to take off her boots. Then she realized she didn’t have time to take them off and put them back on as was their custom. She straightened and was hyper conscious of tracking sand into the trailer. When she sat down, she pulled Mom with her into the booth. She took her hands in hers and kissed her fingers. “Mom, something did happen.” She took a deep breath and glanced at Harut-in-Agnes. *Still pretending to be a popsicle? Great.*

The feather duster feeling inside of her skull returned, but Harut didn’t say a thing. She focused back on Mom, who was frowning and had a death grip on her hands.

Her own were shaking. *Shit*. “Mom, um...” How could she start this conversation? Was there any possible way to tell her that Rayha was leaving without hurting her too much? Any way that would make her understand why she had to, and be all right with it?

Speed, Rayha. Speed. They are looking for you and this host, this

one's device keeps going off.

The pager! Now Rayha heard it too, a soft buzzing. She swallowed. “Mom, I have to go. Not for a while, like, forever.” There, that was out. She held her breath as she took in Mom’s reaction.

Mom’s bushy eyebrows furrowed and she shook her head. “Meri kuch samajh me nehi a raha hain.”

Rayha sighed. “I know you don’t understand. How can you?” She let go of one of Mom’s hands to rake her hair back. “I haven’t been honest with you. I have dreams, nightmares. You remember, right? Nightmares?”

Mom nodded. “Bad nightmares, more and more.” She reached up to stroke Rayha’s cheek.

Rayha leaned into the touch and her world went fuzzy again. She blinked a few times to clear the gathering moisture. “Exactly.” She cleared her throat to get the rasp out of her voice. “They weren’t just dreams. Something happened today at school and at my friend Paige’s house. You haven’t heard?”

Mom shook her head. “I work.” And they didn’t have a TV, or a radio. Just Rayha’s Diskman and CD’s. Unless someone had told her directly, there was no way to reach Mom.

Rayha glared at Agnes—not Harut-in-Agnes but Agnes herself. *She fucking lied to me!*

She said they were trying to get in contact with her!

We suppose they did visit, but your mother was not here.

Wouldn’t they have waited on her?

Harut didn’t reply, so now she glared at him-in-Agnes instead.

“Rayhana, kuch to bolo?” Mom’s voice was a whisper. The tremble in her hands had worsened, so Rayha pressed them against her chest and held them there.

Her gaze slid back to her mother. “Sorry. Um. Something happened that is going to be hard to believe, but you have to believe, okay?” She hated herself for this, but it was the only card she could play that might prevent her mother from crumbling entirely over

another death-without-a-body. “It’s a command from Allah.”

Mom’s eyes widened and she didn’t seem to know where to look a moment; at Rayha, Agnes, the ceiling, or her hands. Then she pulled one of her hands from Rayha’s hold and covered Rayha’s mouth with it. “No, no. Do not speak of the Blessed and Great One with disrespect. No.”

Rayha twisted her head back to free her mouth. “I’m not talking about Him like that, I promise.” She glared at Harut-in-Agnes. *A little help here?*

No reply.

Duh. “I um...I was chosen for something important, Mom. Like, save the world important. By Allah and the Iyrin, the er...” She glared at Harut again. *What’s the word for “angel” in Urdu?*

After a second, he placed it into her mind. *Pari.*

“...Pari.”

Mom frowned.

That is the singular.

Rayha set her jaw and took a deep breath. *Then why didn’t you give me the plural? What is the plural?*

Pariya. You asked for the singular.

Jesus! “Sorry, ‘Pariya.’ Angels, Mom. One of them came to me. His name is Harut.”

We are not named Jesus, Rayha. Harut had Agnes arch her brow.

At the same time, Mom’s eyes widened. “Haroot?” She all but whispered the word. Then she jumped. She tried to cover Rayha’s mouth again. “Nehi, nehi! Pariyo ki bare me ayse baat mat karo!” Mom glanced behind her at Agnes, whose expression was once more blank. “She no mean angels, officer. She just very good girl, faithful girl.” She patted Rayha’s head while Rayha tried to free herself of the hand that continued to find her mouth.

Help, Harut? She thinks I’m going to the looney bin. Can’t you, like, do a big reveal or something?

Again, that one eyebrow rose.

Please? Begging again...always fucking begging.

A tense second later, Agnes stepped forward. “Apne ghutno me gir, insaan, ham hain wo jisko bulate hain Haroot.” He thundered the words in the monotone staccato Rayha had come to know and hate. Agnes’ vocal cords struggled with the depth and volume of the words.

Rayha pretty much only understood his name. Before she could mentally ask him for a translation, it echoed in her mind, lagging behind a second or so as he spoke. *Kneel, mortal, for we are He Who Is called Harut. We are an angel of Allah, bright-shining and bold. We claim this child who is of your loins, so do not despair and do not fear. Rejoice for the greatness of Allah blankets her and you both!*

Rayha tasted bile. *Show-off*. She rolled her eyes, but Mom’s widened in disbelief.

She pulled away from Rayha and threw herself down in front of Agnes’s body. “Haroot,” she all but moaned.

“Mom! Shit, don’t do that!” Rayha pushed forward, but a bolt of pain coursed down from the crown of her head to her toes. *Ah!* She hissed and turtled up. *W-Why?*

He didn’t answer her, he just looked down at Mom. *You are a loyal, faithful servant of Allah, are you not?”*

She nodded. “Gir rahi hoon. Gir rahi hoon!”

I know you are, Mom. I know. Rayha’s heart splintered in her chest, sending fragments of pain into every bit of tissue around it. She blinked her eyes open, but hurried to close them again at the sight of her trembling mother. A single glimpse was enough to know she didn’t want to see this. Even in his meatsuit, Harut managed to convey regal, smug power. Used to being obeyed, used to being worshipped. She wanted to kill him. Right then and there, she wanted nothing more than to run him through with something sharp and cut him out of her life forever. Rayha all but laughed at herself. What was she going to use? A bread knife? And then what? She’d just kill Agnes. The creature controlling her wasn’t inside of her, she couldn’t reach him.

A chill ran down her spine as her thoughts froze. No, she couldn’t

kill Harut now, but she would undoubtedly be taught many lessons about angels if she would be living with nuns.

She raced to cover the thought with others, to dilute it into oblivion, because she knew he could read her mind as easily as he could smite her. Rayha opened her eyes to check if Harut had followed her trail of thought, but he was still busy thundering religious bullshit at Mom, who took it in as if Allah Himself stood in front of her. *Well, this is pretty close to it, isn't it? An angel?* She tried to see him as Mom saw him, but every time she tried, she felt the heat of her branded collar and her throat constricted. No, fuck him. She couldn't worship him and his fucking cruelty.

“Usko kyun le rahe hain, sabse roshan aur khaas pari? Meri Rayhana hi kyun?” Mom was crying now, wailing as she trembled at Agnes's feet.

Rayha longed to hold her, to pull her away, to make her stand—anything but watching her idolize this monster, but she couldn't; Harut was doing her a favor, one she'd asked of him. If Harut told her why Rayha needed to come with her, Mom would make peace with it. *She has to make peace with it!* Rayha couldn't bear the thought of breaking her heart even more.

Does the Holy Qur'an not say: 'O you who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is men and stones, over which are appointed angels stern and severe, who flinch not from executing the commands they receive from Allah, but do precisely what they are commanded?' Does it not ask for sacrifice of the faithful as well as angels?

Mom whimpered, her forehead still pressed to the worn out linoleum. “But my daughter, she is all I have. All.”

Rayha wished she could be anywhere but here. When Harut moved Agnes's body, her gaze flew to him and she tensed. She really wished she had that bread knife.

He didn't hurt Mom, he laid Agnes's hand on the top of her head. “All prophets had mothers. Some had families of their own. When

Allah calls upon your family, there is no sorrow.”

The bastard actually managed to sound comforting. *You’ve done this before, then? Take kids from their parents and pretty much tell ‘em it’s okay that they are going to die young because it’s for a good cause?*

“Bless you, Samika Yasra Kincaid.”

Mom’s entire body relaxed under his touch.

Your disrespect truly has no bounds.

Probably not. Rayha shrugged. *It happens when you force someone into slavery.* She expected to be smote on the spot, but Harut seemed to let it slide.

He straightened Agnes’s body out again. “Help your daughter prepare. It is time.”

Mom scrambled up. Seeing the tears stream down her face sent a jolt through Rayha, but it was the reverence and deep love in her eyes and the slackness of her face—calm, serene—that turned Rayha’s stomach. “Rayhana...” Mom opened her arms.

Rayha sat frozen. Suddenly, she no longer wanted Mom to hug her. Betrayal forced itself like fire through her veins and she ducked out under the table instead. “I’m going to pack.” She legged it to her room and slammed the door, falling onto the bed instead. *I thought she’d save me.* The thought hit her like a bucket of ice cold water and soaked her entire being.

Somehow, Rayha had expected Mom would make it all go away, like mom did. It was illogical, stupid reasoning, but there it was. Her eyes stung as tears welled up again. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at Marilyn Manson. “That’s it then, hm?”

“Rayhana?” Mom’s voice, through the door.

“Let me get my stuff!” She didn’t move, though; she didn’t want to and she really didn’t know what to pack. What did you pack when you were leaving forever?

Rayha, time...

I know! Leave me alone for a few minutes and I’ll be done! She

made sure to send a bunch of anger along as well. Of course, she felt the pressure of time. Soon there would be cops all over the park and maybe they'd close the roads down too. Harut would probably kill them all just so she could leave.

Rayha finally sat up and located both her backpack and gym bag. She started by tossing out her schoolbooks and adding a toothbrush and toothpaste. Underwear. Socks. Two sets of clothes. Pajamas. A towel? A small one then. Okay, those were the basics sorted. She looked around. Her Diskman was in her bag as always, so she added her favorite CD's: the mixes Dale had put together for her, Manson, Nirvana. She scooped the jewelry she hadn't put on this morning into the front pocket of her bag.

After staring at the mess on the bed for a while, she put the notebook and pen that were part of her school supplies back into her bag, then took both out again and sat. Maybe she should leave Dale and Paige a note. It couldn't be anything obvious, but it could be something—some sign of life that would maybe make them less angry at being left behind.

She clicked her pen, turned to a new page and hovered. "Hey Dale." She wrote as she narrated. "I hope you are okay. You are an asshole for trying to keep me safe. Thank you, you saved my life. Please don't be mad. I never wanted to leave you behind, okay? I had to, he—" She traced the word a few times so it would stand out. "... made me. Maybe I can come back some day, I don't know. If you leave, you know where to hide something I can find you with. Don't forget, I think you're an asshole, and pretty much my best friend ever. Don't get in trouble with the stephole. Date Kelly. Rayha."

She read it over. It wasn't much, just a scribble, but it was something. The next letter was a lot harder, but the pressure of time guided her hand. "Paige, I will miss you a lot. He—" Again, she traced the word a few times. "...promised me to make sure you are okay, and I'll have to trust him. So, I hope you are okay. You really scared me." She scratched the last line out. "I was really scared for

you when you, you know, went through that. I heard you in my dream. I think that's really special and I think that if I could have stayed longer, we could have been girlfriends. Maybe, if that's what you wanted too. I don't want to leave, but I made a deal with him because I wanted you to live. No more you-know-whats, not in your dreams and not after you die, I made sure of that. That's my gift to you, okay? In exchange for leaving. Please don't kill yourself and please find another girlfriend. I'll think about you. Love, Rayha."

After a few seconds, she added: "Oh, and maybe you might feel bad for me because I have to go with him. Don't be. I was going to have to do it in a few months anyway. There is a lot I would have liked to tell you, but I can't in this letter because I think people will read it. I hope you don't have to go to jail. Bye, Paige. I'll really miss you. You are really, really nice and you are very pretty, especially when you smile."

There, that would do. She tore the pages out and folded them. She'd have to give them to Mom. *Who'll read what I wrote to Paige. Shit.* Well, there was nothing she could do about that. Maybe Mom would misinterpret "girlfriends" as "girl friends" or something?

She took another minute or so to toss random stuff into her bag: a kid's book Mom said Dad used to read to her, a brush, extra batteries, her tiny lion stuffed animal that Mom also insisted Dad had gotten her, earplugs...

She wanted to take it all—her posters, the few books she owned and cherished but never read, the magazines she'd scraped money together for, all her clothes—but they were just things; what she wanted was to take Mom! She settled for the next best thing, the picture frame in her desk drawer, with a picture of Mom and Dad on their wedding day. His handsome smile always made her smile too, but at the same time seeing them together, so happy, made Rayha want to cry again.

Time.

The announcement made her jump.

They'll be here in a minute, maybe less.

“Shit!” Rayha yanked her bags shut and pulled the door open.

Mom waited for her, with red eyes, and fresh tears, and she opened her arms.

Rayha flew into them and squeezed her. This wasn't a time for anger. “I love you. I love you so much!” She inhaled the scent she wanted to remember forever. “I love you.”

“I love you. Make me proud, Meri bacchi.” Mom's arms were strong and comforting, her entire presence soothing. Yes, they fought, but Mom was Mom—her Mom!

“Rayha.” Agnes's voice held a warning.

She extracted herself and kissed Mom securely on the lips as her hands slid into hers. “Take good care of yourself. Don't work too hard. Don't tell the cops anything, oh, and sleep enough and eat well!”

Mom laughed through her tears, making Rayha smile too. “I should tell you this. Eat well.” She extracted a hand and gave Rayha a tinfoil wrapped package. “For on the road. Food. Tonight's chicken.” She made the Mom-sign for eating; fingertips pressed together, then tapping her lips, and Rayha wanted to shout at the unfairness of it all.

Harut-in-Agnes pushed the door open and stepped out.

Rayha bottled all her anger and pain into a ball of hate that she would eventually use to destroy Harut for putting her Mom through this. “Thank you.” She squeezed Mom's hand one more time, then shouldered her backpack. She slipped her gym bag over her shoulders sideways and adjusted both before taking the box. She handed Mom the folded up letters with the other. “One is for Dale, one is for Paige. You can give them both to Dale, but please make sure they get them? Please?”

The flashing lights of a police car burst through the windows.

Now!

Mom stared at the papers and folded her fingers over them securely. “I will, Rayhana. My promise.”

Rayha was crying again, that and her heart was beating out of her

chest. “Thank you!

Bye!” With a last wave, she leapt out of the trailer and onto the grass, then ran in the opposite direction of the approaching cop cars.

Harut-in-Agnes was hot on her heels.

There wasn’t time to look back, nor to stop. Her hands were full, so she couldn’t wave, but every step was accompanied by a thought about Mom. Every footfall was another goodbye, another hug. She could barely see through her tears, but she didn’t need to. Rayha could pick her way through the trailer park with her eyes closed. This was her home, she’d spent years exploring it. Leaving the place behind—as much as she thought she hated it—hurt far worse than she had expected.

Her ragged breathing set her lungs on fire again. Harut had played her well; even without the collar, Rayha would have agreed to run until her legs fell off, because she couldn’t stomach the thought that Paige would die and she had no greater fear than that she would kill herself anyway now she was essentially free to do so. *Don’t do it, Paige. Don’t you dare!*

Because one day, Rayha was going to come back to Phoenix and make sure Paige was all right.

EPILOGUE

“I think men will remember us even hereafter.”

— *Sappho*

The Greyhound to Saint Louis left at five thirty-five. Rayha managed to get her ticket, stash her baggage, and sit just before it pulled away. The bus driver just smiled at her, so Rayha concluded there wasn't some sort of alarm out on her whereabouts yet. The bus contained ten or so people, most of whom promptly pulled jackets over their heads and went to sleep; none of them spared her a second glance. They didn't encounter roadblocks.

Rayha sat with her backpack on her lap. She was still wearing the Phoenix Baptist Hospital standard issue jogging pants because there hadn't exactly been time to change. The chair was uncomfortable, or maybe she was just very sore, but she was too tired to find a better position to sit in. Maybe, once they'd left Phoenix behind, she could sleep. She should also eat. Her stomach felt hollow and she was woozy; weak. Mostly, Rayha felt numb. The world outside was dark, her insides were dark as well, and her future looked ink black. She would have cried again if she'd had any tears left.

It was done. Mom, Dale, Paige, all her classmates and all the people in the trailer park, everyone she'd ever known—she'd left them behind. She was off to some grand destiny that no one would believe a word of if she told them about it. That said, Rayha was quite sure there was no way she would ever be able to tell anyone about this.

Chicago. The sisters of the Order of Saint Anne. Help people. Those were the three things she knew for certain about her future. She had three hundred sixteen dollars and fifty-three cents in her pocket, which was all that was left of the money Harut had stolen from Agnes after she'd bought her ticket, candy and a few cokes. She'd also bought a packet of crisps because they had reminded her of Paige and

the barn and Rayha, apparently, liked to torture herself. She reached for it on the chair beside her, which also held the box with real food Mom had given her and the rest of her vending machine loot. The taste was soothing.

Her stomach rumbled louder than the crackling of the wrapping. Rayha glanced around but no one seemed bothered. *Good.* She made short work of the content of the tiny package.

Now what? She was going to be in busses and bus stops for nearly two days. How was she going to fill that time? Eat and sleep. Listen to music, read *Mister Magnolia* for the thousandth time. Worry. Mostly the latter, she guessed.

Would what happened end up on the news? Is that how she would find out what had happened to Paige and her parents? To Dale? Would she be allowed to listen or watch the news at the convent? Would the sisters have a radio or TV? All these questions were doing her head in and she was so incredibly tired—too tired to think about any of it.

Rayha stuffed the empty package into the small garbage bin attached to the seat in front of her and laid her head back against the uncomfortable plastic of the chair. Maybe crisps would sustain her long enough to get a few hours of sleep in.

Her stomach lurched as if the bus had hit a speedbump too fast, but Rayha knew that wasn't it. She wasn't surprised when the man two rows in front of her stood up and walked over. His eyes radiated blue light as he stopped by her aisle and turned to face her.

Rayha looked up. In that moment, she was even too tired to hate him. All her body could manage was to turn her stomach acidic and produce a scowl on her forehead. She lowered her bag to the floor and cleared the seat next to her of food and coke cans.

He sat.

She wanted to ask about Paige, but she needed some time to steel herself for all the possible answers. *How is Dale?*

To our knowledge, he is well. He remains at the hospital, but has awoken.

A lead weight lifted off her chest. She inhaled deeper than she'd been able to all night.

Good. Thank you.

Harut nodded.

He didn't volunteer what he most likely knew she was going to ask next, so she had to bite the bullet herself. *How about Paige? Is she going to be okay?*

He hesitated, only a second, but it was enough to make the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. *She is going to live. We have mended her injuries.*

That's not what I asked. The tension in her body had her grip the coke can in her hand hard enough to make a dent. She opened her bag and dumped the whole lot in so she had her hands free to...to do what, exactly? She slid them under her thighs to steady them and to keep herself from doing something stupid like take a swing at an angel. *Is she going to be okay?*

We know what you ask. He paused. *You should not make it your concern.*

Fear constricted her throat, like food sticking to the inside of her esophagus. She tried to swallow the lump down, then realized she didn't need her mouth to talk. *I need to know.*

He turned his head toward her. The man he'd hijacked was in his fifties and smelled like beer. *It's better if you don't.*

She squeezed her eyes shut without even realizing she was doing it. *Did her parents live?* Her heart hurt with a longing for them to be okay, for the nightmare to end here.

No.

The world fell away from her in a dizzying rush that left her crushed. Panic tightened her entire chest now and her mind whirled with the implications of Harut's statement. Paige would go to prison for killing her parents. The cops would come looking for Rayha because she had been there. Maybe Dale would go to prison too!

Harut!

You are concerned.

She wanted to punch him so badly, but she only just managed to hold herself back. *Of course I am! Those “laws of men” you keep going on about are going to put my friends in prison! The police will come looking for me! Harut, fix this—somehow you have to fix this! Fuck it all, she was crying again. You set Paige up, now get her out of this!*

He watched her, and she could almost feel he didn't get it; he couldn't or wouldn't understand how this was his fault and his responsibility to fix. *Harut!*

Her parents are dead. We cannot reverse death.

She had known that and still the news hit like a sledgehammer. Rayha took a shuddering breath and buried her head in her hands. *Think, think, think!* The mental mantra was intended for herself, but Harut hummed inside her skull.

We shall adjust the memories of those involved to ensure they believe you have nothing to do with the crime.

Rayha jerked her head up and dug her chewed up fingernails into her thighs to keep from punching him for real. *This is not about me!* Okay, a bit about her, but not even remotely as much as it was about Paige! *Paige's life will be over because you used her to get me to agree to be your fucking slave! You got her into this, so get her out!*

Harut-in-booze boy tilted his head to the side. *She is not our responsibility.*

“Yes she is!”

Several gazes landed on her.

She inhaled deeply and slid lower into the seat. *Yes, she is! Help her!*

We cannot. Her body committed the acts that led to the death of her parents. How would you like us to repair this when we cannot resurrect the dead?

He sounded genuinely confused, which was the only reason she managed not to explode under the pressure that was building inside of

her. Her brain buzzed and her vision swam. Nothing came to her, no solutions, no way out. Then a stray thought flitted into her brain and she grabbed hold. *Can you break her out? Manipulate people to forget her?*

We are bound by laws too, Rayha. Divine laws. We can interfere, somewhat, on your behalf because you matter. Your Paige does not; not to us.

She exhaled deeply to release some of her frustration. *If the judge or the jury or whatever thinks she's crazy, she won't be sent to jail, right? They'll put her somewhere she can see a doctor?*

Harut didn't respond, which probably meant he didn't know.

Maybe that'll be better for her. Maybe she can get out eventually. Rayha swallowed. It wasn't better; it wasn't better at all. What could she do, though? Was there a way to make this go away? A way to save Paige and lessen her guilt, because it was crushing her already and she knew it would never go away. Without Rayha and this fucking destiny the Iyrin had put on her, Paige would be just like any other messed up kid right now, trying to make it through high school, date, learn to be happy. Now, Paige would be locked up for the murder of her parents. How could she cope with that? How would Rayha? *I should have done more. I should have stayed at the house and helped them.*

It would not have made a difference. These bodies are frail. He lifted the man's hand from his lap and touched his bearded face. *Your bones break like glass, your skin splits with only minimal pressure. It is baffling to us how you live as long as you do.* He lowered the hand and turned booze guy's head. *Forget about your Paige. You have a destiny to fulfill. We will, however, make sure that you will no longer be associated with these events. We do not desire that complication.*

Rayha's head hurt, her stomach hurt, her soul hurt. How was she ever going to sleep again? Eat again? How could she wake up in the morning and pretend nothing was wrong when Paige was facing prosecution on murder charges? She felt stone cold, but was sweating profusely. *Harut, please. Please.* She stared at him. When he sat up

straighter, hope bloomed in her chest. *Did you think of something?*

We did, but you will not appreciate it. He reached out to put booze guy's hand on her forehead.

She tried to pull away, but it was a small space and his grip was strong while her body felt as ragged as a wet paper towel. *What are you doing?*

Your focus has to be on your studies and your servitude. Heat seeped into her skull like before, when he'd collared her, but it stayed a pleasant temperature that seemed to wrap around her brain.

Rayha felt her muscles relax despite her worries. *Harut, what are you doing?*

We think it is best if you forget for now.

A vague anxiety clawed at her spine, but its potential warning never reached her brain. Her thoughts faded into a soothing mist, then her memories did as well. For a blissful moment, she remembered nothing. She simply existed in a vacuum of warm, electric blue light. Then memories flooded back—being born, her father giving her Leo the Lion, her mother's joy when she took her first step. Her first day of preschool, elementary school, high school. The memories flooded in faster and faster, sloshing inside of her brainpan like a glass of water tipping back and forth. Meeting Dale. Smoking pot for the first time. The dreams of saints and martyrs.

Paige.

The memories slowed, took form, and solidified. Kissing Paige, hearing her cry out Rayha's name in Rayha's dream, running for the payphone. Waking Dale, cycling to Paige's house and peering through the window to find cops talking to her terrified parents. The mad sprint through the desert as the sun came up. Paige's body and the demon inside terrorizing her class. Dale being tossed aside like a ragdoll. The deal with Harut, the hospital, Mom. *Mom!* The Greyhound bus to Chicago and the man sitting down next to her, currently hosting an angel.

She blinked.

Harut withdrew the man's hand. *How do you feel?*

Tired. It was the first word that came to her. *Is Paige going to be okay?*

He watched her for several seconds, then nodded. *I have healed her. She will live.*

That's not what I asked. Rayha nervously scratched at the hospital's logo on her sweatpants. *Is she in trouble?*

Only for a while.

Rayha exhaled shakily and nodded. *Okay, good. How about Dale? He is awake and in recovery. He shall be all right as well.*

That lifted even more weight off Rayha's chest. *Good. Are the cops going to come looking for me?*

No. We will assure they do not. Now, no more questions. Sleep, mortal bodies require it.

Rayha wanted to say more, but the light faded from the man's eyes.

He looked around, confused. "Wha—who're you?" He blinked at her, then looked around.

Rayha bit back a chuckle. "I think your seat is over there." She pointed.

He frowned and looked back at her. "How di' I get here th'n?"

"You walked." She arched a brow. "Please leave."

He did, stumbling out of the aisle and into his own. The stench of beer lingered long after he'd vacated the chair, even though Rayha waved her hand around to clear it.

Maybe some sleep isn't the worst idea. Her insides rumbled and clenched painfully. She frowned and rubbed her belly. Usually she only got this cramped in front of a big test or the butcher's class, when she was stressed to the max. She was worried now, sure, and a lot had happened, but her head was fairly calm and her body was too tired to be anything but relaxed.

For a second, she wondered if the butcher was okay. He was an asshole, but he'd probably saved the lives of thirty or so kids. It would

be nice if he was all right. Without a way to answer the question, her mind drifted away to Paige. Even a while was too long for her to struggle. Her parents would make her see more doctors and give her a hard time, but without the demon visits, they would eventually back off, right? Rayha hoped so, she intensely hoped so, because making Paige happy was what all of this had been about from the start.

Rayha reached into her bag and searched for the crisps she'd bought from the vending machine, because apparently she liked to torture herself by buying something that reminded her of the barn and Paige. When she couldn't find it, she looked around until she saw a little red corner stick out from the small garbage bin attached to the chair in front of her. She pulled it open and there it was, the empty bag. With a chuckle at her own stupidity, she leaned forward again to pull Leo out of her bag. Maybe she should prioritize sleep over food; Rayha didn't remember eating the crisps, that's how tired she was.

With the rest of her baggage inside of the belly of the bus, she only had the raggedy stuffed animal dad had given her for a pillow. She mashed it until she could comfortably rest her head against the window and closed her eyes. There were still two days left in this journey, she had plenty of time to figure out a plan to break Harut's control over her, and then she'd go back to Phoenix. She'd see her mom again, and Dale, and maybe Paige as well, if Paige still wanted to see her. By that time, this whole mess would have blown over, right?

Butterflies fluttered inside her belly and soothed her stomach ache a bit. All Rayha had to do until then was not end up like Joan of Arc, burned at the stake for being a freak.

She could do that, right? If she got some sleep?

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