

Beyond The Blue

The Blue Series Volume 2, Part 1

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Chapter One

The Beginning of the Second

Dillon almost fell downstairs as he ran, trying to scream her name or any words for that matter, and simultaneously feeling the rush of disappointment at his inability to do so.

Bursting into his parents' room sobbing and hysterical, he finally yelled out, "M-Mother!"

Scanning around the room, he met eyes with both his parents sitting on their bed talking, with his father still in his day clothes, his mother, in her pink robe and matching pajamas. They both shot off the bed and ran out, neither one bothering to try to listen to Dillon, as he stood there sobbing, his arm pointed towards their bedroom door, trembling.

He knew.

Even as he heard them clamber up the stairs met by the older children, with yells back and forth explaining David's deathly sleep, he knew.

He fell to his knees at that moment, alone in his parents' bedroom, looking up at a painting of a little girl on her knees praying to God on the wall in front of him. Copying the pose, Dillon put his hands to his face in prayer, his fingers still trembling. Feeling the separation on the way down the stairs, almost causing him to fall forward, the pain felt like someone was tearing flesh off his backside. It was as if a part of his soul was being pulled away, pushing him down those stairs. Not wanting to think about his closet door slamming shut as he ran out of his bedroom, Dillon tried to meditate in order to keep from screaming out. The searing pain was worsening by the second, but he wouldn't break his pose or stop his praying to grab at his chest.

Dillon remained kneeling on the floor. Hard as he tried, he couldn't break his stare. That painting drew him in. The mysterious girl with the small halo above her head and her eyes gazing upward into painted clouds had become a much needed source of comfort. Her childlike face, the devotion in her eyes, allowed him to disconnect from the chaos upstairs. With eyes closed, he could only see red. The pain was becoming too intense. *So this is what it feels like to die? Fine then...now I know what it feels like to have life ripped and taken away.*

Even as the police arrived and the ambulance came roaring up Terry Street, followed by the media lights and crews, Dillon didn't move. Hearing his mother wail and scream, his sisters' cry and the coroner and the Chief of Police talking in the kitchen hours later, he didn't move. As the officers taped the area around the house, walking by the window where he remained

kneeling, he still prayed a thousand prayers. Almost meditating, he would not break his stare, as if trying to summon God to come through that painting to speak to him.

Blinking once, then again and again, Dillon found himself suddenly still. The bedroom was getting brighter by the second. Unable to handle the light intensity, he finally broke his prayer pose and shielded his eyes with his hands. As he did this, the ceiling opened up and a snowfall came down, light and airy flakes the size of golf balls floated softly around him, touching his hair and shoulders in caressing whispers. He held his hands out to feel them, awed by the image of the room coated in whiteness.

“It’s...*snowing?*” He whispered to the air, touching snowflakes so he could watch them expand and brighten by several feet. After a few minutes of this winter landscape, the entire room was full with heavenly bodies encircling him; angels from First Heaven were there to protect him, and most of all, to embrace him.

The brightness around him suddenly intensified; a crystallized white unlike anything he could ever fathom imagining appeared before him. It took on a life of its own, quickly absorbing the painting and forcing Dillon to look around the room at the silent gathering. The angels were there, and they wanted him to come with them.

“Wh-what ddd-do you want?” Tears began to fall down his face as he watched them come in closer, hovering over him. His trembling rippled up and down his body and his stuttering kept him from speaking, but his mind spoke for him, loud and clear to all in the room. *Leave me alone, leave me here. I have no purpose now....I failed him...*

As if sensing someone important nearby, the entities quickly parted; their bodies of blinding white glided away to reveal him standing there, directly in front of Dillon. The Angel Sebastian leaned back against the bookcases, ruffling his massive gray wings, their tips sweeping the hard wood floors as dust flew to either side of him.

Dillon cautiously looked up and saw, through his straggly hair, the surprisingly human-looking, male angel leaning there, chewing on his nails nonchalantly. He was beautiful, wearing a black suit jacket and pants, white button down, un-tucked shirt, and bare feet with toes wiggling and stretching as if he’d been in uncomfortable shoes all day. Dillon noticed the angel’s lack of pigment immediately—

Or was that just a lot of white powder or stage makeup? Are we in a play? Dillon glanced down at his own tee shirt and pajama pants then back at the angel again, who was still

checking out the scenery and chewing on his cuticles.

The angel looked young too, Dillon thought, probably barely old enough to drive, judging by the lack of facial hair. As a matter of fact, he had no hair at all, was completely bald and when he finally looked down at Dillon with his piercing and solid silver eyes, he smiled with much attitude.

“Yeah, I know,” Sebastian spoke quietly with a slight English accent while he began rubbing the top of his head, “I have to earn back my hair. I was too overzealous during a recent trip down, having scared and endangered,” he said these last two words using his hands as quotation marks above his head, “the lives of a few - well, maybe more than a dozen - of innocent people.”

Dillon continued to silently gawk at the angel while he in turn, continued to lean against the bookcase, his large, full length wings quivering slightly, as if at any second they could take flight. *Did he just speak to me? Is he really an angel, because those wings sure look real to me.*

“Oh my! How dreadfully rude of me! I forgot to introduce myself! I am the Angel-slash-Guardian, Sebastian, at your service.” He bowed slightly with his hand swooping down. Then his voice turned authoritative as he turned his eyes to the others. “Leave us! I wish to be alone with the boy.”

In an instant, the creatures were gone, some of them lightly touching Dillon’s head and shoulders before departing. With each quick touch he felt encouragement, joy and hope shoot through him like electricity. It immediately uplifted him and he breathed in deeply, closing his eyes then opening them to a space he could recognize once again as his parents’ bedroom. The lighting had returned to normal however the angel had not disappeared.

“Beautiful pictures...I especially like the family group photo – nicely done, but something’s amiss? I do believe your dark haired brother looks out of place. Is his name David?” His voice sounded all knowing and almost accusing.

“Y-yes, bbb-but you already know that.” Dillon’s stutter quickly returned and he sighed, resolved to not having to say too much.

“He’s the one dead now, isn’t he? Pity...what a pity,” Sebastian shook his head in mocking sadness, “but tell me brave one, do you think I’ll find him waiting for me at Heaven’s Gates, asking for admission?” His voice had become bitingly sarcastic in tone as he kept his back to Dillon, who was slowly rising off his knees, gazing at the massive gray wings not five

feet in front of him, appearing impervious to the angel's below the belt jabs.

He wanted to touch them, and he reached out his hand timidly as he slowly walked forward. He suddenly became startled as the angel spoke again, Dillon not quite convinced he was actually seeing or talking to an angel, only to feel shocked and stunned every time this amazing creature chose to speak aloud.

“Go ahead, however please know I rarely allow petting. They are a source of power and it has a tendency to shed off them - if I allow it, that is.” Sebastian's wings spanned the full length of his body, resting on the ground as they lightly swept the floor.

Dillon took another step forward and touched the edge of the left wing as it sloped upward, gliding his fingers along its edge, the softness unlike anything tactile he could ever imagine. He held his breath as he felt the quivering animal, for it felt like it was separate from its host. He then sensed what he thought was a warm sensation travel up his arm, tingling his neck and finally, stroking his face like invisible fingers. He became startled again as the angel turned around and suddenly stared at him intently, curiously, as if just now noticing him.

“You are most definitely different, aren't you? You did not flinch at my harsh words earlier, and yet you still held out your hand to touch me. Interesting...” He turned his head to the side as he watched the boy's stunned expression.

For a brief moment, Dillon could swear the angel looked like a curious child with a look of mischief spreading across his pale face; his white mouth now forming a wicked smile as if he were contemplating doing something naughty. Although his gigantic wings gave him away, Dillon only had to look into those eyes, metallic gray and shining brightly, to know he was in the presence of a powerful creature.

“Hold out your hand, child.” His voice quick and sharp, Sebastian spoke with a sweet authority. He stood just a few inches taller than Dillon and the reference to 'child' finally woke the dazed boy.

Dillon stuttered again, trying to speak, but the words wouldn't form quick enough to make audible sense. His face turned red as he stood there faltering. Sebastian didn't seem to care, however at one point, as if he had gotten impatient, he reached out and rested his hand on Dillon's shoulder, stopping the boy and slowing his mind.

Feeling as if he were talking in slow motion, although his voice was normal, Dillon spoke as Sebastian continued to touch his shoulder. “Why? Why are you here and why do you need

my hand - and furthermore, I'm not a child – I look to be almost as old as you.”

Sebastian ignored him and reached down and grabbed his hand without much resistance and held it in his own. The angel's hands were not what they should be, Dillon quickly surmised. Instead of perfect extensions of his body, they were pale white with long, thinly delicate fingers with fingernails that were almost nonexistent stubs—

He's a fingernail biter – how oddly humanistic.

Choosing not to pay any attention to boy's observations, Sebastian continued to hold Dillon's hand in his, closing his eyes as he paused, breathing in deeply as Dillon watched him, breathless himself and still dazed at the presence of such an incredible creature not human.

Sebastian watched Dillon's life, and David's life shared, through Dillon's hands. He saw their emotional bond; their connection a binding contract of balance between what they each were - two separate parts to a whole person; yin and yang, positive and negative, lightness and darkness, polarities around two souls. He viewed their many talents, saw David's persona as seen through Dillon's eyes and he smiled slightly as he gleaned all he could gather from that description of the mysterious one. He stood there trying to figure out as best he could why his arch nemesis - his most hunted rival - would ever be interested in such a young, obnoxiously defiant soul such as David Smith.

And finally, what he hoped he was looking for, he found. For in this boy's hands, he saw what he had suspected all along. *Azmodeus wants this one too.*

He smiled and let go. Gazing down at Dillon he thought how lovely the boy was, how pure of heart he was, and so vulnerable to those he loves. *Now that his brother is gone anyone could destroy him easily. No, that won't do, for if he took his life, that devilish weasel would have him delivered to Nine on a silver platter.* “Never,” he whispered softly at Dillon, his breath sweet peppermint.

“N-never w-what?” Dillon breathed out, almost hypnotized.

“Never...*mind...*” He winked and clicked his tongue, making Dillon blink. *He's quite entertaining. I should take him with me...eventually, but not now. No, now he will have to play the bait.*

The door knob rattle made Dillon jump and blink, and in that millisecond, Sebastian was gone. He frantically looked around the room, then to the ground just in time to watch it gently fall back and forth until it rested there at his feet. He quickly reached down and grabbed it as the

door swung open. Whirling around to see his father standing there, Dillon saw him scanning the room frantically. What he was looking for Dillon couldn't tell, but it looked like he was checking for ghosts.

As he watched his father approach him, still holding the large gray feather in his hand and lightly stroking it, he could swear he heard Sebastian's voice whispering in his ear, the sweet smell of peppermint in his nose as he received a giant hug from his father.

I am older than dirt, my Sweet, and you are a fraction of what I am. However, we are both children in the eyes of Our Father. Fair thee well...

The voice was suddenly silent, leaving Dillon stunned as he hid the gray feather in his pocket, not taking it out at all, and later, finally laying down with it in his room. It served as a reminder he was not alone and more importantly, he thought, he wasn't insane.

It was a difficult and long emotional night for the Smith family. Tommy stayed over and crept into Dillon's room in the early morning hours after everything had finally calmed down. He stood there in the moonlight for what seemed like ages just watching the living angel lay there in the dark, slightly puzzled over the image but not wanting to wake him if he was indeed, sleeping. Dillon's head and upper body were lying in the closet on his pillow while the rest of him stuck out, curled up so that as much of him got in the closet as could get; trying to feel the connection again and secretly hoping the door might take him where his brother was, reuniting them again.

Tommy knelt down next to Dillon and put his own pillow on the floor, lying as close as he could, facing Dillon's curled up knees. The silence was quickly broken, however, because Tommy made the mistake of glancing over to Dillon's bed as he laid there in the dark. Feelings of guilt and shame traveled across the room to where he was and he swallowed hard, blinking a tear away.

"I'm n-not sleeping, T-Tommy. I w-will never sleep again." Dillon whispered harshly, trying but failing miserably to control his emotions.

"Why don't you come out of there, Dil? I can sit with you and we can talk? I promise I'm here for you, please? I just want to be your friend..."

Tommy started to cry as he listened to Dillon continue to sob. It pained him deeply unlike anything he'd ever felt, to listen to such a sound. It was like watching angels in agony; it

just wasn't something he could handle. Accepting the guilt so that it could drape over him snugly, Tommy began to sob as he relived in his mind, what he had done to Dillon earlier that night. "I'm sorry, Dil - so, so sorry - for David, and for...everything."

They continued to cry together in the darkness, and then talked until eventually the light of the morning sun lit the room, allowing them to see their faces again.

Chapter Two

David's Rebirth

Emen smiled and slowly walked back into his home away from home. As a powerful, influential master elf, he had earned and bought a home right off the main courtroom and near the central, higher and more protected part of the Elvin Fortress of Ulleren. It was of sufficient size, with an entertaining room large enough to sit a dozen elves comfortably, and probably six people in comparison. It was the first room upon entering the dwelling, with several seating arrangements, all close if not on the marbled floor; several rugs were thrown here and there with pillows scattered around for extra seats. A large fireplace aligned the far wall, central to the room's activity. Off the gathering room were two sleeping quarters, a master sleeping chamber for Emen, and an adjoining bedroom with six cots scattered around. There was a small eating area off the living room as well, and a wash room separating the two bedroom chambers. The entire set-up was nicely decorated in elegant fixtures.

David remained leaning against the wall in the hall, not having moved since the revelation hit. He knew Emen was watching him, but he just couldn't look at him. The sudden betrayal was foreign and destructive, so he closed his eyes and tried to focus on his breathing, remembering Dillon's influence.

Emen sensed this and walked back to the doorway, shaking his head and laughing softly, his body language screaming his own victory. "Come in, David. Be at least grateful you skipped The Entrance, as well as Second and Third Planes – be VERY grateful." His eyes glinted with glee as he thought of all the human suffering. A few minutes went by and the human remained motionless. He narrowed his eyes as he began to fume at the lack of response. "Look around and embrace what and where you are, for you have no other choice. Your door is now closed - did you feel it? Did you feel it slam and lock itself shut?" Leaning against the doorway, his purple eyes glowing in the corridor's surrounding darkness, he was the picture of an evolved, overly confident, successful creature, as well as a master manipulator, stepping on anyone in his way to the top. His greed fueled his association with the Arch Devils and demons he chose to deal with, and he had acquired quite a reputation for making and sliding away from deals not in his favor. That said, Emen had earned the title of Master Elf, granting him notoriety as one of only a small handful of elves in the Underworld to have earned such a title. His strengths lay in

his magical skill as a sorcerer, his power in his eyes, combined with his ability to persuade and deceive. These traits made Emen a very clever and resilient Underworld resident.

David remained still and continued looking forward as he sat on the ground, pinching his lower lip with his thumb and finger while he remained deep in thought. He had been deceived by someone he genuinely liked and admired, someone he actually considered leaving his world, including his brother for, and he had no idea the deception was all around him, created to trap him here. This realization made him feel incredibly foolish, for he hadn't a clue he was being manipulated and set-up to think this world was where he belonged, and yet what was eating at him right now, was that he had been taken and brought here so easily, tossed into the mixture of what would be considered by most as Hell, yet his captors were nowhere to be found. *Could I be so easily caught, only to be cast aside now, my life above gone with the closing of a door - a closet door no less? Could my life have been taken and destroyed that easily? Could it have been that simple an act to do? Where was God in all this? I guess I always knew I was expendable, guess I knew all along my life was a joke, waiting for the punch line – and here I am, still waiting for the punch.*

Where was Louis, David thought as he began to fume even more so. *Was there anything truthful in what he told me?* “Where is he?” He whispered as he continued to watch his life fly by in black and white on the make-believe screen that was the other side of the hallway.

Emen remained where he stood, watching the human intently, reading his thoughts and enjoying the show. “He doesn't know where you are - lucky for you, that is. He will hunt you down once he knows you aren't where you are supposed to be. Do not say his name out loud, for it is a summoning spell and he will show before you...and you don't want that, David.” He spoke casually as he began filing his nails with his black dagger while he continued to lean against the doorway.

David brought a trembling hand to his forehead and breathed in deeply, then let out his breath slowly, as a single tear fell down his cheek. “I'm so sorry Dil,” he whispered as he quickly wiped the tear off and brought both hands to his face to cover himself, not wanting to watch his life unravel and unfold on the movie screen anymore. *This is real, I am no longer living, but I feel so alive. This just can't be happening! Dillon has it worse though because he gets to see me dead in our bedroom.*

Emen felt the emotion and held his breath as he watched the realization set in for his

human. For a brief second he felt a twinge of sadness for David, not having felt that emotion in ages; it scared him and he stood up straight and refocused, noticing David checking out his forearms and stretching his fingers now. He spoke again, knowing what the human was considering. “Don’t think just because your soul has moved on, you can’t bleed when wounded, or die when killed here. This is your new life, your new meat cage and it is a life that can be taken away even easier than your previous one. We still value existence here, for this is the last stop to nothingness for you.” Saying those words callously woke him from his gaze on the human, and his old, dark self quickly returned.

David still didn’t answer the master elf he thought was once his friend, but he pulled his hand into a fist and clenched it as he listened to Emen snicker. He could feel the elf’s eyes on him greedily. He was property - but not owned - just swapped between two powers in play.

“Get up David, NOW. I need you to come in here so that I can shut my door for the night, okay?” Emen’s voice sounded condescending now, and he looked like he was beginning to lose his patience.

Never being one to linger long on anything and always quick to react to any situation no matter how horribly disturbing, David got up quickly without thinking, shook his head and breathed out forcefully as he walked towards a suddenly smiling elf. Right before he reached him, he felt it - a pulling away from his body - catapulting him forward as he stumbled into Emen’s outstretched arms. Looking pleasantly surprised, the dark elf smiled wickedly as he pulled David in even closer to within inches of his own face. David gasped and shuddered as he felt his connection finally leaving, the pain searing down his middle like a machete slicing him in two. He wanted to scream out, never having felt such an intense pain, but he was suddenly winded. He went to slide to the ground but Emen kept him standing.

“You feel it now, don’t you? How’s the pain? I bet if you still felt like you were dreaming, you most definitely feel awake at this moment? Welcome back, welcome to our world now.” Emen whispered seductively as he tried to hold onto David for as long as he could, smelling him briefly, then finally repositioning him back on his feet like he was a larger than life action figure. He then watched as the human he had so quickly grown to enjoy admiring, stagger into his house not looking back or answering him. Turning and following his new protégé inside, he reached out gracefully and closed the door to his home with his leg, kicking it shut.

Sarin, Jackal, and Leselle were all sitting around the roaring fire on pillows, eating and

drinking an unknown liquid from flasks made out of leather. The two male elves were laughing and playing cards, Leselle sat silent, staring at the fire. She jumped up as she heard David walk into the room, watching him as he stood there trying to catch his breath while he scanned the space with a look on his face that screamed pain and anguish. Sarin looked up at him also, not sure whether or not to smile smugly or feel sorry for his sudden predicament. Jackal shot David a mean look, growling something under his breath. “Why is he still *here*?”

Leselle quickly ran over to David but stopped short as she met eyes with a much disapproving Emen. “Go sit back down, Leselle. I wouldn’t want you to risk losing your tongue, for the night is still so, so young.” Shooting her a threatening glance as he strolled by David, Emen fell onto the small couch and kicked his feet up. “Come here and make yourself useful.” He ushered her over with an outstretched hand and pointed at his boots. She quickly obliged and took them off for him, gently placing them on the floor. Sarin kept his watchful eye on David, who in turn was now giving Emen a mean stare.

“Come over and have a seat and join in. You look like you could use a drink.” Sarin smiled and raised and wiggled his flask at David. David ignored him, still staring at Emen.

Emen was beginning to tire at the threatening look from this ungrateful human’s eyes. They bore into him fiercely and he struggled to keep from engaging David. “Jackal, go and get him - bring him here. I think it is time for the unveiling. David needs to know who he’s dealing with...respect will be mine.” He continued to lay back on the couch with his hands behind his head, smiling at the ceiling and ignoring David’s accusing stare.

Jackal silently got up and tossed his cards down. “I was losing anyway.” He quickly left the room. It was awkward silence as they all waited. David hadn’t registered yet what was about to happen, but as Jackal walked back in escorting a young man bound with his head covered by a brown cloth, David finally broke his stare and looked over.

Jackal pushed the human down in front of David.

“David, I’d like you to meet my new captive. I still haven’t decided whether or not to turn him in, for the purse on his head is quite high. The one who deceived you wants this one for a price, an unusually high price. But still, like I said before, I haven’t decided. Truth be told, the young male would most likely die within a day or two, having only been wanted to serve a temporary need. You might determine whether or not I spare him - how does that sound - important, huh? Think about it, and let me know should you decide to change how you are

looking at me right now. Once you change your threatening stare, I will proceed.”

David stood there confused, but angry, his eyes darkest black. Trying to speak, his words suddenly sounding unnatural, he tried to find his voice. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at, Emen, but you have proven to be more than your words. I’m also not sure what to make of you, or us for that matter, but sure, I’ll play along.” He stood there hands across his chest and confident, turning from Emen to Jackal and winking at the large elf, only to watch him look away from his gaze. That’s strange, he thought. *Why would Jackal turn away from my stare?* He suddenly remembered his eyes.

“Fine, unveil my gift to my newest member of the group.” Emen waved his hand casually as if already bored with the show.

Jackal pulled off the veil and walked over disinterested, sitting by Sarin again, while David stood there holding his breath and slowly, arms outstretched and reaching down, found his way to sit on the ground in front of Joel.

The room was silent for a few seconds as everyone, including Emen, watched David’s reaction, his eyes a soft, clear light blue again as he took in the sight that was his best friend.

Joel took in David’s image silently, tears falling down his face as he heaved in, filling with all the emotion he’d felt earlier this day. He couldn’t believe what had happened to him; saying goodbye to David, taking his life, coming here, getting saved by these creatures from the eatery he was almost a part of, to sitting there in the other room for what seemed like ages waiting for the end to come, and now, sitting across from David again, their knees touching lightly. He breathed in long and slowly to control what would be an onslaught of tears and anguish.

Emen broke the silence as he hopped off the couch, his eyes dancing with new life as he appeared in the blink of an eye, startling both boys and sitting down legs crossed between the two so that the three of them made a triangle. He put a hand on each of their knees and spoke, shaking them slightly in excitement.

“Isn’t this great?! We are having a reunion! It’s like a party - a human party for two! Tell me Dave, are you not surprised?” Emen smiled and beamed as he watched David break his silent stare from Joel and turn to him.

“Untie him, Emen.” He spoke in barely a whisper, continuing quickly as he noticed the dark elf’s face start to turn sour. “And yes, I am surprised to say the least. Joel and I have spent

and shared time. I suppose I owe you a ‘thank you’ for bringing him here safely.”

“So...” Emen looked like he was enjoying David’s groveling immensely.

He sighed in response and rolled his eyes. “So, thank you, now how about his hands?”

Emen chuckled as he reached over and lightly touched Joel’s bright, neon yellow straps that had his hands bound and stuck together. The light touch of his finger made the yellow disintegrate.

Joel raised and rubbed his hands. He had large gashes across both inner wrists, red slashing scars so violent looking, David held his breath as he reached out and gently grabbed hold of Joel’s forearms and brought his wrists closer to see them. They were healed, so it seemed, but watching him bend and stretch them gave away their lack of function.

“Do they hurt?” David breathed out, not looking at Joel.

“Uh, yeah, a little...but I-I can’t use them very well.” He choked on his words, trying not to cry again as he stared at every inch of David’s curious face. He had endured so much just to see his friend again, and here he was, holding his hands, yet not looking up to meet his eyes. Look at me Dave, he pleaded as he remained silent. *I know you care about me because you came after me, and now we’re together again...*

Emen watched the interaction silently, trying not to laugh out. He could immediately see Joel’s worship of his new protégé, but he wasn’t quite sure of David’s level of interest. *Hmmm, strange...I would think David would seem more interested in this one, since the Dark One wanted his capture so desperately.*

David let go of Joel’s hands and finally looked up at him, watching the hurt start to spread across his friend’s face. He didn’t want to reveal to Emen, and anyone else who might be watching, exactly how much he did care about Joel, loved him even, although he’d never admit that last revelation. Instead, he tried to start small talk, failing miserably. “So, what do you mean by saying you can’t use them well?” He rested his head on his hand, positioning and balancing his upper body on his knee, trying not to appear too interested.

Emen interjected quickly in a harsh tone. “This is dull - beyond dull. Come on, go ahead and hug! *Feel the brotherly love,*” hugging himself as he closed his eyes, his face twisted in fake passion and emotion. David glanced over at him for a second, and then shot his eyes back over to Joel, who was looking with fascination at Emen, studying his every detail like he wasn’t quite sure all of this was even real.

He repeated his question again, his voice purposefully monotonous as he snapped his fingers in Joel's face to break the stare. "So, what do you mean when you say you can't use them again?"

"Uh...they're weak at the wrists so it makes it difficult to grab and hold onto things." Joel gave David another hurt look, his light brown eyes so painful, David casually looked down and cleared his throat. He hates to do that, Joel thought, then realized what David was doing and sighed in relief. He immediately changed his facial expression, a half-smile trying not to show through. He smiled at Emen then looked over at David again. "So, enough about my dull existence, what are you doing here? I didn't think I'd see—"

"Right, well," David cleared his throat again as he gave his friend another signature look, interrupting him. "I came down in a dream state to visit my friend Emen here, and not minutes ago, just found out I'm stuck down here for – gee, how long Emen? What, an eternity right? Or my soul's death, whichever comes first?"

"So, you're dead too?" Joel asked quietly, as if he needed to keep David's death a secret.

David started to feel annoyance creep in, his patience with his friend beginning to disappear as Emen continued to gaze between the two of them, making his own assumptions about their relationship, something that was making David nervous. "Joel, this is the Underworld and we are both here now permanently. There will be no second chances, no 'see you around' in the afterlife. This is the last stop on the way to nothingness. You're going to need to do something about your hands, because trust me, you'll need them." He got up, stretched casually and glanced down at Emen, flinching as he realized the dark elf was already standing next to him, watching him already and invading his personal space. He tried to play it off as nothing, but Emen smiling had made his face turn slightly pink. Damn, he's quick, he realized as he tried to recompose himself. Suddenly the master elf threw his arm around his shoulder and almost kissed him.

"Yeesss?" Emen jeered, prodding David to turn his head so that the elf could lick his lips but David wisely kept his mouth at a safe distance.

"You haven't been a stellar host, Emen. Where's the food, the drinks, and the...uh, live entertainment?" Trying but failing miserably to change the subject off him and Joel, David watched his friend out of the corner of his eye. Joel looked immediately uncomfortable.

Emen laughed with an air of someone sinister and shook his head. "Be careful what you

ask for, David.” He walked over to the couch to lie down. “Leselle, grab our boys some drink and food. They suddenly have *needs*.” He snickered.

Leselle appeared wounded at the harshness in Emen’s voice. She gave David a sad, defeated look, making him think that her servitude to the male elves in this group was common. It only served to piss him off more.

“David, you might want to introduce your friend to the group, since we will all share sleeping and living quarters here for the next few days to lie low - since both of you are wanted men – ha! Gee, that’s a stretch of the word.” David glared over at Emen, then Jackal, who was chuckling and whispering something to Sarin.

“Leselle!” Emen snapped his fingers and Leselle jumped up and gathered drinks and food.

He continued to feel guilt as he watched Leselle being treated like a house slave. Suddenly thinking about his own mother, but quickly pushing the memory from his mind, David walked over to help her with the drinks when the other elves interceded. Before he could touch a plate, he had Jackal’s attention as the larger than life elf started to chuckle and nudge Sarin’s arm to have him look over too.

Emen noticed immediately and shot up, for the first time, looking attentive and disgusted. “DON’T you dare! Step back and go sit next to your long lost friend! If you choose to help the female, then you will be treated as female - understood?!”

David stood still, shocked at the sharp delineation between what was male and what was obviously not male. He realized right then how much of a relief it was to be his gender. He turned and walked over to Joel and sat back down; Joel’s face giving him the same revelation.

Speaking almost under his breath now, David quickly introduced Joel. “Everyone, this is Joel, a friend of mine from the Living World. Joel,” he pointed a finger at each elf as he made the introductions; Joel turning around so that he could see everyone sitting behind him on the floor. “Sitting over there playing cards is Jackal and Sarin,” the two elves nodded their heads silently, “And you’ve already met Emen, lying on the couch barking orders,” (mocking laughter from Emen as Leselle flinched), “and Leselle is coming over right now with our food and drink...thanks.” David smiled at Leselle, making her blush madly as she laid their plates of meat and some kind of potato pâté down, then setting their goblets next to them. The food portions were tiny and Joel mouthed his shock but David nudged him silent. Leselle waved briefly at

them both then walked back over to sit next to Emen on the floor, leaning against the couch.

“Nice to meet everyone,” Joel spoke quietly, his voice slightly intimidated. Jackal chuckled again. David shoved a piece of meat in his mouth to keep from saying what he wanted to say to the chunky elf.

Taking in David’s presence again, Joel smiled sheepishly as he took a drink of the mysterious liquid, then whispered, “I can’t believe we are actually here together—“

KNOCK, KNOCK.

Everyone jumped as if expecting an army to come storming into the room, except for David, who laughed loudly instead. “Wow! I think somebody’s a little jumpy in here, waiting for Mr. Bad Guy to come charging—“

“Ssshhh!” Emen shot up off the couch and was at the door, Sarin with him, his hand on his dagger he had wrapped around his thigh. David just sat there, his back to the door, rolling his eyes. Joel tried to laugh too, trying to imitate David’s apathy, but he looked too uncomfortable in his own skin as he cautiously eyed the door along with everybody else.

Emen motioned to Sarin and in a second, Sarin was standing over David and Joel, helping pick Joel up and motioning for the two of them to go into the bedroom. David resisted, mouthing the word, “What?” to Sarin, who in turn, threw his hand out impatiently and motioned him to come along. Joel however, went along very willingly.

“Yes, who presents at my door this time of night, uninvited?” Emen stood off to the side of the front door, leaning against the wall picking at a nail with his dagger.

“It is Leothan and I wish to speak with you regarding matters of much importance. May I enter your dwelling?”

“Are you alone, Leothan?” Emen’s voice slightly amused with a hint of sarcasm, for he knew Leothan never did anything alone. As far as he was concerned, Leothan didn’t even think by himself.

“No, of course not and you know this, Emen. I never am...”

“Can it not wait until after dawn? I have traveled extensively all day and am ready to retire. May I join you tomorrow morning at your convenience?” Spoken like a true businessman, David thought as Sarin pushed him into the other room.

“Let me in, Emen.”

He stabbed his wall with the dagger, leaving it there. He motioned to Leselle and she ran

over and unlocked the door, stepping aside just in time to not get run over by the entourage of elves in silver armor - a dozen at least, with more standing guard in the hallway. Leothan entered as the warriors separated and formed two rows serving and marking his entrance. He strolled right up to the couch Emen was laying back on, boots still off and his feet propped up on pillows, his toes wiggling. He looked very sour as he glared at Leothan's over-the-top arrival.

“Good evening, Emen, Leselle, Jackal...and where's Sarin? Oh, there you are, hello Sarin – were you taking an evening nap?” Leothan smiled sarcastically as he watched Sarin lean against the door to the bedroom, his arms crossed over his chest, his face smug and confident.

“Well, yes, now that you mention it, Your Grace, I was playing cards and winning too when all of a sudden, a nap just fell on me like an Elvin princess and all I wanted was to lie down.” His cocky smile heated Leothan's face. A few of the elf guards chuckled, then quickly fell silent as Leothan half-turned their way.

He regained his composure and refocused his attention on Emen, since continuing banter with Sarin would likely make him look more a fool to his warriors.

As the Elvin King of Ulleren Fortress, Leothan was a master elf like Emen, however, he was what most Underworld residents would refer to as neutral - neither light nor dark - the most despicable class to be in such a volatile place. Leothan used his neutrality to allow him popularity and acceptance with the masses. He was a master speaker, able to weasel his way out of much political fire when put in the spot light.

The Elvin King stood five feet, three inches tall, hair whitest white and long, straight at his shoulders. He had crystal clear blue eyes and olive skin. He was elegantly dressed in gold with armor and jewels. He looked the part of a king of elves, his voice charming, but authoritative when he needed to be. He was older and his rule had lasted fifty years - the longest ruling Elf at Ulleren - and he paid homage and enjoyed his long reign at the expense and protection of the Dark Lord.

Leothan cleared his throat, and then yelled “Silence! So, how are you *four* doing? I think word has spread around that the *four* of you are quite phenomenal in your many combined talents,”

“What is your purpose here, my Lord, for a visit at such a time as this would be considered alarming and like I just said, although I cannot speak for the group—“

“You can speak,” Emen whispered, smiling back at Sarin.

“Right, and I think I can speak for the group when I say that we are all incredibly tired and request naps.” Sarin smiled smugly again as he watched Leothan seethe.

“Fine then, I’ll get to the point. Where is he? Where is your stow-away?” He glared between Emen and Sarin, both of them suddenly shocked at the inquiry. “Don’t give me those looks – I know he’s here, I have my eyes all around me. There are eyes everywhere Emen! And I don’t take this sort of imposition lightly. I’m sure you are well aware of the Dark Lord’s inquisition. This-this Joel character has a hefty price, and as the hours go by, the Dark Lord’s eye will turn to Ulleren. We may not be protected much longer if we dare disobey and deceive his wishes!”

Sarin started, but Emen quickly interrupted him, laughing as he spoke to Leothan like he was ten and afraid of a bully on the school bus. “He hasn’t even cast his eye on Ulleren, and already you fear his wrath? May I remind you, Leothan, he has given us his support because I have come through for him when he needed a competent elf? It is I who represent Ulleren, for while you dine and drink with the rich, socialite swine that think they own Sixth Plane, I am the one dealing with the Arch Devils who actually have the capability to own and conquer all! They all know me by name, and I have worked hard to bring respect and nobility to Ulleren. I take great offense over your quick turn in loyalties to an Arch Devil who hasn’t even raised his eye brow in our direction yet. So quickly you want to turn your kind inside out, don’t you?” Emen leaned back on his couch again, settling into it as if ready to take a snooze, with Sarin sitting on the arm rest leaning against the wall. Jackal stood next to him, Leselle behind him and shielded.

“Well, let’s just see if my predictions are true, shall we?” Leothan turned to Ulmed and began to speak, but Emen cut him off. “You should consider your imposition, Leothan—“

“And you should consider your lack of manners Emen!” Leothan snapped back.

“I will not have my house searched whilst I sit here like a prisoner. I am not held captive, and your warriors do not sway me to cooperate. You have no right to tear through my personal dwelling unannounced and uninvited! What if he is not here? Then what would be allowed my reckoning?” His powerful eyes glowed purple as he shot Ulmed a look, while the soldier and captain went for his sword. Sarin watched intently as well, and it was his amber eyes that Ulmed listened to, stopping suddenly to only rest his hand on his sword.

“Well, something tells me he’s here - actually it was someone who told me he was here. Now we can be civilized about this, and negotiate a compromise after I see him, or I can call for

a search and seizure? It's your choice. One, two, three—“

“FINE! Have at it! I will not forget this horrible imposition, mind you. I will not forget.” Emen leaned back on the couch, hissing his words as he threw up his hands.

“Sarin?” Leathan spoke quietly, and almost pleading quality in his voice as he watched the powerful warrior jump off the couch and block the way, standing in front of Ulred, who was Sarin's personal friend; both attempting to stare each other down with Ulred finally relenting, his eyes shot away as he shook his head slightly in frustration.

“Let them pass, Sarin.” Emen breathed out sullen apathy as he spoke.

“I will get what you seek. Your guard can stay here, for there will be no search and seizure – no need. I will bring you what it is you wish to split friendships and loyalties over, my Lord.” Sarin's eyes looked threatening as he stood there, unable to bear the thought of his long time friend's humiliation watching his home being ripped apart.

“I am not sure that is the right—“

“My Lord, may I interject a thought - a compromise? May I escort Sarin to retrieve the human, so that you may know from my eyes there is nothing left to question or concern with?” Ulred was a half-elf, half-human hybrid, with blonde hair, brown eyes and the tallest in the group of elves at five foot nine inches. He had an overwhelming fascination with humans. Sarin rolled his eyes, but relented to his accompanying him.

“Fine, go and get him.” Leathan raised his hand and motioned for the two of them to go.

David and Joel were sitting in Emen's master bedroom leaning against the door listening to the words spoken.

“Dave...Dave?”

“I'm right next to you Joel, just speak and I'll hear you.” He whispered back, his mouth a thin line as he leaned next to Joel at the door.

“Why are they coming for me? Who's this Dark Lord anyway? What the hell did I do to get so fucking popular anyway?! I just wanted to hide out with you!”

“Don't worry, Joel. I am NOT going to let anything happen to you. I know who wants you, because he wants me too...Louis.” He whispered into the room as he turned and leaned against the door, half expecting him to appear as he smirked, remembering Emen's warning earlier.

“Is this the same guy you told me about at school?” Joel asked, his voice panicking and increasing its volume.

“Shhh! Yes, and he’s the reason I’m here for good. He-he fucking tricked me into coming here; making me think this place was some God-damned vacation to Excalibur and I more than fell for it. Speaking of God, He sure as hell wasn’t around when this shit was going on - I can assure you. He doesn’t care about you either, but we both know why that is.” David turned to look over at Joel, who had copied him and was leaning against the door, their shoulders touching.

Joel returned to look at David, able to see every detail in his friend’s face. *I can actually see everything in here...without a single light source.* “Dave?”

“Yeah Joel?” He answered with an air of annoyance in his voice again, still refusing to look over.

“Can you see in here?”

“Uh, yeah, a little bit, why?”

“Can you see the collection of teeth on the counter over there, on the other side of the bed?” Joel sounded excited, his voice fast as he leaned in close to David’s side profile, resting his hand on David’s shoulder.

“You’re invading my personal space, Joel. Do I need to remind you that we are hiding out? Quit cuddling!” David raised his voice and pushed him away. “You should know that I’m still pissed at you for taking your life like that - you ass.”

Joel giggled almost sadistically.

“I was sick to my stomach and vomiting all the way home after your little peek-a-boo moment with me at the car window. I wish I could kick your ass right now, right here.” David fumed in the dark, his arms across his chest as he stewed in his anger.

Joel smiled warmly in response to David’s emotion, his face blushing as he watched in the bright dark, for the room was simply that, a bright neon green mixed with shadow gray. He could make out David’s squint around his eye as he tried to see the invisible teeth Joel was talking about.

“And no, I don’t see those damn teeth you pointed at. So...is Emen into African voodoo or what?” David snickered, instantly lightening the mood between them. Joel laughed too, and then they both backed off the door as the knob turned and opened. They hadn’t even heard the

footsteps coming down the hall. “Elves,” David whispered as he threw his arms half up. “Fast, vertically challenged - hey Sarin.”

He entered the room as both David and Joel stepped back and sat on the edge of Emen’s bed together in one united motion. Following Sarin was a strange elf-human creation. His ears not so pronounced, his facial features bigger, especially his nose. He wasn’t pretty enough to be Elvin, David decided. And this person feared Sarin. David smelled that too.

“Come with me and don’t say a word unless spoken to,” Sarin pointed and spoke in a harsh whispered tone only to David, who then rose to meet him, only to be pushed back on the bed harshly by an outstretched hand. “Do you understand me? When I tell you to do something or to follow me, you’d better do it because I will NOT save your sorry self unless you show respect.”

Sarin didn’t look threatening to David, instead his actions, his voice and his posture reminded him of an older brother he’d always wanted and never had, for he saw concern in the elf’s face and eyes. *He cares about me, how sweet.* David smiled slyly at Sarin, and then looked over at Ulred, who was staring at him with a look of awe.

“What the hell are you looking at?” David whispered, snapping Ulred out of his gaze and making Sarin roll his eyes and sigh.

“Come on, just shut up and come on!” He went to grab David but the human maneuvered out of his hold quickly, shocking the elf as he watched him walk by Ulred and out the door. Joel ran after him.

They entered the living room and walked right over to the edge of the couch behind Emen. Sarin and Ulred were there in a flash. Leothan stood tall and beamed in his self righteousness now. Emen rolled his eyes and sighed at the sight. How he hated this idiot elf turned king. The thought of this made him wish for absolute anarchy.

“So, here we are with not one human, um, young man, but two young men – boys - how interesting.”

“I’m all man, thanks,” David interjected. Somewhere in the back of the room Leselle giggled. Leothan’s eyes looked like they were going to explode in sudden rage. David tried not to smile at the sight.

“DO NOT INTERRUPT ME YOU FOOLISH HUMAN! I DON’T CARE IF YOU ARE MAN OR BOY! YOU HAVE NO WORDS TO SAY THAT I WOULD WISH TO HEAR!”

SILENCE AND WAIT TO BE RECOGNIZED!” The Elvin king fumed as he glared up at David, who was almost a foot taller. The room had a moment of awkward silence as they all watched the interaction between them. Some of the guards started whispering and as David panned the group of elves, he noticed quite a few of them were staring at him with looks of pleasant curiosity – not looks from an army meant to come and capture or kill. He smiled again as he looked down at his feet so that Leothan could slow his breathing down. “Emen, what say you to this, this heathen?” Leothan walked over to Emen, who was still lying on the couch pretending to sleep with his eyes closed.

“I will not engage you this game, Leothan. I have already spoken my concerns. He is of my group, that one who just spoke and I should have warned you. He has a sharp, snake’s tongue for such a pretty face. However, much to your disappointment, I’m sure, he is not who you look for - Sarin?”

Sarin grabbed Joel by the arm and walked him two paces before David stepped over to stand next to his friend. Joel shot David a frightened look.

“So, you must be Joel?” Leothan spoke as he looked up at Joel, frowning at the same height differential as the other human.

“Uh...” Joel stammered.

“I’m Joel. I am the one you are looking for,” David spoke with a quiet resolution, his eyes down cast. The guards all began to whisper and Leselle shot over and shook her head to say no.

Emen sat up for the first time and laughed. “Nice try. No, Leothan, the dark haired human is tricking you. The one with the bright blue hair is Joel. He is the bounty, the other one is...” Emen paused.

“Yes?” Leothan glanced between them all first before yelling at his guards to silence themselves.

“He is a human we picked up on the way here,” Sarin spoke up as Emen almost bit his lip to keep from saying David’s actual name.

“I didn’t ask you Sarin. There appears to be a cover-up going on here and I don’t like it. Ulred, bring Narissa in here. She will identify who she saw earlier.”

“It will not matter what she saw, my Lord, for we all showed up this night from a long travel.” Sarin walked over and put his arm around David’s shoulder, “He’s with us now, as a

new member of our group.”

“And his name? What’s your name?” Leothan raised his hand up to silence Sarin as he looked up at David.

“Joel - I already told you, your majesty.”

Sarin clenched his teeth as he glared up at David, who was doing a great job convincing Leothan he was Joel.

Emen laughed and walked over, grabbing Joel by the arm and squeezing slightly. “Ow,” Joel whispered as he tried to get away.

“This one is Joel, Leothan. The Dark Lord has a bounty out on one human, and they did not come here together, for I brought this one earlier today - remember my visit?” He glared at Leothan, who was trying to decide what to do.

Right then Ulmed walked back in with Narissa, who pointed at David as soon as she walked over to Leothan and bowed at the King. “I see him, my Lord, that is the one I was telling you about,” she kept her head bowed as she stood next to him and across from David, who was keeping himself from smiling as he listened to Sarin continue to seethe.

“If it is him you see, my dear, then look upon his face and make sure—“

“This idiot girl proves nothing! First of all, I would never believe nor accept the word of a female, and I would hope as the ruling Elvin King, you would agree?!” He grabbed and pushed Joel towards Narissa, making her squeal in fright as she backed away. “This is Joel! Tell him your name, human, or you’ll have more to fear than simple recognition!”

Joel began to cower and tremble, feeling the dark elf’s power behind him.

“Leave him alone, Emen. I’m warning you. None of this concerns any of you!” David yelled out, causing the guards to pull in closer and Leothan to step backward as he gazed upon David’s angry face, those eyes suddenly causing a stir of commotion in the room. Narissa let out another tiny squeal of a scream and ran out of the room.

“Let her leave,” Leothan spoke as he continued to stare at David. Joel turned and smiled proudly as he saw David stand there glaring at everyone in the room, stopping to look at Emen.

“Don’t look upon me that way, unless you’d like to duel? I can wager your friend Joel, should you lose, my dear?” Emen smiled wickedly, forcing David to quickly look down and sigh. He knew Emen had him.

In the silence that followed, Leothan continued to gawk at David as the Elvin guards

started to whisper, watching the strange human lose his temper, his eyes turning black, as he stood there trying to control himself.

Leothan finally snapped out of his gaze, suddenly becoming a politician as he spoke to the large group, his voice suddenly louder. “Fine, Emen. I believe you, and yes, I, too, would never take the word of a foolish female in such important matters as these.” He said this as he scanned his audience, avoiding David’s disgusted glare. “But that leaves still one question, and now I am more concerned and intrigued with this one standing right here. Who is this other human?”

“He is a human I picked up at The Entrance while I was searching for Joel. I knew the Dark Lord wanted Joel, and I had planned on selling him to a bounty hunter I know in Fifth Plane. I was going to leave in the morning. But this dark one here is a human that I’ve known for quite some time, and now he’s a permanent resident in our world and has decided to join our group.” Emen gave David a warning glance to shut up, but it didn’t quite work.

“My name doesn’t concern you, or anyone else for that matter and I don’t have to pay my respects to a king I have no allegiance to. I am someone you wouldn’t want to know. Let’s just leave it at that shall we?” David spoke calmly, scanning the room, causing tiny eruptions of violent stirring among the Elvin soldiers as Leothan began to anger. Before he could reach out and grab David by the throat, Sarin stepped in front of him, causing David to stagger backward.

“I WILL NOT TOLERATE SUCH RESISTANCE, SUCH – SUCH LACK OF RESPECT!!!” Leothan was screaming and motioning his army to move in, but paused as Sarin drew his sword. Only two of the elves attacked David. He ducked as a spear swung around him. Quickly grabbing it, he turned it to deflect a sword from the other elf, while he grabbed a dagger from the other elf’s thigh strap, pushing him back hard enough he flew across the room. Sarin grabbed David and pulled him away as more elves came forward, swords drawn, a few with bows armed with arrows pointing at them both.

“I don’t need your help,” David whispered harshly in Sarin’s ear as the Elvin warrior continued to pull him back, one arm wrapped around his shoulder, the other on the arm, twisting and squeezing it at the wrist until David dropped the gold dagger.

“Yeah, right, sure. You looked like you were handling it just fine until the arrows all pointed at your big head – fool! Just shut your mouth.” Now it was Sarin’s turn to whisper closely. “Let me and Emen handle this.” His commanding voice made David relax and stop

fighting the hold on him. The elf had a way about him, his ability to carry himself and the reactions of the other elves when he moved about the room was enough to give David the impression he knew what he was doing and apparently, everyone else knew it too.

Leothan laughed and motioned his troops to hold back, although he didn't release his archers who had filled the room on the fireplace side and were all pointing to the other direction. A total ambush was in order.

“How impressive for a human without a weapon to handle himself so well - and why is that? Why is it you choose not to arm the newest member of your group, Emen?”

“I haven't had the chance. However, he is new to our world, Leothan, please excuse his rudeness. He is young and I have taken him on to teach him the ways of our world.”

“I find it interesting you'd take in a human into your group – that would be a first, I do believe. I also think you've taken on more than you can handle with this one.” Leothan continued. “However, the boy is strong and fast for being a mere human.” David glared at Leothan for referring to him as a boy, not even catching on about the human insult. Joel however, was getting pissed with each reference to his species being splattered around the room.

“So you say he's newly descended? Hmm...” Leothan stood there deep in thought as everyone watched, the archers still positioned to attack. In an instant, his face lit up. “Lower your arrows! I have a thought to share, Emen! Are you sure the Dark Lord wouldn't want to have Joel given to him by us? Wouldn't it look even better coming from our kind to the Ruler of the Underworld?” His voice had suddenly changed tune, became high pitched and excited as he turned and took a step towards the master elf, who was fuming once again over the sudden imposition.

David finally took notice, sucking in air as he registered Leothan's comment. *Holy shit! Louis is the ruler of the Underworld...the whole Underworld? Oh...no...*

“I will pay for the human - double the price you'd get from your despicable bounty hunter and you can stay here. How does that sound?” Leothan spoke casually again, forgetting David and thinking about how glorious he would feel to have the Dark Lord visit his castle for drink so that he could then present the human in a surprised gesture of gratitude.

Joel stepped back in sudden fear but two Elvin guards stopped him by standing right behind him, their swords on his back. “Where do you think you're going?” One of the soldiers whispered into his ear. He shot David a panicked look. He nodded back, trying to stay calm and

giving Joel the same look.

“No, Leothan. The human is someone I will keep for a while until I find it necessary to rid myself of him. Only then will I turn him in. I did not acquire him for the money—“

“Then why would you interfere with the Dark Lord’s business?” Leothan’s giddiness over possibly pleasing his benefactor transformed instantly into curious suspicion. “You still haven’t told me who this hot tempered, foul-mouthed one is right here. I want a *name*.” He turned his attention back on David, making Emen sigh and scratch his head. How to keep both humans was becoming quite an ordeal, but David wouldn’t keep in line if he gave away Joel. *Lose both by getting rid of Joel, or wage war right here and possibly lose my standing at Ulleren – my home away from home and my protective safety net. I would have to be on the run all the time if I threaten my welcome here.*

“I already told you it is of no concern to you.” David spoke to Leothan in an annoyed voice again. Sarin grabbed at him and pulled him back one more time.

“Emen?” Leothan spoke up, ignoring David’s glare again, almost driving him crazy as he stood there watching the Elf King look so smug.

“You do not wish war with me, Leothan. That would be a mistake on your part.” Emen was ready to walk out, not wanting to discuss his agenda anymore. *Damn idiot king, always thinking about your own sorry ass.*

Leothan laughed, shocked. “You wish war over a mere human? I must say I am missing something here! Maybe I should just say *His* name and end all of this?” Leothan turned away and walked towards the door to the main outer corridor. “He would come and all would be ended, would it not?”

“That would be a mistake, I assure you, Leothan! The Dark Lord will not be pleased to see you harboring his fugitive. I would tell him it was you AND I think I’d wager he would believe me over you, since he and I have a working relationship. Think about it...think about how saying his name will jeopardize your precious kingdom. I lose nothing but a useless human. You will lose your world. He is enraged, so I’ve heard, since this morning, and has been known to take out his anger on innocent bystanders, especially powerful ones, such as you. Now,” Emen turned to the archers all pointed at David and Sarin. “Remove your elves from my dwelling. Have your archers lower their bows or I’ll have to destroy them, every...last...one of them.”

A few of the archers lowered their bows, but quickly raised them as their king looked over. "I am shocked and dismayed our friendship has now ended. You have put yourself in a position that will affect you and those who choose to follow you." Leothan glanced at Sarin, and then continued. "Lower your weapons," he ordered to his elves. "Emen, you are to exit this fortress upon first light and you are banned, all of you, from returning. Good luck in your disobedience, for I will not take part in your deception. And this one here, he is another you hide, but I don't wish to know anything more." With that said, Leothan left and his troops followed, Ulmed the last to leave as he stood in front of Sarin and David.

"Don't leave - join us." Sarin whispered as Ulmed stood there, his sword placed back in its sleeve as he sighed over his own dilemma. "I have my own motives, Ulmed, and you are more than invited to join."

Before Ulmed could answer, Emen walked over, beaming at his apparent victory. "My, my - what quick feet you have for a human! I dare say you were even faster than those skilled warriors!"

"They weren't that skilled," Sarin mumbled.

"Magnificent to see, was it not Sarin?" Emen glanced at Ulmed then to his most trusted assistant and partner. Sarin smiled weakly as he still held onto David.

"Could you let me go now, Mother?" David hissed as he started to fight Sarin's hold.

"Silence! Hold your tongue or I will end your friend's life right here, right now, and we will feast on his blood – have I mentioned yet the value and power in that rare body fluid? Simply delectable it is; a fancy royal feast." With a quick shot of his eyes, Emen had Joel thrown against the wall, pinned there. "Understood? You will go now, both of you, and bathe. You will then retire and sleep your visions of grandeur in one of the beds while Sarin and I decide a plan." Emen turned his eyes casually to David and Joel fell to the ground, scrambling off the floor like it was on fire then running quickly over to David.

Sarin let David go as he pushed him towards the washroom. He stood there for a second, debating his next move, then slowly turned and left the room, Joel with him, while Emen and Sarin both watched. Emen turned his glare to Ulmed, who quickly walked over to the fireplace to sit next to Leselle. Jackal joined them.

"I am tired of his arrogant rule. The fool is a disgrace to all elves. I will go speak to him myself."

“That may not be wise. He can talk easily, and he has already banned us from returning. Besides, we don’t need Ulleren. I know the Planes like the back of my hand. We have places to go to, and we know so many! And I know you Emen, I know how you get when power consumes you! Leothan serves a purpose and he’s been a decent king, having survived so long. Taking over Ulleren and keeping the humans here is like waiting to be annihilated – the Dark Lord will know they are here! Word will spread and we will be exposed and left to defend a fortress that holds no importance to me—“

“I will not lose my home! Ulleren is here because I have worked to keep it protected! That fool is no better running this kingdom than say...Leselle!” Emen’s voice remained a whisper, but the three other elves looked over at the mention of her name. “I will go speak to him alone and try to talk some sense into him. Stay here with the others, and watch David, Sarin. Watch that one closely, for I have plans for him.” He turned and left the room.

Surprisingly, there weren’t any soldiers in the corridor to guard Emen’s dwelling. Odd, he thought as he moved in the direction of Leothan’s upper courtroom. *Time to take what is rightfully mine...*

While Emen was gone claiming the throne to satisfy his own growing greed, Sarin was busy preparing his escape. He knew of Emen’s plan, saw it in his friend’s face, but the greed that had taken over Emen was changing him, no longer was he someone Sarin considered worthy to follow. He knew he needed to act quickly, for if his knowledge of Emen’s growing power held true, it could be a quick turnover. He turned and watched Ulned talk to Leselle. He would help them leave, for only Ulned could order the opening of the gates to the fortress. He excused himself to check on the humans.

Closing it as he leaned against the washroom door, Sarin startled both David and Joel as they stood there talking, planning their own escape. He smiled at their future disobedience, shaking his head. “I have plans to leave, for I do not approve of Emen’s visions of grandeur, but we must act quickly if you wish to come with me. I rarely travel with others, especially young humans, so prepare to listen closely. I have connections and I believe we can simply walk out the front gates, but once again, you’ll have to obey my command, for there can be only one leader. Understood?”

David looked suspicious, while Joel just stood there nodding his head ‘yes.’

“Where is Emen? I thought you two were a tight, little pair? And what about Jackal, for

I'm sure his loyalties lie with Emen?"

"Emen has gone to claim the kingdom from Leothan, and I feel he will win, but while he is distracted, we will leave, however it will have to be quick. I fear our timing must be perfect. We will have to brave whatever is outside the gates, but I'd rather do that than sit in here and rot with only one entrance and one exit. Now are you with me?" Sarin began to grow impatient as he continued to watch David watch him back.

"Fine, we're in. Let's go." David put his tunic back on and grabbed his things.

"Stay here while I deal with Jackal. It shouldn't take me but a minute to cut his throat." Saying it casually like he was going to run to the store to get groceries instead, Sarin quickly left the room, leaving both David and Joel standing there half-dressed, confused and dazed at the sudden turn of events, the violence and the swapping of loyalties. "So this is what it's like," Joel whispered to the door. David just smiled, thinking how much he loved chaos.

Chapter Three

A New Group

As the blood pooled around him, his corpse slumping over next to the fire, Jackal looked like a large overstuffed Elvin doll. Sarin callously wiped his blade on the elf's back while Ulred collected some of the blood for them to drink. Leselle cried silently as she covered her face and hovered next to the fire. Sarin and Ulred both took long drinks of the blood as they stood there discussing their plan.

“You may speak now, Leselle. I promise you, I won't cut out your tongue. I found Emen to be too harsh with you. You may follow me, if you wish. I can always use an interpreter. However, should you wish to stay, I'll have to tie you up and gag you, for obvious reasons. You understand, right?” Sarin smiled over at her while he took another swig, wiping some of the blood off of the corner of his mouth. He was so beautiful in the light of the fire, his orange eyes reflecting the flames' glow.

Leselle had always admired Sarin, yearned for him even, but he'd seemed so aloof, so uninvolved and detached, she figured he was out for only himself. Now, things seem different with him. He is going to help two humans he has no ties to, betray the friend he'd fought for many times over, and he wants her to join him? This night was stranger than most, and somehow, she felt it was only going to get more intensely strange. Still, she thought, she shouldn't miss out, and she didn't want to be here when Emen returned to see his newest treasure gone and taken by his best friend. “Yes, I will accompany you. I am honored you have included me, Sarin.” She bowed her head as she spoke.

“Although there is one rule: when we are traveling and working, you will not be female, because I will not carry you. I will also, in turn, not make you feel inferior. I will teach you how to fight when I can, and you will be required to carry yourself that way. Can you do that? Because if your role will be helpless female, you might want to stay, for our journey will be hazardous at times, I assure you.” Sarin finished his glass of blood and glanced behind him at the washroom door still closed.

“Fine, I can do that. I need to do it, don't I?” She smiled weakly at him, trying to sound and look confident as she wiped away her tears. “Why did you have to kill him?”

“Because he would have talked and caused trouble, possibly drawing attention to our escape, therefore he needed to go. Most creatures are expendable if they pose a threat, and

unfortunately, he did. Now quickly gather your things and get ready. Ulned, can you order the opening of the gates?” Sarin watched Ulned try to decide, a look of apprehension on his face.

“I should be helping my King if he is fighting with Emen and yet I want to go with you. I am torn Sarin. Yes, I can order the gates opened, but there would be commotion and chaos and all attention will be drawn to you. However, there is a back way, a secret passageway I know of —“

“Does anyone else know?” The elf walked over and started grabbing his things.

“I don’t think so, but—“

“That’s not good enough!” Sarin walked over to the washroom door and opened it, causing David and Joel to fall forward. Annoyed to realize they were eavesdropping, Sarin sighed. “Nice of you two to join, now gather what things you have because we leave now.” He said these words as he walked over to Jackal and stripped him of his clothes and his boots, collecting them in his hands and tossing them over at Joel. “You have a minute to change and gear up. Never mind the blood, it’ll wash out eventually. I would suggest you hurry. Disrobe – now.”

Joel looked at David then quickly took off his shirt and dropped his pants to change while David walked over to Jackal and collected his weapons. Two matching silver daggers with leg straps he took and put on, as well as a bag of blue dirt balls, making him grimace as he took them anyway. He also snagged a small bag of gold and the elf’s knapsack, not bothering to look inside it. Lastly, he took a crossbow and the pack of small black arrows that accompanied it. Sarin looked over and smiled, thinking to himself how fast the human was catching on. “Don’t use that crossbow until I teach you how. Oh, and by the way, Mr. Greed? Give Jackal’s cloak to your friend. I dare say you will leave him completely unarmed and vulnerable. At least an invisibility cloak would serve him well, considering it’s specifically made for stupid humans who like to slash and render their wrists and hands unusable.”

Joel blushed then panicked as he watched David push Jackal backward onto his back, his neck completely sliced open from ear to ear. He forced himself not to vomit, but he had to look away. David seemed totally unaffected, almost callous in the way he tossed the elf around to collect his belongings. Leselle turned away too, not wanting to watch as she pulled her brown cloak over her head, having pulled her hair back at Sarin’s suggestion, so as not to be a female siren.

“Sarin, you will need me to guide you through the passage—“

“Just show me the way, Ulned and alarm the troops of Emen’s plans - that is if he hasn’t already started to fight Leothan. Their duel, I believe, will not be as quick as I had originally thought, so you have time - time to gather your men and possibly destroy Emen, if there are enough of you. His command of the magical arts is impressive, but he has his weaknesses. His power lies in his eyes, so know that first and foremost. Go and help your King - our King - from Emen’s greed. I will find my way through, you know that.” Sarin walked towards the door, everyone following him, with Joel pulling up his pants that were two times his size, but not long enough. He looked ridiculous and David smiled, thinking of some twisted, punk rocker version of a hillbilly. He undid his waist band and wrapped it around Joel, synching the extra fabric together.

“I wouldn’t want you to run bare ass through the passage with your new duds around your ankles, because I’ll be behind you most likely.” David smiled then winked at Leselle, who was giggling again and looking Joel up and down.

“Hey, I think she digs me.” Joel whispered back to David.

“Need I mention that elves have supernatural hearing capabilities, and she just heard you?” David whispered back, nudging Joel.

“I am going with you. Please let me travel with you? It would be an honor. Besides, you need someone with experience such as yours to guide these other, less knowledgeable... humans.” Ulned whispered, his voice trailing off as he received a harsh look from Joel. He continued to plead as they all crept out into the hallway on Sarin’s lead.

Sarin remained quiet until they got to the underground passage, located in the large kitchen serving the main palace. It was hidden behind the cleaning closet, a hole tunneling downward into darkness. Sarin didn’t appear phased, but the others looked at each other and Leselle cringed, since it was well known that elves prefer to be outside during the lighter portion of the day and evening, locking up in Ulleren at night. Sarin turned and informed the group of their positions, for the tunnel was barely large enough for two to walk side by side. Sarin was in the lead, followed by Leselle, then Joel, and David picking up the rear. Ulned grabbed Sarin’s arm as he was about to leave, forcing the elf to address him at least with his eyes.

“Please consider my offer? I am captain of an army that may no longer have its king, and I cannot serve Emen. He does not have our welfare on his mind as he ascends the throne.” He

came in close and whispered in Sarin's ear. "You need me to help you with this group – and you know why – please?"

"We waste time. Fine, come but you'll need to leave whatever you have here."

"Already done - shall I go last?" Ulred's voice was giddy and his face beaming, until he saw David glare at him, causing him to look away.

"I thought you said you knew the way? You should go first, Captain." David whispered then snickered. Joel chuckled.

"Silence both of you. Ulred, take the lead, and I'll be last. Let's move."

The way was dark and slippery, with water leaking here and there, dropping on their heads as they ran along as fast as they could. Ulred had a torch, as well as Sarin, but within minutes both torches were out. Sarin whispered, "Illuminate," and with a wave of his hand over the smoking torch, it relit. David and Joel watched with amazement.

At one point, the tunnel got steep enough, they all slid down, one right after the other, and David had to keep from yelling out in glee at the sudden amusement park ride. He found himself playing along with Joel, trying to catch up to the dark mass of flailing arms and feet ahead of him.

Once the path leveled out, it got smaller, so that they crept along at a slower rate, Sarin becoming impatient as he followed David. They all remained silent as they traversed the dark, wet and cramped terrain.

"How long to the other side? For it is the width of Ulleren Mountain we traverse, is it not?" Sarin wiped a loose strand of hair out of his face as he spoke, having to bend down slightly for the tunnel was narrowing, barely clearing his height. Ulred had just finished tying Joel's hands with extra cloth he had on his tunic. The cloth wrapped around snugly on both wrists gave Joel much needed strength, but his dexterity was gone still. "That should help you out some, at least with lifting things and carrying your weapon. How does that feel?" He glanced at Joel and half smiled, spreading into a full smile as he watched the young human grin and stretch out his fingers.

"Thanks," Joel whispered. Ulred turned to speak with Sarin, but remained smiling. He had always been fascinated with humans, and now he was traveling with two! His smile disappeared as he looked upon Sarin's frown. "Not long Sarin, it shouldn't take long," he answered quietly.

“Then make haste.” Sarin hissed, getting annoyed. David glanced behind his shoulder at him and thought about what Emen had mentioned earlier. *He doesn't like company and prefers to travel alone, yet here we are, like a bunch of obnoxious kids on a field trip.* He smiled at the visual image.

They began walking again, slower now due to other obstacles in the way. Small stalactites came down in places, causing David and Joel to duck down, but not before David got hit by one. He stood in the dark and rubbed his forehead as they went on. Joel whispered back to him with Leselle in the background listening.

“How's your head? I'm sorry about that – I should have warned you.” He reached behind in the dark and accurately brushed a loose strand of hair out of David's eye. David stared at his dark outline and gawked.

“How in the hell did you know where that stupid rock was? And how could you see my hair, let alone my general location?!”

“I told you, Dave. I can see in the dark. I can see every detail. You have a really pissed off look on your face right now, and your eyes are really squinting.” He glanced at Sarin and the others, who were all staring at him, making him nervous.

“Well, then you should be able to duck when I hit you in the forehead too, right?” David fumed as he rubbed his own forehead again. Leselle laughed.

“Yeah, well, you're not mad, I can tell by the look on your face. And I already told you I was sorry—“

“So, you can see in the dark? Interesting...you can move up to Ulmed and help navigate, Joel, since it looks like we have several hours ahead of us, so we should move as fast as we can.” Sarin pushed David forward, trying not to listen to him rant and mumble under his breath.

Meanwhile, back above the tunnel in Ulleren, Emen and Leothan were waging war in the main courtroom. Emen had the upper hand, having partially frozen Leothan before the elf could throw out a protective shield. While Leothan was trying to thaw, Emen fought the twelve Elvin guards in the general vicinity. He was a skilled swordsman, and enjoyed close contact duels.

As soon as he could speak, Leothan called out the name. Emen, having just sliced through the midsection of the last guardsmen turned and threw a Disabling Curse with his eyes. The curse worked, for Leothan could not speak.

Emen started to walk toward the elf, furious and enraged. “Fight me with your sword! Die like a king should die! Instead you hide behind those who may not choose to protect someone such as yourself!”

Just then the two elves, not six feet apart from each other, simultaneously threw up their hands to block the intense lightning bolt erupting between them. As they both lowered their arms in unison, Azmodeus stood there, a look of smug contempt on his face, for this had been the third summoning spell today and he was still reeling over not finding his human prize at Fifth’s Cavern this evening. He had just finished giving his witch a severe verbal and physical lashing when the summoning spell was enacted. His sleeves were rolled up to reflect his mood.

He stood there between the two elves like a mediator, looking at Leothan, than Emen, smiling as he gazed upon the one creature in the entire Underworld besides David he wanted to see but couldn’t – until now. He was brilliantly dressed in black, his cloak flowing around him, his bright, crystal staff in his hand. Both elves were temporarily stunned by his presence.

“So, we meet again Emen. You’re just the elf I’ve been looking for. I believe you have something that is mine, do you not?” Azmodeus, standing six and a half feet tall, looked down upon the master elf with intrigue and slight suspicion, for he had already surveyed the fighting scene in the instant he was there, and could tell Leothan had become disabled.

“Uh, my Lord, yes, I do have him, both of them, for-for you. I-I was defending my ability to stay here this night from Leothan, who had ordered my exile because I would not give the humans to him,” as Emen spoke, Leothan’s eyes started to bulge out in his inability to speak. “I was going to finish him and take Ulleren for myself when he summoned you. I do apologize for the interruption—“

“I will be the one to determine whether or not this summons is an interruption, master elf. I am curious to know why you would have this Joel character knowing fully how I have wanted to find him, and now I find out you have the other human too? Interesting how you have stumbled upon that one as well, knowing already how I have worked for him. I’ve been worried for their safety, you see, yet you kept me waiting,” His voice was condescending as he looked away from the elf and scanned the room.

“I-I was going to bring them both to you in the morning, my Lord! I feared they would not make the travel at night, and I knew you had placed significant value on them both, however, you may rest assured that they are both here. My finest is watching over them in my dwelling

whilst I try to talk some sense into the king. He called you because he was losing, by the way.” Emen smiled wickedly at Leothan, then tried to get the Dark Lord to look at him again, but it wasn’t happening. He began to feel nervous.

“Yes, I can see that Emen. Let’s see what your counterpart has to say shall we?”

Azmodeus snapped his fingers together in front of Leothan’s face and the elf king blinked twice then panicked as he looked from Emen to Azmodeus, stammering.

“Speak.” Azmodeus looked straight ahead again, his eyes displaying his sudden frustration.

“My Lord,” Leothan bowed, almost touching the ground with both hands in worship.

“My gravest apologies, but I had wanted to call you earlier this night when I came upon the two humans in Emen’s dwelling! I banned Emen from Ulleren because he had brought them here, jeopardizing my kingdom and deceiving you by keeping them. He refused to let me contact you! I-I knew they were for you, I saw the marking on the dark haired one’s neck as he fought my guards—“

“He *fought* your guards?” Azmodeus, still not looking down at the Elf King, raised his voice in frustration. He rolled his eyes after hearing the last comment spoken.

“He lies, my Lord. It was he who chose not to summon you earlier. He was angry with me because he wanted all the glory for himself in presenting you with the humans, when it was I who braved the journey twice even, to get them and bring them both here safely, only minutes from the closing of the gates.”

“YOU lie! I cannot believe your greed, Emen! You come into my courtroom after I banned you and you defile everything here with your immense craving for power and greed! You use your power to overthrow your own King!” Beside himself with shock, Leothan could finally speak his mind. With hands shaking, he brought them in to hug himself, suddenly aware of his vulnerability among the two higher powers standing in front of him. He looked over at the Dark Lord, who finally sighed and turned to the door.

“Both of you are to accompany me to this dwelling where I will retrieve what is rightfully mine. As to your duel, I will allow it once I leave. If either one of you should start or even speak without being spoken to first, you will have to deal with me, for I have very little patience left tonight. You understand, don’t you?” Azmodeus spoke softly, gracefully and with just a touch of insincere sarcasm as he walked down the corridor, both elves accompanying him, a few safe

steps behind, silent with anticipation.

As they approached the door to Emen's dwelling, all three of them stopped. The door was left ajar, and it swayed back and forth to expose the room inside. Emen ran in and scanned the room, holding his breath as he saw Jackal's corpse lying on its back next to the fire, naked.

Azmodeus breezed in quickly, walking over to the dead elf. As he reached the corpse, the fire in the fireplace, which was at a low simmer, erupted in a massive blaze, lighting the entire room as the Dark Lord got closer. Emen was speechless as he stood there staring at Jackal's split throat. Leothan shook his head in disgust, trying to not speak his opinion, however feeling smug in his position now with the humans gone and Emen looking suddenly to blame. He breathed out a sigh of relief as he watched the Dark Lord not bother to stoop down, instead remaining standing, staring down at the corpse. He turned its head to one side with his black boot to inspect the throat slashing.

"He was killed by an elf - someone with expertise in weaponry. Who did you leave the humans with, Emen?"

"My partner, Sarin - I left them with him." Emen couldn't hide his shock and sudden overwhelming dismay. "I have traveled with him and fought beside him numerous times, his loyalty never faltered. I do not think he would have done this." He simmered in his anger and jealousy, speaking quietly. "Should we check the other rooms, my Lord? I can show you the rest of—"

"They are not here, you fool. I have already checked. Is the gate closed?" He turned to Leothan.

"Yes, my Lord, most definitely!"

"Who, besides you, can order it opened this time of night?"

"Uh, only Ulned, my Captain of the guards, but they still have to inform me first and that hasn't happened. Ulned, was here earlier, but—"

"Where is he now?" Azmodeus began to approach Leothan, making the Elvin King back step and stagger.

"My Lord, if I may speak? Ulned was here with Sarin while I went to talk with Leothan. They are close friends, having fought together a long time ago. I cannot believe he deceived me! I told him specifically to watch them, my Lord!" Emen pleaded as he watched Azmodeus stand between the two of them, thinking every possible angle.

“Would we know if the gates were opened?” Azmodeus turned to Leothan again.

“Of course my Lord, but I assure you, the gates have not been opened. The commotion that would ensue should that occur would have my attention for I have rigged it so.” Leothan bowed his head and waited for instruction. Emen gave him a look of disgust. *He can't even run his own kingdom under duress. He has no direction.*

“Then they are here, hiding with others. Who does Sarin know here?”

“He associates closely with only me, my Lord. And I know him better than anyone. He would not hide. That's not his style.” Emen burned in his anger. *I'll kill him*, he kept thinking over and over again. *I'll kill him twice for his betrayal!*

“Well, then there must be another way out. Leothan, do you know of this?”

“Why no, my Lord! I dare say if there was an alternate route, I would know—“

“Well obviously YOU DON'T!” The Dark Lord slammed his staff down onto the ground then caught and pointed it at Leothan, causing the master elf to flinch and look down. Emen chuckled as he watched.

“This is your kingdom, your castle, you fool! Surely you know its layout, its alternate routes?!”

“But I swear my Lord, there are no...routes.”

“Yes, well we'll see, won't we? I want blueprints of every room in the fortress NOW, or I'll just start systematically killing every elf I see! I'll spare all humans, for there should be only two. You have minutes to respond for my time is worth more than you can afford. I'll wait here.” Azmodeus walked over to the fireplace and leaned his back against it, his face without emotion, his mouth a thin line. He looked like he was not having a good day.

Leothan stood there temporarily stunned then started to stammer as Emen began to chuckle again. “Yes, my Lord. I will go work on it now. Shall I bring the layouts in here?” He started for the door, turning to glance at the Dark Lord for an answer and receiving nothing. He scurried out.

“So tell me about this Sarin character. I vaguely remember someone in my Council discussing him. I believe his reputation precedes him in every way. Master swordsman and warrior, ranger, surveyor and general survivalist - correct?” Azmodeus continued to stare straight ahead, his voice in perfect monotone.

“Yes, my Lord. Unfortunately he is all those things and more. He is known for his

ability to...to...umm..."

"What?! Speak!"

"Disappear. He is a master at disappearing. He knows the lands, my Lord. And he is popular among all classes. If he had wanted to, he would have had no problem hiding here. Any and probably all of the Idiot King's army would side with Sarin if he would challenge the throne. I fear Ulned went with him too. I saw the look on his face as he stood in front of Sarin. I have seen that look of pure worship twice this night." Emen sighed and kicked a pillow lying on the floor with his boot.

Azmodeus breathed out loudly, closing his eyes and feeling the frustration building in his throat. *This is everything I did not want to have happen. The longer he is exposed to this world, the stronger he gets and the more difficult he will be to capture. This is my fault, my mistake, my foolish lack of judgment in not taking him when he was first handed to me at the Cavern.*

He sighed, taking in all Emen was saying and more, for his mind never stopped working, thinking and over analyzing was his hobby, but when it came to this particular soul, he didn't want to have to work this hard to acquire him. *This wasn't supposed to happen! Our union was meant to be!* He'd felt it at the Cavern that night. He saw worship on the human's face – pure idol worship meant for him. In his frustration, Azmodeus slammed his staff on the ground again, causing the floor to crack and split in two across the full length of the room. Emen jumped and stepped backward a few paces as the room shook.

Turning to the elf again, the Dark Lord spoke. "What do you mean – twice in this night you witnessed worship? Explain."

"My Lord, I saw it with Ulned looking at Sarin, and earlier tonight, I saw the same look on Joel as he gazed upon David – pure worship. I should have known Sarin would interfere with my plans – my plans to bring them to you." Emen quickly explained himself as he noticed the Dark Lord glancing at him with a suspicious look on his face

Emen's voice became enraged again as he continued to talk about Sarin. "I just find it strange that he would take the two humans, Leselle and Ulned with him. He is a lone traveler - choosing to only travel with me when he feels so inclined. He prefers his own company, my Lord, yet he now has four with him?! I am completely—"

"Fooled – you are and were completely fooled by this elf you trusted. How did he interact with David?" The Dark Lord now looked over at Emen with interest.

“They acted like bickering brothers, my Lord, the both of them arguing back and forth. I thought Sarin despised him, but now I see their connection.”

“Yes, well this new addition to my kingdom has a powerful charm capability, and unfortunately, to my frustration, he knows how to use it already. It appears he has transformed someone you considered your most trusted partner to turn his back on you. Anything else about this human you’ve noticed?” He remained interested, still focusing his eyes on Emen, causing the master elf to feel nervous and self-conscious as he suddenly began to think about what words he would say to improve his position with the ruling Arch Devil while he tried to steady his voice. It was more than intimidating.

“I noticed quite a few things about him my Lord, reasons that made me realize why you had chosen him. He has charm, beyond question, and when he talks to you, he has a sharp, spiteful and stubborn wit, having offended Leathan twice in this dwelling earlier tonight. I had to apologize for his harsh words.”

Azmodeus smiled as he listened intently, then shook his head and sighed, thinking to himself again how much more difficult the human would be to catch the longer he delayed.

“Go on.” He looked over at the master elf again.

“His eyes turn black when he is enraged, although I did not sense as of yet a magical connection with that. He is fast and has the dexterity of a hundred elves, and his strength was noted tonight. He is spiteful my Lord - a young, hot tempered, stubborn and willful human in need of close control. He cares for only two things, himself and Joel.” Emen kicked another pillow and fumed as he stood there, hands on his waist, then began to pace the room.

“Three things...” Azmodeus whispered. “So, do you really wish to acquire Ulleren? I would think a master elf of your caliber and experience would be better served under me for instance, not as some figure head ruling over passive, afraid of the dark, elves. I can offer you an impressive prize for tracking this elf Sarin down? I can give you what you would never be able to achieve on your own. You have a minute to think it over. I will want both humans untouched of course. You will summon me when you find them, and as far as any of the others are concerned, you can challenge and do with them what you wish, or I can intercede. I can provide a lifetime of torture should you seek revenge.” Azmodeus turned to look across the room again, no longer maintaining eye contact with Emen. He found it tiring to focus his time, his words, and especially his eyes on creatures not worthy of his attention. So far no one fit the profile of

worthiness.

Emen didn't need to think about the offer, for he would have hunted down Sarin himself as soon as the dust had settled here. "I would be honored to serve you, my Lord. If I wish to acquire Ulleren after my retrieval of your slaves, could that be so?"

The Dark Lord laughed. "You don't need my blessing or my assistance in that matter, Emen."

Leothan ran in after that comment with several rolled up scrolls, out of breath and a look of fear on his face. "Where would you like these, my Lord?"

"On the table, of course, now who besides you knows this castle so well? For I assure you, there is another passage out and they are crawling through it like rats as we speak. I could easily smoke them out, IF I KNEW WHERE THEY WERE!" Azmodeus yelled as he pushed himself off the side of the fireplace and stormed over to the table in the corner of the room. Leothan side stepped, bowing as the Dark Lord approached him. He harshly grabbed at one of the rolled up scrolls, almost ripping it out of Leothan's hand. "This shouldn't take but all night," he whispered sarcastically as he looked through one scroll, then tossed it aside like trash and grabbed another. Leothan watched him scan the documents quickly in awe, until the Dark Lord stopped and looked up at the wall and sighed. "You have orders and time is ticking..."

Leothan snapped out of his stare and stammered again. "Yes, yes, of course my Lord. I will locate a few of my cabinet members this instant and return." He bowed and quickly left the room, glaring at Emen as the dark elf paced back and forth. Emen mouthed the word 'idiot' at Leothan as he walked by.

As soon as Leothan was gone, Emen casually walked over to the table and picked up a scroll, spreading it out. It was a rudimentary drawing of the central kitchen and food preparation area. He glanced at it, then tossed it aside and grabbed another. The Dark Lord spoke as he inspected the scroll he was holding. "What was that you just discarded?"

"The kitchen, my Lord, nothing spectacular there, quite straightforward really, for I cannot imagine a secret passageway through the kitchen of all places. The smell of food cooking would travel into the passageway and call every troll and orc in the valley to come in – no, I believe not."

The Collector paused and thought about Emen's comment, then turned back to his scroll and began inspecting it again.

A long, frustrating, uneventful hour passed by and he had nothing to gain from his search of the castle. He stepped out of Emen's dwelling at one point and walked around, scanning the general area and getting the full tour from Leothan himself. Word had spread of the escape, but no one could offer a hint at the location of the hidden passageway. Azmodeus felt at times as he walked the halls, that he was close, and the thought enraged him, his head pounding and his eyes burning as he looked through walls and searched entire homes in the confines of the fortress. It finally dawned on him what he should have done in the beginning. He sighed and frowned at his own stupidity, turning to Leothan as he spoke. "Tell your subjects that there is a large reward for information leading to the hidden location of the secret passage. If the location is found this night, the recipient will receive a handsome reward and a single wish granted by me. Spread the word and I will return to Emen's dwelling to wait. I do not sense anything in my tour that would lead me one way or the other." With that said, he turned and walked back with Emen.

Azmodeus thought about what he had offered to Emen earlier. His inner voice was warning him not to involve the dark master elf for obvious reasons. He knew Emen had no intentions of delivering the humans in the morning. His greed was evident and his plan was simple – to keep David around as his own personal treasure or protégé, and Joel was probably bait to keep the two in line. His deception and willful interference considering he knew how long the Dark Lord had worked to trick the human down, would earn him his death card – but not yet. *Let him think I trust him enough to find them, for it is Sarin he will lead me to, and I sense Emen is the only one who can locate this particular ghost elf. This Sarin does not know who he deals with.*

Within an hour, elves began wandering into Emen's dwelling, with Leothan alongside, to give their stories of a so-called hidden passageway no one else knew about. The Dark Lord sat at the end of the table and listened to the first elf tell his story about a passageway located in the grand courtroom off the side entrance. "There's an extra door there, my Lord – a door to the outside world I believe, and I am not alone in my observations. Others have seen it too." The elf was an older version of Leothan, a member of the king's personal cabinet. He was dressed to the nines in stately robes and jewels, and looked like he had made himself glamorous just to visit and converse with the Dark Lord. Azmodeus regarded him with a quick glance of suspicion, then turned away as he continued to sit at the table.

He finally spoke with contempt. "So, there's a mysterious door off the main courtroom?"

How convenient. Leothan, are you aware of such a door?" His voice was monotonous and bored.

"Why no, My Lord!" Leothan spoke, his face looking shocked.

"Of course you're not. Am I surprised? Fine, let's go take a look-see and possibly try to open this mysterious door?" Azmodeus got up quickly while the group of elves all stepped back and off to the side to let him pass. He strolled out and walked the entire way to the main courtroom unescorted, everyone behind him and following along. He spoke out loudly as he went. "You know, Leothan, it is a shame I already know the layout of your kingdom and I've been here two hours...shall I give you a tour?" He smirked to no one as he finally arrived at the main courtroom.

As if knowing already where to go, he strolled over to the left side of the courtroom and scanned the corner. He saw a door partially hidden by a small wall jutting out and over to compensate for the extra pillar needed to support the greater slant of the ceiling.

The door was tucked in the corner and stood at five feet tall. It didn't have a door handle, nothing to dress its surface. The Dark Lord held his hand out and along the edge of the door frame and could not feel a breeze. He brought his hand to the center of the door towards its top and laid it there flat, then pushed lightly, feeling the wood give a little. He pulled his hand back in a fist and punched a hole through the wood easily, taking it and ripping it down the entire length of the door. The elves waited behind him as he stood there and looked in. The room was the size of a regular closet, but completely empty. He stepped back and raised his staff and pointed it at the door frame; the heat the staff emitted disintegrated the wood, making it fall in piles of dust on the floor.

It took only a matter of minutes to inspect the closet for hidden portals or additional doors, and when he finally felt satisfied there wasn't anything to this closet but air, he stepped back out and began to ignite in frustration. So much time was being spent doing nothing while his prize was getting away. He tried to control his anger as he kept himself from completely obliterating everyone in the room. Instead, he focused on one to prove his point.

The elves all took steps back as they watched him come closer, his eyes a brilliant yellow. Leothan stood up front, but he quickly side stepped again to reveal the elf that had brought them there Celtin. The elf began to panic as he tried to think of something to say in his defense. The Dark Lord chose not to look upon him, nor speak to him or any others, but as he walked by he

casually pointed his staff at Celtin, not bothering to stop as he left the room, disintegrating him as he whispered, "Obliterate."

The elf became a small pile of ashes as everyone else jumped back. Leothan gasped as he called after the Dark Lord who was walking back to Emen's dwelling. Emen smiled wickedly down at the pile of dust and shook his head. "Tisk-tisk, you fool." He turned and walked after the Dark Lord, leaving everyone else there whispering, some speaking about not coming forward for fear of retribution should their ideas not hold true. *None of you have any vision.* Emen thought as he walked away.

Azmodeus stormed back into Emen's living room, walking by the low lying fireplace as it suddenly erupted in flames again. He looked over at the table scattered with scrolls and thought about how much time he was wasting. "He's getting away..." he hissed at the fire. He heard her call to him. He rolled his eyes and clinched his teeth. "Great, now the distractions start coming in."

He lifted his staff and positioned it in front of him. Within a second, a tiny six inch miniature Esmeralda shadow appeared standing on the large crystal orb, the size of a softball, looking up at him.

"My Lord, I am sorry for the interruption, but it is Drake, and he is demanding a discussion with you, for you still haven't—"

"I know! I know! I haven't allowed his precious, idiotic duel with Monstrous. That vagrant heathen tool just wants his precious Arch Devil title! Is he requesting entrance or is he already there sitting at my table?" He rubbed his forehead with his left hand, his crystal ring reflecting the fire and glowing.

Emen stood in the doorway and watched all this silently, holding his breath as he did so. Oh, how he wanted to look the part. *He is powerful and commanding even when he is frustrated and rubbing his head...how amazing.* He leaned against the doorframe and stared longingly. *I'll kill Sarin for taking David. That was for me. He wanted the human for a reason, as did I. I just hadn't had time to figure it out yet...*

"No, my Lord, of course I have not. No one is allowed entrance into Nine without your consent. I-I serve your wishes my Lord, please forgive me for tonight - have you found him?" Esmeralda paused for a second as he glared down at her, then started to cry and held a handkerchief to her eyes, her blood red sequined dress and matching elbow length gloves made

her look like a tiny porcelain china doll. Emen turned his head to the side slightly, dazed as he watched her beauty.

“Would I be here in Ulleren if I had him? NOOOO...I’d be in Nine again sitting in front of my own fire sipping on my wine! Instead I am here in a mountain box surrounded by elves who fear their own shadows! I can’t get through to anyone! Do you enjoy listening in on my discussion?” Azmodeus glanced from Esmeralda to the fire, his head half turned in Emen’s direction.

“No, no my Lord! I-this is my home and I didn’t know if you needed anything—“

“I need nothing you have to give unless it is a secret passageway. Do you have one of those handy?” Azmodeus spoke to the fire.

“No, unfortunately I don’t, my Lord. My apologies. Please continue and I will wait outside.” He bowed and left the room.

Azmodeus sighed and breathed out loudly. “Do you see now what I deal with here? Tell him entrance is denied and I will meet with him in an hour...or two. Damn him. I will inform you when I leave here.” In an instant, she was gone. He raised his staff and thumped his forehead with the crystal, his teeth clenched still as he closed his eyes and thought hard. Where were they? Did he or did he not check every part of the castle? Yes, he did. He looked through every room and home, his eyes scanning every closed door. This may not get resolved tonight, he worried. *The longer he is away from me...*

He pulled at his hair until it all came down around his shoulders and down his back. He stared down at his shadow near the opposite wall from the fireplace and watched himself look amazing, his profile strong and paternal. *Why would he run from me? I wouldn’t run from me. I would embrace me and everything I have to offer. He is ungrateful and undisciplined. He must know something about me I didn’t tell him...*

“Emen?! Enter, for I have questions of you while I wait for the next bumbling idiot to come through your door.” He turned and kicked Jackal’s corpse as he walked back over to the table, hurdling it into the fire to burn. “I cannot stand filth!” He yelled to the massive blood stain on the floor outlining Jackal’s once huge body. It was the perfect picture of a murder scene.

Emen ran back in and stood at the doorway.

“Enter and make yourself at home – do you like what I’ve done with the place?”

Azmodeus moved around in a circle, his arms outstretched to survey the corpse burning in the

fireplace, then pointing at the blood stain on the ground and then over at the table and the massive muddy footprints strewn across the living room floor. “It just screams ‘welcome home!’ Along the same domestic note, however not as pleasant, what have you told my future captive about me, for I am curious as to why he would scurry away from me like a frightened stray dog in an alley when not long ago I was considered by him as his ‘new best friend?’?”

Emen paused and thought about the potentially damaging question. He did tell David in a roundabout way that it was the Dark Lord who brought him here, but he would have come to that conclusion anyway, and he did, without Emen saying anything other than repeating what David already knew once he thought hard enough. He suddenly noticed Jackal’s body slowly getting dragged through the fireplace and the distant growling of dogs pulling on him, and a quick glimpse of three pairs of white eyes in the flames. “My Lord, I said nothing about you other than how powerful you were. The human came to his own conclusions about why he was stuck here. I just listened to him...cry as he realized he wouldn’t see his world again. He whispered something about being sorry to Dil – whoever that is.”

“Lie!” Azmodeus turned towards the elf and pointed his staff. Emen took a step back then shot across the room only to find himself slammed and forcefully pinned against the wall. “You have one more try Emen, or you’ll join that idiot elf out there who also chose to disappoint me, so try, try again,” his voice annoyed as he walked towards the elf slowly, his eyes sparkling with hatred as they reflected the now roaring fire. “Shall I call my hell hounds through the fire? I am sure they’d *love* to visit.”

Emen thought quickly for suddenly he didn’t feel quite so valuable. Still he thought, *I have something to offer him*. “My Lord, I and only I know Sarin well enough to follow him. He can disappear for ages, not surfacing from the depths he travels for months at a stretch. You need me to find him so that you can claim those souls and I need to find him for my own personal reasons—“

Azmodeus turned and pinned him to the wall securely this time, his hand outstretched as he began to choke the elf from across the room, pulling him up several feet off the floor and grinding his backside into the cement wall as he did so; his hand holding Emen’s throat at such an angle, the elf’s face was forced upward to look at the ceiling, rendering his eyes useless tools, like holding a venomous snake at the mouth, its fangs disarmed. “You still haven’t answered my question, Emen. I suggest you open up and seek my counsel for your transgressions against me,

or else suffer anyway. Your choice – you have ten seconds to respond either way, however do know I can detect a lie from this distance just as easily as I can smell flesh burning in the fire.”

Three hell hounds slowly crept out from the fireplace one by one, and stalked around the Dark Lord, awaiting his command. He lessened his choke hold on the dark elf to allow him to speak to the ceiling.

Emen began, however his speech was slightly garbled. “He asked why he was here and I told him. He then asked where his door was and I told him it was a portal created by someone powerful. At that point he realized it was you. He asked and I confirmed it so. He asked why you brought him down here and I told him that he had a purpose and it was...to be...with you.” Emen gasped and tried to breathe in after speaking so many words in one breath. Azmodeus thanked him silently by squeezing his throat tighter, squinting his yellow eyes and glaring at the master elf.

“So...you interfere in my affairs with the one soul I had devoted so much of my precious time to, making him fully aware of my plans to *collect* him?” He lessened his hold again for a brief second, allowing Emen to gasp and take in another precious gulp of air.

“I-I didn’t tell him anything he hadn’t already figured out on his own, my Lord! I only confirmed that he was brought here by you to be with you. At that point he went...into...shock.”

“I see. And at that point you made his transition so much easier and sweeter by bringing out his best friend to lessen the blow, making you look like his savior and me, his evil future captor? Brilliant Emen - I couldn’t have planned that one better myself. Now, what shall we do with you, for I have already lost my standing with my future slave, and when I do acquire him, I will have to dispel his already tainted view of me. He didn’t need to know I had planned and executed his capture so elaborately. Now he also knows how much stock I have placed in his descent here, making me look as though I am desperate to have him *here*. You’re uncovering my behind the scenes plan to David gives him the upper hand against me, makes him realize how important he is to ME. Tisk-tisk, what a shame...” The Dark Lord pounded his staff on the ground twice then lifted it, whispering three names in succession, while still holding Emen in suspension. Emen all the while tried to plead for his continued service to him.

“Israel,” the Dark Lord whispered; the crystal light reflecting the elf’s right leg. In a second, it was ripped off and dragged away by the hell hound called forth.

“Ezekiel,” he whispered; his crystal staff pointed to the left leg. Emen screamed out a

second time as another leg became transported across the room.

The third hell hound, the oldest and strongest of the three, sat at the Dark Lord's side and smiled as she waited her turn. She gazed up at her master and winked. "Syrianna," he whispered sweetly down at her, then turned and walked over to the table to sit and wait while pieces of Emen scattered across the floor.

Chapter Four

A New World

Joel saw the expanse of landscape up ahead, after what seemed like hours of running, his back hunched over in a tunnel. He knew he was close, for the tunnel began to widen ever so slightly over the last two miles, and he breathed out a sigh of relief as he saw the other side ahead of him. He reached out and called to Ulned, who was running along at a faster clip, and reached the elf just in time to grab the tail of his cloak as he flew out of the tunnel and fell over, staring straight down at the cliff he was balancing on.

Ulned threw his hands out in a panic as Joel kept him suspended, almost dropping him when David ran into his back. Bracing the rest of the group made Joel feel stretched too thin. “Hold on to me Dave and pull back!” He screamed, trying not to lose his hold on the elf, but feeling his hands begin to shake and give way.

The two of them together pulled Ulned back the three feet into the edge of the cave. Ulned whirled around and hugged Joel. Leselle and Sarin walked around them carefully to survey the area.

“You saved me! How did you know the edge was there? I couldn’t see anything! I ran out so fast, I thought I had more room to stop.” Ulned gasped for his breath as he finally turned and scanned the night scenery.

“I can see everything, but I almost couldn’t get to you in time. I guess it was a good thing you secured my wrists, huh?” Joel gushed as he held his hands out, beaming at the thought he saved one of his new group members. David rolled his eyes. He was still perturbed Joel could see in the dark.

They found themselves half-way down the other side of Ulleren Mountain, on a small cliff. The path down didn’t exist really, just heavy, large and jagged rocks all around blocking any chance for a quick retreat to the ground. Sarin sighed heavily as he quickly extinguished his light.

“We need to make haste, for we are not safe yet. I know where we need to go, but it will be hazardous to get down, so stay close and help each other. Joel, you have the lead, so I hope you are up for the challenge.” Sarin grabbed Joel by the arm and led him over to where they could start their descent. David stood back and watched in jealousy. Leselle watched David adoringly. *He looks so incredible when he frowns - a beautiful angry human, he is.*

It was all new to Joel, as he watched the deep black sky, the landscape a series of mountainous peaks and valleys, the far horizon, rolling hills. He couldn't believe the wide expanse of darkness, no sign of light anywhere; the sky without a moon or stars to guide anyone in their travels. It should have scared him, intimidated him at least slightly, but it did not. He saw it all brilliantly lit up with his skillful eyes, a gift from the Arch Angel Gabriel who had foreseen his destiny and possibly took pity upon his sacrifice for love. Love was a weakness for many up high. Joel was touched on his way down from his world and he knew it somehow.

"Thank you," he whispered to the sky as he climbed down easily, everyone following his lead. He felt stronger suddenly, more confident in his gait and ability to traverse the steep terrain, and he frequently looked over his shoulder and stopped to help the others down, at one point reaching his hand out to grab David's to guide him when he appeared to struggle, trying to decide to jump or reach over and slide down the side of a very steep, sharp rock.

David quickly pulled his hand away and glared at Joel. "I am not a charity case! I can get down by myself. Why don't you go help Leselle?" His voice was sarcastic and sharp as he scowled at his friend. They both looked over at Leselle, but she was flying down the mountain looking more graceful than ever.

"I'm fine, thanks guys!" Leselle squealed, light as air bouncing by them. Ulnd laughed out loud, while Sarin frowned again. Both David and Joel appeared stunned and slightly foolish as they stood there, mouths opened, watching her silhouette fly by them.

"We must remain quiet! We need to communicate with our hands and stay close. There shouldn't be any noise." Sarin whispered. "We are not gone yet. I feel there has been a change in the air. Something has just happened and I smell death. They will know of our escape soon. Let's make haste! Do you feel it Ulnd?"

"I do, just now. I smell fear...and tearing flesh. One of our kind has died mercilessly. Let's go." Ulnd quickened his pace as well, and the boys were left standing next to each other on a rock, watching the others fly down the mountain.

"Look, Dave, just swallow your pride long enough to allow me to help you down! I promise it won't change my perception of you." He pleaded as he jumped down onto the next rock gracefully and looked up at him, encouraging him to come along.

"Fine, sure why not? Guess I have nothing to gain and everything to lose, so let's just do this." He sighed and followed Joel's lead. It took several tries before he finally relented and

allowed Joel to hold onto him when it was needed. There were times during their descent down when it wasn't needed, and David had to fight the urge to push his touchy friend off, and probably down the side of the mountain.

By the time they were on the ground, David's jaw hurt from clenching his teeth to keep from lashing out at his guide. The touching was too foreign to him and he didn't like all the attention Joel was paying him. He still felt hands on various parts of his body as he began to run down the hill towards the others, once again having to follow Joel in the darkness. This wasn't going to be easy, but then again, nothing ever was for David. He received the cold shoulder from above and he knew it. *God never did like me, and now, He's made it so that my best friend has to lead me around like I'm some weak damsel in distress.* "Thanks," he whispered to the dark sky, to the God he knew wasn't listening.

"Your welcome, Dave, I hope you're not too mad at me." Joel whispered back, his voice sounding hesitant.

They all ran along a ravine until Sarin called a stop to collect and discuss a plan. He kept them all huddled together while he took off into the darkness to map out their location.

While Sarin was gone, the silence was deafening. No one spoke in the huddle, as if suddenly they all felt exposed and vulnerable without Sarin there. He was the veteran in the group, the warrior who could defend himself and countless others if he chose to do so. Leselle stood there in the huddle and worried about whether he would actually do that, for the Sarin she knew was only ever interested in himself and his own well-being. She thought she knew him well enough, since Emen was her male companion and Sarin only seemed to travel with Emen when he chose company, and she was always there. Why he suddenly decided to take a group of wary, innocent and naïve travelers with him blew her away, and she stood there looking around the group feeling more and more nervous, expecting him to never return. Had she made the right choice in leaving Emen? She didn't know for sure, and Sarin's solo past scared her. He would never pick a female companion! What was she thinking? She'd be the one who'd snag him? No, not by a long shot, she decided, as she went to play with her hair, stopping once she realized it was not easily reachable. She noticed Joel staring at her pointed ears. She pulled her cloak hood down farther to cover them.

"So, is it true? Can you elves hear really well?" Joel whispered to Leselle.

"Yes, it's true. Our ears and our eyes are stronger than humans' however, you prove me

wrong with your night vision.” She smiled up at him. He paused and glanced at David, who had quickly looked away, seeming suddenly disinterested in their conversation but feeling for the first time what it was like to be potential prey. *National Geographic never felt this real...I feel like one of a small pack of gazelle and I don't like my odds here – one in four chance of getting eaten? Not cool...*

Sarin showed up out of nowhere and startled them all, relieving Leselle and causing her to laugh nervously at her own doubts. “There is a cave not far from here. It is deserted and protected. We should sleep there and start again at dawn. I have covered our tracks, for the most part. Let’s go.”

Once they were in the cave, Sarin turned to Ulred. “We cannot have fire, or light of any sort, brighter than this.” He pulled out a tiny stick six inches long, and lit its end with a wave of his hand. He then turned to the others. “Everyone gather around and form a tight circle on the floor to hear me.”

Sarin spoke for quite some time, answering questions from David and Joel mainly, about the eight different planes, the portals to each, and the way the Underworld worked. He discussed their mission, where he needed to go, and how they could get there undetected. It was all very fascinating, even Ulred was speechless as he listened to Sarin talk about his favorite places to escape when he needed to hide out for awhile, thinking as Leselle did earlier – why would Sarin make public all his secrets to this hybrid group? It didn’t make sense.

“We need to get away for quite some time, I fear. Both humans are wanted by a powerful force, Ulred you have left your duty and service, which puts you out of Ulleren, and Leselle, you and I both know who we will have to avoid.” He looked around the circle as he spoke these words, and stopped as he saw David’s face in twisted frustration. “What is it? What weighs on your mind?”

David sighed and looked down. “I feel as though I’m jeopardizing the group by my presence here. This powerful force you speak of, tell me about him, for I only know what Emen has shaded from view, and when I met this person who I shall not name, he was obviously showing only what I wanted to see.”

Sarin put his little light in the center of the circle so that its green fluorescent glow lit everyone’s faces well enough to see more than shadow. As he did this, he noticed everyone looking at David, and David, looking at Sarin. “Well, he is the ruler of the Underworld, as many

would say. Some call him the Devil. Other names commonly heard and used are the Collector, the Dark Lord, the Dark One, the Ice King, and his name that summons him wherever you might be should you speak it out loud. I have never seen him in person, and most creatures here haven't either and lived to describe him. He chooses to surround himself with beautiful creatures," Sarin glanced back at David, and noticed the others still watching him. David gave Sarin a look of sullen acknowledgement.

"Go on, I need to hear this, for I have a brother in the Living World who might become the next addition to his collection if I don't find a way to protect him from my new perch down here." He whispered solemnly as he glanced up to the ceiling.

"Beautiful creatures are his fancy, so I've heard. He takes some pity on them, for I have met two such creatures he had spared because of their appearances, and one he spared and took with him in servitude. He is an Arch Devil, the highest one of six. The other five rule their portions of the Eighth and Seventh Planes under his guidance. He appoints the title of Arch Devil, which is the most powerful creature here."

Joel piped in, whispering to mainly David, "I guess Darwin would determine Arch Devils to be at the top of the food chain and our kind, endangered?" He watched David half smile.

"He selects them for recognition because of their accumulation of power and reputation, but if you ask me, he chooses who he likes and who he can control to those coveted positions. There is the Council – his Council – of Twelve which includes himself, the five other Arch Devils, and six other members that have met the requirements of power and reputation to be there."

"So it's fixed by him? How convenient," Joel scoffed in shocked amazement over the idea that Hell's politics could be rigged. It seemed too cliché even for him. David remained silent, trying to absorb this new image of Louis yet unable to let go of the man he met and warmed up to so easily.

"Right, it's fixed," Sarin was getting annoyed with Joel's animated presence but he continued anyway, focusing most of his words and attention on David. "It's not surprising that all the Arch Devils are loyal to him, would fight for him, and have cushioned him in this bubble he has created over the past several hundred years. He is therefore, the longest reigning Arch Devil to rule the Underworld - his rule being around eight hundred years or so, give or take a few. He is the oldest creature here, by far." Everyone breathed out in unison as they heard this

last piece of information. David sat stunned as he continued to watch Sarin speak so casually about a devil meant to capture not only him, but he feared his brother as well. *He didn't look eight centuries old...fucking hell was I fooled or what?* He nervously looked around expecting everyone to be laughing at him, but no one was paying attention. He braved a question. “So, why do they call him ‘The Collector’ for it sounds as if he doesn’t need to collect anything to be powerful? He’s at the top of the food chain, and already in control, like some kind of mob king. What the hell does he want with me?” His voice cracked as he tried not to scream out in frustration, thinking of Dillon for the first time since he fell to the floor at the first realization of his death. He felt nauseated again, grabbing his stomach and leaning over as he sat still, not wanting to hear but feeling his soul’s life and his brother’s, depended on his ability to figure out whether it was worth fighting this devil or simply giving in.

Sarin looked down again as he sat across from David and sighed. “I just told you, David. He likes pretty things. I’m sorry, but you fit that quota, and we’ll all tell you, there’s something about you that seems more than meets the eye. He obviously sees that too, and I’ve also already told you that he has a market on everything and everyone down here. He knows who his competition is at all times - that’s what keeps him on top of his game. I hate to say this, but if he fancies you, he’ll both own you and control you, or he’ll destroy you.” He paused suddenly as he saw David’s face contort in rage.

“I see, so I’m just some little bird out of its cage to him?” David hissed as his eyes turned black as coal again. “So, I’m supposed to be his slave now that he has me down here? Un-fucking-believable...”

“Welcome to the Underworld, David.” Sarin whispered back. “Do you *now* know who you’re dealing with? Do you *now* know what Emen was talking about when he said ‘everyone has a purpose down here?’ Any more questions?” Sarin suddenly found himself getting sucked into David’s black eyes along with everyone else there.

“Uh, why are his eyes black like that, Sarin? He is only human, right?” Ulred whispered, although his voice was curiously scared.

“That’s why he’s being hunted, I think,” Sarin glanced away from David. “He is more than he looks—“

“So, another question? If he orchestrated my whole seduction down here, and I can only assume he used or paid Emen to be my new best friend,” he glanced at Leselle and got the

answer he needed, for she bowed her head to hide her sadness. “Right, so, since he set all this up to take me when I dreamt next, why wasn’t he there while I was hiding in the forest and you all showed up instead?”

“I think your portal miscalculated your arrival. Emen mentioned something about the last time you visited Fifth’s, you were supposed to enter in the Cavern, like other times, but instead you entered in the forest nearby, remember?” Sarin paused to watch David nod his head in acknowledgement again before continuing. “So, Emen was there to take you to the Cavern for the Dark Lord as instructed, for he told me about that. I don’t think the Dark Lord’s witch fixed the problem, sorry for her I’m sure, although she is very pretty – probably spared. Anyway, you came not to the Cavern, but to the same place you came to before, and lucky for you, we were there to take you away before he could realize his witch’s mistake. Emen was one step ahead of the Ice King. You, in theory, owe Emen more than you know for being there in his greed to take you away.” Everyone started to whisper and talk when David spoke up again.

“So what the hell did Emen want with me if he was serving the Dark Lord? He would be an idiot to try to deceive this powerful one you speak of. Why? Why would he risk everything for me?”

“He wanted you for personal reasons, I think—“

David held his hand up in a stop gesture and shook his head. “Please don’t describe ‘personal reasons’ right now. I don’t think I could stomach it.”

“Well, he was fairly charmed by you - I could tell - and Emen doesn’t charm easily or at all for that matter. I considered him impervious to charm spell.” Sarin looked over at Leselle, who looked suddenly distressed and uncomfortable.

David laughed softly. “So, you’re saying he had some sort of *crush* on me?! Did I charm him then, because you said something about a charm spell?” He looked over at Joel, who looked back at him and smiled weakly. He suddenly realized what it meant. He had it in the Living World too, he just didn’t realize it. He could get whatever he wanted that way. “Great, so I can persuade others to do things for me, to take risks for me, and to even die for me?”

“Yes, I believe you can, and that’s a strong character trait. He obviously is drawn to you for those reasons as well.”

“And you, what about you? Why are you taking all of us with you?” David spoke for the group, for everyone looked over at Sarin and waited, catching the gifted master elf off guard.

“Look – the Dark Lord’s tortured, killed and at times annihilated several close friends of mine, so I have an interest in helping you escape his clutches. I guess I have a death wish when it comes to foiling his plans and if I can show you how to survive down here, then you’ll be better off, and I’ll feel like I’ve done something good for a change. I feel I need to do that for some...strange reason – okay quit looking at me all of you! I’m not *charmed* if that’s what you’re all thinking!” Sarin raised his voice as he got up and walked over to his pile of things, pulling out a flask and taking a long swig of something unknown.

Everyone else sat quietly and watched him drink. David played with his fingers, snapping them together and fidgeting, something he occasionally did when he was nervous, usually it was his cigarette lighter he flicked on and off but now fingers would have to do. And now he craved a cigarette strongly.

Thinking about his anarchy lighter, he enjoyed watching the flame pop up and disappear at his command. He’d pretend it was magic when he was bored. He smiled suddenly at the memory, raising his dominant left hand up and simulating a flicking of his index finger and his thumb. A loud simultaneous gasp occurred as Leselle, Ulred and Joel all watched David’s stunned face lit by a tiny flame of fire coming out the tip of his index finger. He held his breath as he watched it gently sway with the combined breathing of the other three witnesses. Sarin casually glanced over then almost dropped his flask, catching it in mid air and running back over.

“What...? How did you? Why are you not burning?” He began, but stopped as he continued to watch the flame.

“I don’t know. It just happened. I was craving my cigarette—“

“Cigarette? What’s that?” Leselle asked the group.

“You have many hidden talents, David. Tell me, did you notice any of these changes before you knew of the Dark Lord, or afterward, while you were above?”

“Uh, I guess I always felt different, since I could remember. I do admit now that I think about it, I did get stronger after I met him, a lot stronger actually...”

“That’s right, Dave! Remember your eyes at school? And the fighting? You were amazing then, and it has obviously followed you down here.” Joel breathed out in an excited whisper. “Now you have become some kind of highly evolved superhuman, or something! Darwin would be so proud of you!”

David smiled as he looked over at Joel, watching the idol worship emanate from him.

Sarin squatted down and checked out David's hand, his face serious. The group silenced themselves, everyone waiting on Sarin to speak. He sat back on his butt and let go of David's hand, staring at him as if for the first time, scrutinizing every inch of his face up close.

"You are...he will be...looking for you I fear, until...until he finds you." Sarin whispered, his face showing the first sign of worry David had yet seen. "He has invested more than time in you, I fear. Although I feel some of these skills of yours are yours alone, the fire – that is a sign of power and demonic influence. He must either see that in you or wish to control your growth under his watchful eye, molding you the way he wants you to be, because that is not a gift he could give you. Or else..."

"So because I wield a flame and don't burn that means I'm demonic?" David blew out his little flame, shook his hand and stared at Sarin, his fear creeping up his spine as he watched it spread on Sarin's face as well.

"Remember Dave? Remember your dark soul and our conversation at school?" Joel nudged him and smiled in the magical glow of the light stick.

"You are impervious to fire - a fire dweller. That is one of the signs of higher power, diabolism, sorcery, and darker influences. You have no idea what you've just discovered." Sarin looked down and sighed, shaking his head in confusion.

"I think I have an idea now...and I know now why he was looking at me that way in the Cavern across the table. He was looking at me as if I were already his new apprentice. But I can't imagine he'd want to share his kingdom, for it sounds like he enjoys being on top and everyone else at his feet." David stirred in his seat, making eye contact with everyone individually.

"Or he might have something else in mind..." Joel's voice drifted off as he looked down, the sound of worry resounding off the cave walls.

As if expecting the Dark Lord to appear at any second, Sarin suddenly got up, grabbed his things, and ordered them all to stay there while he ran out of the cave in a flash, leaving them all sitting there waiting.

David flicked his index finger with his thumb again and smiled as he watched the flame flicker and dance, not expecting it to happen a second time, so he breathed out in relief. He leaned in and blew on it slightly, and watched, along with everyone else, as the flame grew and grew and extended outward in a jet of fire. He stopped blowing and it returned to its tiny flame

on the tip of his finger. As he watched it in silence, he thought of all the things he could do with it. *Would it work if I put my finger in my mouth and blew out?* He tried it, and sure enough, fire shot out his mouth, causing everyone to duck and Leselle scream out as they all shot backwards in their seats.

He stopped and took his finger out of his mouth, shaking his hand, but the flame wouldn't extinguish. He became irritated and spoke quietly, but sternly. "Out," he whispered.

The flame, which had spread to all his fingers, engulfing his entire hand, disappeared; only smoke rising off his hand remained, but his skin stayed intact. Joel gasped as he reached out and touched David's hand, quickly pulling back and letting go.

"Ouch! That's hot," he whispered, trying not to sound obvious. It didn't work though, and he felt his ears turn red with embarrassment.

David didn't notice, for he was in his own world. He stood up and raised his left arm out in front of him, hand opened, fingers all pointed out, and whispered, "Flame...fire...out." Nothing happened. He thought hard about fire, then commanded it in his mind, and waited, concentrating on its appearance, for the cave was almost pitch dark. "Everyone, back up or get behind me...Sarin, if you're there, back away." He focused again on the flame, felt heat transfer and travel down his arm from his face, his mouth specifically, as he breathed in the cold night air, he could feel the air transform as it traveled down and out his arm, hot energy shooting through his fingertips and jolting him backward a step as a streaking flame shot out the palm and fingertips of his left hand. It traveled ten feet at first, then down to four feet, then three, two, and finally, one foot out. He smiled wickedly, his face lit by the flames' brilliant light and heat source, knowing he could control it easily. The others came over and warmed their hands near the flame. David quickly extinguished it as he saw Sarin approach from nowhere.

"What do you think you're DOING?!" He grabbed David's arm and pulled him close, so that their faces were inches away, then pushed him back again. "Do you want to draw every creature, including Him, here? Do you not realize lighting a fire in a cave is almost as stupid when you're hiding out as, say lighting a fire out in the open?!" He turned and walked a few paces, his hands across his chest, and sighed, shaking his head. It worked; David stood there without words – a first for him – and felt incredibly stupid.

After what seemed like a lifetime of silence, Sarin turned around and addressed the group. "There is much activity right now on the plains, a war I think, although it appears to be

smaller in scale than most. Although I hate to have to mention this idea, it could actually work if we stick together. I think we should mix with the battle going on - blend in if you will - so that we will be difficult to spot if he were to tour the area—“

“Can he do that, Sarin? I mean, why not just stay here tonight and travel at first light? Chances are, he'll return to Ninth and refuel before coming back out to search—“

“Ulred, I know him. I know how he hunts, and I saw it, I saw his horse fly above my head towards Ulleren. He plans on scouring the area. He will be able to sense the human if he is in a small group, plus he can see through walls, shrub and caves. Our chances are greater for deception if we are amongst a larger group of creatures – a mixture of smells if you will. He will not be able to smell him with all that death and destruction going on, and he wouldn't even think we were involved in that battle to begin with, but we must leave now and make great haste. I will protect Leselle. Ulred, you cover Joel, although with that invisibility cloak he should be fine, and David, well, you're on your own.” Sarin started to walk to the entrance of the cave, then turned back to look at them all, everyone gathering their things except David and Ulred. “He will not be one to go home, not after you've escaped and he's been waiting for you. I suggest we hurry. Follow me because with all the fire and destruction out there right now, it is shadow time come early.” He smiled slyly as he sprang forward and down the side of the cliff. The others quickly followed.

Chapter Five

Wasting Time

He sat at the head of the table and drummed his fingers on the edge of the chair arm, wasting time as he waited for something to happen. He was angry sitting there listening to his hounds crunch their nightly meal. It seemed lately he'd given them a nightly meal every night, spoiling them in his frustrated rage at events not going his way. He sat there and sensed someone was talking about him, felt his name almost spoken aloud, so he sat up, staring at the table and concentrating. Nothing came to him. He slammed his fist on the table and it shuddered under his anger. Syrianna glanced up at him, for she laid herself near his chair to eat her portion - the heart of course. She was picky in her eating. Only the most important muscle would do for her appetite.

Azmodeus glanced at the scrolls on the table and noticed one scroll cast aside and resting against the back of a chair. He remembered Emen taking one earlier and brushing it off. "I'll kill him again if this scroll is the key." He opened his hand and it shot across the table to him. He flicked his wrist and it opened up, displaying a large kitchen and storage area. He glanced over it quickly, then paused, focusing in on a small closet off to the side, away from everything else. He rolled his eyes and shot his chair out from under him. As he marched out of the room he harshly pointed at the fire and snapped his fingers. All three hounds looked up and noticed. Israel whimpered to stay longer. Syrianna growled at her brother in response.

He came upon Leothan in the grand hallway, with his followers around him whispering. They all looked over at the Dark Lord as he approached, each of their faces showing fear, as if they were all, including Leothan, trying to muster up the energy and courage to go back into the room one more time. He smiled apathetically as he went past them, all of them cowering behind Leothan. "Emen is no longer a threat to you Leothan. I have taken care of that." He paused as he walked by, not bothering to look upon the Elvin King. "You will owe me for your pestilent removal, however for now you will accompany me to the kitchen. Also, open the gates, for I may need to leave that way." He started to walk towards the kitchen, Leothan running along beside him after sending a messenger to the gates.

"My Lord? What if we allow others in by opening the gates?" He pleaded as he ran along, trying to keep up with a tall Arch Devil almost double his size.

"You fool - have you forgotten I am still here?" He gave the elf a disgusted look as he

quickly marched into the kitchen and walked over to the closet. Opening it, he glanced around the room as he walked in. He shot the rug off to the side with a quick movement of his hand and causally walked over to the door in the floor and paused, then kicked it down in one movement, knocking the entire trap door through to the ground below. He pointed his crystal staff down and lit the tunnel from above.

He saw their tracks easily along the tunnel's path. He jumped down and looked along the tunnel, not bothering to use his crystal staff to light the way, only to come back up in a few seconds, turning to Leothan. "Two things – first - I will use the gates for my departure and lastly, you might want to close off this tunnel, for it is a gaping hole waiting to be occupied." He turned and summoned Esmeralda's shadow on his crystal ball again.

"Yes, my Lord?" She bowed and waited.

"Send Leviathan - and is he still there, waiting to annoy me?" He paused as he waited her response.

"Unfortunately, he is, my Lord."

Azmodeus dismissed his witch quickly and walked to the gates with Leothan trying to keep up with his much quicker, elongated gait. "Tell me about this Sarin character, for I have heard of him, heard glamorous stories of bravery and inspiring swordsmanship from several travelers, but I am never wrong when I say they are not usually correct. Overzealous story-telling always seems to be the case with these mysterious rangers I hear about."

"Yes, well my Lord, I dare say he is the best warrior I have ever known," Leothan quickly corrected himself when he caught the disapproving glance. "Although the stories told about him are many, and frequently exaggerated, I'm sure."

"Yes, I'm sure that's true, for as I said before, I am never surprised anymore. The caliber of creatures in my kingdom has dropped significantly, so much so, I'd actually entertained and revisited the idea of wiping the slate clean and starting over - my own recreation of Genesis." He laughed softly as he spited God. "Well, they shouldn't have gotten far. I'll be able to spot the human easily, for I already know his smell, his scent still fresh in my mind from last we met. His adoration strongly sweet," he smiled wickedly as he allowed his excitement to turn to anger as he walked along, Leothan intently listening to every word, enchanted and fearful at the same time. "I haven't hunted anyone personally in centuries, so I hope this human realizes the honor I have bestowed upon his wanted soul. He will experience my own personal version of hell for evading

my capture, and the others will suffer an eternity of pain for helping him. I might just put each and every one of them naked in clear little glass boxes lined with sharp cutlery of various sorts. I'll have the boxes rotating ever so slowly, so that they can feel the blades pierce their skin repeatedly. He can watch them on the floor near my feet, chained and tied like a little dog..."

He approached the gates as they were opening, allowing his dark horse Leviathan to enter in all his stately grace. The completely black horse was one of only a few remaining; one of two the Dark Lord owned, with large, massive wings, deep red magical eyes, and a long mane and tail. He was a fast creature indeed, an evil version of Pegasus. The horse raised his head and nodded at him as he approached.

Azmodeus turned to Leathan as he casually pointed his staff to disintegrate a band of ten orcs running in, all of them turning to quickly back out as they saw him standing there. They weren't fast enough however, for the blue electricity from the Dark Lord's staff engulfed them, and several other Trolls standing nearby. He paused as he finished the clearing of the gates, then turned to Leathan and spoke.

"Should they be stupid enough to return here in the future, I would hope for your sake and the safety of your subjects, you will know to secretly summon me immediately while you persuade them to stay here? I will call upon your services in the future to repay me for Emen's passing, rest assured, for I never forget favors." He pointed a finger at a bowing Leathan while he spoke, then gracefully leaped on his horse, causing it to balance on its back legs, like he was an evil Zorro. Turning and flying out in a blue haze of light, he was gone. Leathan almost collapsed from fear and intimidation.

Azmodeus guided his horse up and around the mountain, realizing the tunnel probably went straight through it. He yelled down to Leviathan as they flew off, "Find an odd group of young travelers, three elves and two male humans. I am looking for a dark-haired beauty with a defiant face. He will be easy to find, for he is the only human soul to ever catch my discerning eye."

They ran to the battlefield, Sarin first, followed closely by David, Joel, Leselle and Ulred a few paces behind. "Spread out somewhat, so as not to create a group or cluster, and remember how you will look from the sky!" Sarin yelled out behind his shoulder as he drew his sword and sliced through the mid section of an orc raising his sickle.

David followed closely behind, pulling out Jackal's sword just in time to deflect another sword by a half-human, half elf, with menacing white eyes and a wicked mouthy grin packed too full with sharp, jagged yellow and black teeth. He quickly kicked the creature in the left shin as they both steadied swords in mid air, the creature bearing down on David from several inches above. The kick caused the creature to hobble, allowing David to push him backward a few paces with his sword. He had a second to perform it, and he trembled in excitement as he shot his left hand out and breathed in a massive amount of cold air. A blast of fire hit the creature in the face as he ran towards David again, the flame knocking him backward one last time. David walked over and shoved his sword into the creature's chest quickly. Feeling a rush of power, all fear leaving him now, he turning around to find Joel, but the invisibility cloak was working, for Joel was nowhere to be found.

David ran forward a few steps, looking around at the sky and the scenery come in and out of perception; light from various torches and magical spells would momentarily catch those fighting briefly, then the darkness would return like a black curtain, temporarily blinding him as he tried to position himself to be within eye sight of the others.

"Joel!" He whispered as loudly as he dared. Deflecting a sword by a passing monster and engaging it in a duel, finding himself barely able to move out of the way of his own sword, yet, keeping the creature at bay.

David's strength was another issue all together, for if he hadn't been given that gift, he wouldn't have been able to lift Jackel's sword, or be able to handle it at all. As he struggled to fight for the first time in his life with a sword, he also noticed something else too. The reptilian creatures around him seemed stunned to the point of hesitating when he was near them. It didn't take long for him to capitalize on this newly found observation.

Trying to contain the seven foot tall creature by dodging and running around him, David quickly adapted to the fight, engaging this reptilian monster, only to have another join in. His speed and dexterity allowed a duo of duels, David smiling the entire time, giddy with excitement as he ducked, performed a back flip and landed behind the two creatures, catching them both off guard long enough to decapitate one, and block the other's sword in mid air. He pushed the remaining creature back with his sword, feeling his energy course through him again. He lunged at it again, engaging in swordplay long enough to knock it to the ground, pounding with his sword against the dying beast's sword until he finally got through.

He stood up and scanned the fighting scene again, catching Sarin fighting a larger than life troll carrying a large spiked ball and chain. Every time the creature threw his weapon around, several creatures fell across the plains as a result of the impact. It looked like a small group of green toy army men flying around, David thought as he watched the human-like creatures fly through the air with each swing of the troll's spiked metal ball and chain, blinking twice to make sure he was truly seeing it.

Sarin was dodging the massive weapon effortlessly, and the troll was yelling out in frustration, for each dodge by Sarin quickly resulted in a slash across its ankles and shins, until finally, it staggered, blood pouring down its legs, and fell forward to its knees. Sarin wasted no time in shoving his sword through its throat, pulling it out and turning at the same time, dodging out of its way as it took a face plant into the ground.

He caught David off guard by quickly pulling out his bow and arrow and shooting it with confidence and without hesitation right by David's ear, causing him to duck and turn, only to watch an orc fall to the ground behind to him, an arrow through its left eye.

David stepped back and felt a tug on his shoulder. Turning around wielding his sword, he saw Joel's face poke out from under the invisibility cloak. He looked like he was the Chasseur Cat from Alice and Wonderland and he laughed at the sight.

"You're fighting great Dave! Keep it up! Watch out!" Joel stepped back as David, his back to the orc, sidestepped and reached around without looking and grabbed the spear, dodging its point and breaking it in two, taking the sharp end and jabbing it up into the orc's throat; its end shooting out its skull in one quick, strong movement.

Joel gasped as he watched how fast David moved, his aggressive fighting style almost too harsh to watch. Sarin came running over at that moment and scanned the area, glancing up at the sky but not seeing anything overhead. The war was medium on a grand scale, orcs, goblins, and trolls fighting a mismatched band of humans, elves, and creatures unrecognized for their various deformities. All in all, there were about four hundred forces there, the orcs and trolls far out numbering the human brigade. What bothered Sarin most were the few Nagul Orcs he could see on the battlefield, for the Nagul worked for Lord Drake, and Sarin knew him well enough to hate him. He was grateful that there were few of them invested in this battle and his battle with their Captain was intercepted by the troll he just killed. He knew he needed to get them out of there as soon as possible.

The plains were rolling hills, grassy and without trees to hide behind. Leselle and Ulred were not to be found as both David and Sarin looked at each other and spoke simultaneously. “Have you seen the others?” They both paused long enough that Joel answered for them. “No, I haven’t, have you?”

Sarin grabbed David by the shoulder and pulled him close. “We have to leave. The Nagul are here!”

“The what?” David couldn’t hear him.

“The Nagul! They are invested in this fight so we must leave!”

David still couldn’t hear but it didn’t matter. Sarin turned both David and Joel around so that they could see what was coming their way.

“Run!”

Joel saw a brief glimpse of what was chasing them. Two trolls had both picked up the human scent and were barreling towards them, one with a spiked ball and chain, the other with a long spear and sword; the two of them running alongside each other made the ground shake. Some of the orcs and humans engaged in battle quickly separated so that the trolls could barrel through.

David could keep up with Sarin easily, but Joel was quickly left behind, and although invisible, as the trolls ran by him, he tried to stand still and take up as little space as possible in the open field, however, one of the trolls stopped and turned around, sniffing the air and looking for what he couldn’t see. The rest of the war continued around them.

Joel froze as he stood there and looked up at the troll standing not ten feet away from him. The beast with its wide set, largely disproportionate eyes, tiny, downsized slits serving as nostrils, and extra wide mouth, bald head and scantily clad body was an intimidating sight for Joel to take in all at once. It smelled like a sewage treatment plant and he almost fell backwards as the beast took a step towards him, the wind catching its smell just right.

This can’t be happening! Not possible! This morning I was in bed in the dorms thinking about what David and I were going to do today to stay out of trouble, and now I’m looking up at a nasty, shitty-smelling purple people eater! It’s only a dream - so wake the fuck up Joel!

He looked up just in time to duck down as the troll lunged forward and bent down with its upper body, once towering several feet from above. It came in way too close for Joel’s comfort and smelled the air above his head. Joel fell on his back as the creature loomed in close;

the sudden appearance of the troll's massive size from the ground looking upward had allowed him to underestimate it. As he scrambled backward trying to get up on his feet, he saw it.

With his night vision, Joel was able to see the black horse and its rider in the sky, several feet above them, but coming in close enough, Joel could easily throw a rock and hit him from where he stood. The rider, although wearing a black cloak pulled up over his head, his light blonde hair blew in the wind behind him as he turned the horse in circles above Joel's head, at one point, appearing to look right at him.

Joel suddenly lost sight of the horse rider, for the troll stood above him and lowered its head quickly, so that it replaced the night sky, balancing itself about a foot above Joel's face, sniffing in deeply.

He could see up the creature's nostrils to the back of its empty head. *Move Joel! Move or else say good bye to everything and the only one you've ever cared about!*

In a flash, the sword the troll was carrying came down from above, and Joel caught a glimpse of its blade in the darkness, allowing him to roll to the side, just in time to look over to see the blade sticking out of the ground next to his ear.

The troll yelled out in frustration for his sword was stuck firmly and deeply in the ground. He raised his spear and arched his back to stab the human he couldn't see but who smelled so sweet, when someone poked at his eyes from behind. He yelled and threw his hand up to grab at it on his back, but the human was too quick, dodging his clumsy arm swat in one motion, while bringing his sword around and slicing the troll across the front of its neck, spilling its blood as he allowed his sword to slide down its body like a pair of opened scissors. David landed next to Joel, helping him up and pushing him out of the way as the troll fell forward in his place.

Quickly running over to wipe his sword on the troll's dirty, ripped up vest, he turned and smiled in triumph over at Joel. "Come on! We've found the others! Follow me!" He ran over to Joel and grabbed at his arm to pull him along.

"Dave, I saw him! He's above our heads as we speak! Here!" Before David could reply or realize what was happening, Joel grabbed his cloak and threw it over his friend.

David saw an orc running to Joel from behind at that moment, and pushed him to the side just in time to throw up his sword to block the sharp edge from slicing his face in two halves. The orc looked stunned, expecting to hit the back of Joel's head instead of an invisible person's

sword. Dazed, it struggled to keep its sword down against David's strength, not paying attention as David reached down quickly, still holding up his sword against the orc's with his left hand, while grabbing his dagger out of his thigh strap and stabbing the orc in the stomach, piercing the blade in so strongly, most of his arm went through its body and out its back. The orc gasped, then fell into David, who quickly pushed the creature off to the side. He panicked as he glanced above, feeling suddenly overexposed, expecting the horse and Louis to be there, but he saw nothing but dark sky, occasionally lit by fire and torches being waved and thrown here and there. Turning in a full circle, scanning the scenery and watching the fighting begin to die down, he finally saw Joel standing near Ulned, who was fighting two orcs and winning, while protecting Joel at the same time. He quickly ran over and grabbed at Joel's arm to pull him away.

"Do you see him, Joel?" David whispered as he leaned in, startling and causing his friend to jump backward.

"No, I think he's gone. I saw something in the sky a few minutes ago, but it hasn't returned. I've been checking diligently - trust me." Suddenly losing sight of David, Joel turned and started to run alongside Ulned, finding himself also looking around anxiously for the horse rider and David. "Where the hell are you?! I hate not being able to see you!"

"I'm right next to you, moron. Where'd you think I'd be, riding on your shoulders?" David laughed as they ran along, causing Joel to smile. Oh, how he enjoyed hearing that laugh. That's why I'm here, he thought. *That laugh is so contagious! What is it with him? This is my destiny, being here.*

"Joel? Hello?" Ulned tugged on Joel's sleeve as he caught up to him, the only one who had kept running while the others had stopped.

In his embarrassment, Joel couldn't make eye contact with the group as he jogged back over with Ulned nearby, trying to look like he was just getting some exercise. He bounced up and down a few times for show.

"Great, we're all here. We needed to leave because I never signed up to fight Nagul—"

"You mentioned them earlier but I didn't hear—"

"They are elite orcs and very skilled fighters. Luckily for us, there weren't that many of them in that battle - mostly just regular orcs—"

"There's a hierarchy among those things back there? How insanely funny..." Joel quieted up when he didn't get any response from anyone in the group and he couldn't see David to feel

he was even listening to him.

“We need to leave because right now, with the Nagul’s strong sense of smell and the Dark Lord still out there, we will need to also split up. He is still looking, I fear, and we are a huge beacon at the moment, even with David invisible. Besides,” Sarin glanced at David, who had taken the cloak off his head to expose his face to the group, “I think there’s a good possibility he can see through the invisibility cloak.”

“Great! Just great! Should I give myself up now or wait until all of Hell’s fire consumes me in the end, which, according to my calculations, should be in about ten minutes?” David pulled the cloak up and over his head again, disappearing like a vision.

Joel blinked twice then stared, trying to picture where David’s face was and finding himself quickly getting frustrated again. “Well, if we’re separating, David and I are staying together, because we were separated once before and I died because of it, so...bad idea to let that ever happen again.” Joel stood tall, his hands on his hips as he addressed the group, trying not to glance over to his left, where he knew David was most likely staring at him, mouth opened and a look of probable disgust on his face. He glanced quickly over anyway, then looked down at his feet. Sarin broke the silence.

“No, not possible - that will not work. This is the plan. David and Leselle will go with me, and Joel, you will go with Ulned. We’ll meet up in a day or two to regroup - sound good, everyone? Yes? Good, now Ulned, do you—“

“No! That won’t work! I’m not leaving him! You don’t get it Sarin. I-am-staying-with-HIM.” Joel pointed at David then reached out to where he thought his friend was and grabbed his arm, pulling it towards him, looking at where David should be, his face pleading for his friend’s verbal agreement.

“He’s right, Joel. Look we’ll regroup soon—“

“That’s bullshit Dave! Total bullshit! No! I won’t watch you leave again! Damn you!” Pushing him away first, Joel turned his back to David and breathed in deeply, trying not to scream, his chest hurting more intensely with each breath he took. He began walking away, then running, until he got to the edge of Ulleren Mountain, and began to climb, not wanting to look back.

It didn’t take long and David was beside him, trying to remain quiet as he crept along, watching Joel’s shadow getting further ahead. He could hear him mumbling, and he smiled

thinking about how Joel was giving his location away to everyone there.

“Fine! He thinks he can just leave me and go off on his own – we’ll see if he doesn’t miss me around to make him laugh, asshole. Damn it! I’m in Hell and I have blue hair and my hands are almost completely worthless! Talk about your bad combos!” He threw his hands up and shook his head, still in shock over the fighting scene with the troll. His body wouldn’t stop trembling. Hearing a popping noise, he stopped to turn around, sighing. “Why hello Dave - nice of you to join the field trip,” he glared at David’s visible head, leaning against a rock and smiling sheepishly, a smug look on his face. *Damn him! I can’t even be mad at the asshole.*

“So, I’m an asshole, huh? Interesting.” David pushed himself off the rock and walked over slowly to where Joel was, throwing the invisibility cloak over his friend’s shoulders, only to have Joel pull it back off like it was on fire.

“Hell no! I’m not wearing that! I gave that to you, so you wouldn’t get caught, Dave. Come on, you wear it.” Joel threw the cloak over David again like a mother hen then cautiously looked above his head for the flying horse rider. Not seeing the scary vision, he began to walk around a large boulder the size of a moving van.

“No...you need it, because with that blue hair and those worthless hands, sounds like a bad combo to me...I wouldn’t want to risk it.” David laughed softly as he threw the cloak around Joel, who had stopped walking and stood still, shaking his head and feeling foolish. He always has a comeback, Joel thought.

“You know, you always have a comeback, don’t you? I can’t get the last word with you, Dave.” He threw the cloak over his body but not his head, so that he walked along side David a blue haired head bobbing in the dark. David couldn’t help but laugh softly every time he looked over to the head for directions.

They traveled along at a quick pace, not talking for an hour. They were going along a rocky terrain, in between two mountainous ranges and were fairly hidden by the large boulders placed here and there along the narrow, rocky landscape. It was slow moving if one couldn’t see one’s way around, and it was also an area for ambush since there were only two ways to go, forward or backward. David wanted to light a flame to guide him, but resisted, instead watching Joel’s shadow as best he could to find the safest way around the many boulders they scurried across. He had to fight the urge to reach out and touch Joel as they traveled along, just to hold onto him like a cane, to support his step. He was having difficulty traveling in the dark at a fast

clip. He also hated knowing Joel had the advantage. Finally, after several minutes of silence, Joel looked behind him and spoke quietly. “Where are the others? Did you really leave them all behind?” Pulling the cloak down to his shoulders, he stood in front of David, making him stop to look up at his devoted friend.

“Uh, well...they’re behind us about one hundred feet back, making sure we stay separated, but together. What?! Why are you looking at me like that? Did you think I’d just leave them all behind and we’d start on our own?! We don’t know where the fuck we are or where we’re going to and I have the Devil himself making me his most wanted fugitive as of this night, so quit looking at me like I’ve just hurt your feelings because I haven’t – so there. Now move...please?” David stood still with his hands on his waist and shuffled his feet, sighing at one point when he finally made eye contact. Those large, brown eyes had a sad look about them that made him want to apologize every time Joel decided to make them show hurt.

Damn! I can't boss him around or treat him poorly – it's like he's turned into Dillon overnight, and the last time I could remember I swore there would be only one Dillon in my life, more than that and I'd have to start taking tranquilizers.

“Fine! Bring them over here so that we can travel together because this is stupid. I feel like they probably think we’re married or something just because I didn’t want to separate, and, and that we need our time alone together or something...that’s stupid, isn’t-it?! Right! I know! So...anyway, where are they?” Joel’s voice was beginning to sound more and more anxious as he rambled, answering his own questions with much unneeded vigor as he walked along side David. He suddenly felt nervous being alone with his friend.

“Uh...first off, I know where we need to go because Sarin gave me the general direction to travel in, and secondly, I never answered you about whether or not it was stupid, but that’s okay - strange and random, but okay. So, let’s just keep going. We have awhile to go according to Sarin, and he said he spotted the dark horse and What’s His Face going the other direction, so we might be out of the woods for now.”

He started to walk forward again, but paused when he realized he couldn’t see anything. He reached out and grabbed Joel’s arm, and guided him slightly in front to show him the way. It worked, for Joel started walking again, then running in front of David to quicken their pace and get them to where they needed to go.

Chapter Six

An Unwanted Alliance

He had searched for an hour, more than he had wanted to, and when he stormed into the Grand Hall, pulling his gloves off his hands and ripping his black velvet cloak off his shoulders, Esmeralda and Sandor were both present; Sandor waiting with a tray, a glass, and a bottle of wine, Esmeralda with a wicked, seductive smile.

Azmodeus flew by them both without speaking, shocking his witch as she broke her seductive pose and pushed herself off one of six large pillars the size of water towers. Pouting as she quickly followed him into his main courtroom, Esmeralda wanted to make peace again. She wanted to feel a little Underworld romance.

The Dark Lord stomped up the eight steps to his lavish throne; an impressive chair made in solid gold with rubies, emeralds and sapphires decorating the arms and backing. Beautiful and colorful textured linens draped across the seat and sides of the throne. The arm rests were lion faces with rubies for eyes, decorated in detail to show off their simultaneous roar.

He tossed his gloves and cloak on one of two smaller scaled chairs each positioned on either side of his throne, and kicked a large square cushion placed at the foot of his throne the size of a door, off the stage in his frustration.

“Send him in! I will meet with the mighty war whore now!” He growled orders as he flung himself onto his throne, one leg hanging over an armchair in a pose Esmeralda had never seen before, for her Lord was a regal nobleman. To see him sit this way, his head cradled in his perched hand, rubbing his temple, his casually thrown leg dangling like a school boy placed in the naughty corner, made her uneasy.

“Did you not hear me?! Did I stutter?!” He yelled fiercely as he continued to not address her with his eyes. He could feel her hurt. *Go ahead and cry. I feel nothing for you.*

“My Lord, I did hear you and I will go and bring him. I am sorry—“

“Don’t say another word. Leave me.” He paused, sighed and continued to cradle his head in his hand. His witch quickly turned and walked the massive distance to the large double doors at the end of the rectangular courtroom, also decorated by two sets of large pillars, half the size of the ones in the Grand Hallway.

The length of the courtroom was decorated by large black and white checkered tiles. A large red velvet floor runner twelve feet wide ran the full length of the stately room. It lead to

the platform were Azmodeus sat to greet his guests if he so chose to do so. Mostly, he'd bring them straight back to a more personal setting, either the Council Meeting Room, or the Dining Room, but not tonight. Tonight, he'd give Drake the grand tour of his Hallway and his Courtroom, then the door. He was so frustrated, and his head hurt. He rubbed it slowly, trying to think clearly his next move in regards to the human prize, then quickly realizing he wasn't able to think anything through and that unnerved him.

Drake entered, walking the full length of the courtroom, his dark blue cloak flowing behind him, his gait wreathed a smug confidence making Azmodeus want to shoot him down before he got within speaking range.

"Well, well, my Lord. I must say you know how to keep a caller waiting, don't you?" He bowed slightly as he approached in true gallivant form, only to lose his confidence as he noticed that the Dark Lord wasn't even looking at him. He began to seethe in his anger.

"What do you want? To what do I owe a second grandiose visit in the span of one evening?" He continued to sit rubbing his temple, his eyes closed.

"I would like to meet with you again concerning matters in the plains this night. I had an army of Nagul, orcs, and trolls fighting a resistant band of human and Elvin waste brigade, a mere four to one odds with my army far outnumbering and outperforming, when I was just now informed they retreated, most of their numbers dwindling down to almost nothing. I heard you were seen encircling the night sky and watching the battle, were you not, my Lord?"

"My whereabouts are of no concern to you, Drake. I answer to no one." He kept his eyes closed, allowing Drake's rage to grow. As if reading his mind, the Dark Lord added, "You'll soon know I choose to look at very few I converse with. You are not alone in that regard, rest assured."

"Well, of course the issue of my little war is not my reason for being here, for I would have been there had I not needed to converse with you regarding Monstrous. Did you not inform him my wishes, my Lord?" Drake finally had a handle on his anger, his voice less forced as he chose his words wisely.

"Yes, I did manage to slip him a note by messenger, and he has not returned yet, but do not fret for I am sure he will bring a note of agreement. Knowing Monstrous as I do, I am sure his pride and stacked ego will not allow him to slide away from your challenge. However, I did warn you not to push me on the time. It will happen tomorrow, or the next day. My feelings on

the subject are nonexistent, you see? You can duel your empty hearts out and I will await the victor. Once I receive word from either Monstrous or my messenger, I will send him to you. Now, is that all?"

"I will be difficult to find, my Lord, you know this, for I am nomadic—"

"Yes, I know! Now, why is that? Why do you not choose a home? I would think if you would want Arch Devil status you would at least find yourself somewhere civilized to root. I cannot even set up correspondence with you, should I ever wish to do such a thing. Now tell me again, how would one reach out to a nomadic war mogul?" Azmodeus was suddenly having way too much fun slamming the fool standing before him attempting to seek recognition and allegiance. Not a chance in hell, he smiled wickedly, enjoying his torment with Drake.

"I will be in touch with you tomorrow, my Lord, rest assured." Drake bowed again, his eyes, one black, the other light blue, transfixed on Azmodeus' face. The Dark Lord still had not looked down upon his visitor, choosing instead to shun him.

"Fine, I may or may not be here tomorrow, however you may call on me either way," his voice casual and non-committed. "I warn you it will be a very busy day, and unlike this night, tomorrow if you are here and I am not, I will not return with as much haste as I did tonight."

Drake turned and began to walk back out the courtroom, speaking at one point over his shoulder. "Might I add, I believe the reason for my losing this little clean up war I allowed tonight, according to my captain of the guards who is waiting for me in Eighth Plane, was a small band of elves and a human most extraordinary. He was young, pretty, and was called upon several times, his name already on the tongues of my army of warriors," Drake turned around to walk backward a few feet so that he could get a better view of the Dark Lord raising his head and glaring for the first time, the two of them making eye contact from thirty feet away. "Pity for the human wonder, for he is now most wanted by several angry Nagul warriors, and you and I both know how they like to hunt down their adversaries. But that is of no concern to you, is it, for as you put it, you may or may not have been there? Good evening, my Lord." He continued to walk away, knowing his ruler was staring at his back with much intensity.

By the time he walked to the door and reached out to open it, Azmodeus was suddenly there, leaning against the other double door, arms crossed and his face stern as he watched Drake approach, his face now a mixture of newly found interest and suspicion.

"So, go ahead and say it – his name that is - and what did they say about him?" He

glared at a much happier Drake, who finished walking over and leaned confidently against the other door. “You have my interest... finally.”

“Well, I suppose if you are truly interested, as am I, considering this David character now has me to deal with for meddling in my warfare, then I suggest you follow me to Eighth Plane to discuss the matter with the few soldiers I have left in that brigade. My Captain did send a small caravan to pursue the superhuman. Apparently, he uses an invisibility cloak, for they did say he came in and out of vision during their battle,” Drake paused and checked out his nails casually, then continued when he realized Azmodeus was waiting on his next word and actually looking at him. A thrill shot up his spine as he continued. “The little bastard cannot even fight fairly. Still, he knew his way around his weapons easily, with an almost competent quality, and even managed to bring down a few of the Hellenic Trolls. I’m sure you know how strong they are - not easily brought down by mere humans, for it usually takes—“

“Yes, well, I am sure that is all hearsay.” Azmodeus pushed himself off the door and shook his head. *There is no way he has this much potential! This can't be true! He was supposed to be artwork, a mere distraction to adorn my Court.*

“My Lord?” Drake tried not to show his glee as he watched Azmodeus try not to appear alarmed at hearing such guarded information from the one person he loathed the most.

He paused before he spoke, trying to think on every angle before committing himself in alliance. “Fine! I will join you, but only if you call off this little caravan you speak of, for I may not wish the little human harm before I lay my own eyes on him. Where is this captain you speak of? Let’s go now.” Azmodeus turned and walked back in one second to grab his cloak and gloves, then returned to Drake in less than that amount of time. They walked out together, side by side, a first for both - an unlikely alliance.

Once they were outside the realm of Ninth Plane and on the edge of Eighth, Drake led the Dark Lord to his captain, who was waiting near the portal entrance. The Nagul Captain was sitting around a fire, keeping himself warm, along with a dozen or so Nagul orcs with him. Being so close to Nine’s portal, the intense chill extended like fingers into Eighth Plane.

Huddling by the fire, for the Nagul with their thick, reptilian skins need an intense heat source to penetrate and retain, they tried to get as close as possible without catching fire. The captain rose when he saw the two Lords approach. Azmodeus kept himself hidden mostly under the cloak.

“My Lord, what is it you seek? My command awaits your word.”

Drake glanced at Azmodeus, who had chosen not to speak first, so he spoke instead. “Captain Hunten, I need a messenger sent to call off the search party, NOW.” Drake walked by the stunned orc and began to warm himself by the fire.

“But my Lord, the human?! Remember the human? You said you wanted him found and dragged to your feet—“

Drake looked over at Azmodeus quickly as he interrupted the orc captain. “Well, well, that’s all good, but I’ve changed my mind.” His voice had a masculine, rough, deep sounding gravel to it, making each word spoken lustful and smoothly authoritative.

The orc captain turned to one of his men and rushed him off, whispering something in his ear before pushing him away.

“Listen up, Nagul warriors, the Dark Lord is before you now,” Drake pointed towards Azmodeus as he spoke, “And he has words for you to hear. Listen and answer him as you would do me.” He casually leaned against a massive red rock and waited, again checking out his manicure.

The orcs all bowed their heads gingerly as they stared at the Dark Lord. Hunten walked forward a few steps and knelt before the Dark One.

“I have heard many great things, Dark Lord. I am honored by your presence.” Hunten spoke, causing the other orcs to stir at the realization that the mysterious black cloaked gentleman was indeed, the ruler. They all knelt at that point and looked upon the Dark Lord.

“This newly descended human you speak of is my property. I want him brought to a safe place where you will find and keep him, alive and unhurt. Should this be done successfully, you will all be rewarded - not one, but all of you. Understood? Therefore, with that said and now repeated for good measure, please know this will not be based on individual merit, but on all of your efforts, for the young human I speak of is clever and apparently has adapted quickly to my world – our world - so he will be difficult to capture. I have mistakenly bestowed upon him certain traits in the Living World to better assist him in that particular place and now those skills - agility, strength and speed – to my surprise - have followed him down here, and unfortunately he has learned to master them quickly. He is marked for me however that may not ensure his safety. There is an elf sidekick named Sarin who is accompanying him, as well as another human named Joel, and two other elves. They are all escapists, and although I would appreciate

a group capture, the only two I need here are the humans. The others can be considered expendable should it warrant that. When they are found, summon me by speaking my name.” He paused, not sure they even knew what his name was. “Azmodeus spoken will summon me. Any questions?”

He lowered his cloak to scan the group of orcs, showing himself and watching as he always had to do, all of them in awe over his physical presence. He made his nobility evident by looking upon each orc, in a way hypnotizing each and every one of them, gaining their loyalty instantly. Such simple creatures, he thought as he glanced over at Drake, who was smiling, thinking something Azmodeus thought for sure was along the lines of black mail.

Hunten spoke. “My Lord, it will be done. We will find the marked one. I can still smell him on my warriors.” Hunten smiled wickedly, causing Azmodeus to pause at his request, suddenly unsure these Underworld residents were the right candidates for a gentle, quick capture of a cargo so fragile. “I tried to get to him, my Lord, but that elf Sarin wouldn’t let me, we fought instead and unfortunately, one of our trolls turned on me. Still, as you can see, I am here now before you.”

“Rise then Captain, and have your warriors attend to my affairs.” Azmodeus watched as they all rose to see him at eye level.

Nagul orcs were well known to be tough cannibal warriors, gaining their strength by eating their victims in battle. They were all at least seven to eight feet in height, strong and solid as they stood tall, and bred to fight, nothing more. They were clever hunters and warriors; their territory spanned half of Fifth Plane, mostly consisting of forest and swamp lands. They were greatly feared there, and only recently joined forces under Drake’s rule. He now had their allegiance, and because of that, most of Fifth Plane as well, promising the Nagul a newly improved Fifth Plane in fire element, matching Eighth Plane beautifully.

“Now tell me what it is you saw in the marked human. Did you get his name?” Azmodeus tried to appear calm, but he was getting frustrated talking about the one that had so easily eluded him with these heathen animals.

Hunten smiled again as he glanced over at Drake, who quickly nodded his head in agreement at his Captain to speak. “My Lord, his name is Daa-veed, and it is on the tongues of my warriors, for he fought solidly, destroying a few orcs and two Helenic Trolls as I watched. Impressive for a little human, but not untouchable and most importantly, he didn’t fight better

than the Nagul. However, let me say to you, he stunned them with his face.” Hunten touched his own grossly disfigured reptilian face from countless battle scars, and smiled, his eyes light yellow and green. He then laughed, showing his large canines and incisors as he remembered what he needed to say. The other orcs snickered and smiled at each other too, as if remembering as well. “His beauty, my Lord, combined with his incredible smell, temporarily stunned my warriors, allowing him the upper hand. Now that we know of him and have his smell in mind, he will not be so quick to get his way in battle again, I assure you.” He picked up his sword and twirled it in his hand casually, with a skill evident to all, and shoved it forcefully into its sleeve; the end of its handle a small skull white and black, the size of a baseball, with two diamonds for eyes, the skull looked forward. Azmodeus sighed and began to rub his temples again, rethinking his renegade appointment of these creatures.

Sensing the Dark Lord’s indecision, Drake jumped in. “Well, this was fun. I need you to attend to your new mission now, for time is of the essence here. You wouldn’t want the human to befriend others who would get in the Nagul way, would you?” He pushed himself off the red rock face and causally walked over to the group. He turned to Azmodeus, who in turn, tried to return the glance, but couldn’t make himself maintain his gaze on the Council Member he detested the most. Drake smiled at the attempt, watching Azmodeus look on as the Nagul packed their things, bowed, then left quickly, huffing and snorting along as they ran in formation. Drake broke the silence first.

“My Lord, honestly if this mere human is something of importance to you, you will need more than Nagul to find him and bring him in.” He took the opportunity and leaned in to speak in whisper. “I can find him. I am a ranger by trade, nomadic for a reason, and I know about this Sarin character you spoke of earlier. I used to travel with him.” Drake stood back and waited, watching Azmodeus slowly turn to face him, making eye contact with interest again.

“What is it you wish in return? Ah yes, let me answer that? I would think someone of your caliber would use this opportunity not only for personal gain, but for title as well? Am I correct?” Azmodeus sighed as he tried not to show his frustration. Was this human David worth this much? His inner voice was screaming at him to pull back his invitation, for he knew Drake was not worthy of such recognition, and in fact, was a growing threat by the minute, but his ego and his curiosity about the human drove him to grant what he knew he shouldn’t. Such an irrational decision was sure to haunt him and he knew it. At that moment, he hated with a

passion his newfound weakness for such a human.

“My Lord, if I may be so bold—“

“I’m sure you will.”

Drake laughed softly as he rubbed his goatee. “If I may be so bold, I would request a payment in title of Arch Devil for my efforts in tracking and returning this human to your hands untouched and unspoiled, for I fear the Nagul might nibble on him, possibly stealing a few fingers if they could get away with it.” He laughed softly, shaking his head like they were his misbehaving children. “I would also request a home of my choosing—“

“You must think me mad for allowing more than the grand acquisition of your title! I wish to acquire him, but not at a price rendering my kingdom at your disposal! He is merely an amusing toy to me, Drake, a play thing for my entertainment, and as such I will grant you what you have been begrudging me for a short month of pure, God sent, eternal agony, but nothing more! Is that clear?” He looked disgusted as he glared at a smiling Drake, who spoke calmly in contrast.

“Yes, of course, my Lord. My title will suffice. I will have this human plaything as you put it, at your doorstep before very long - rest assured.” Drake bowed and started to leave, turning around to face the Dark Lord as he realized and verbalized an afterthought. “I am sure you can send word to a now most fortunate Monstrous of my sudden change of heart, for he is no longer duel-able at this time. Fare thee well.” He half bowed and disappeared.

Azmodeus turned and re-entered Ninth Plane, walking through and absorbing into the ice wall to release himself on the other side, moving across the Grand Hallway again. He felt a sense of building disappointment and apprehension over making alliances with the Nagul and Drake. He knew giving Drake Arch Devil status will only quicken his ascent to superstardom amongst those who have chosen to follow him, and he also knew Madera was dangling in the wind, awaiting a most certain annihilation should Drake become more powerful. Why he wants to own and settle down in Madera was beyond explanation, he thought. Sighing as he walked over to Sandor, still standing in the same place as before, tray in hand and head bowed, Azmodeus took the glass and stood there in front of him and waited. I’ll give him a thrill, he thought as he stood there long enough for the young man to look up briefly to see that he was allotted the all important job of pouring his Lord a glass of wine.

Sandor quickly, with hand trembling, grabbed the opened bottle and poured a climatic

glass of wine, watching the Dark Lord's hand holding the glass casually while he tried to aim for the inside rim of the very wide goblet, at the same time, being able to admire up close, his beautiful hand. "Thank you, my Lord," he whispered, as he bowed again and placed the bottle back on the tray.

"Did she go to feed above?" The Dark Lord raised his glass and took a drink, inspecting the top of Sandor's head while the servant remained bowed.

"She did, my Lord, shortly after you left with Lord Drake. She left in a hurry. I think she was upset, but she didn't speak her mind." Sandor remained looking at the floor.

"Yes, well, females do not need to speak their minds, for we can read them just as easily as we can make them cry."

He finished his drink in two shots and placed it on the tray, then turned and left without speaking another word. He went straight to his personal living room, to think, meditate, and devise the next plan of action.

Chapter Seven

The Great Escape

Sarin, Leselle, and Ulmed caught up with them in an hour's time. They traveled together in silence, Sarin and Joel not talking or making eye contact at all. The tension was palpable.

As they moved along the valley between Ulleren Mountain and the Pass of Nasshi, a series of mountains leading into Seventh Plane, the landscape was rocky and narrow in places, making their travels difficult and tedious at times. The grade going up either side of the mountains was great, and there were many places to hide and ambush. Unfortunately the door to Fifth was not along an easy path. Running in single file, Joel in the lead, the group suddenly stopped at Sarin's motion, having grabbed Joel's cloak and pulling it back to whisper.

"I hear voices up ahead. Stay here with the others while I scout the rest of this terrain. We should be close to the portal leading into Fifth Plane. We need to get as far away from Sixth as possible, pass Fifth, and remain in Fourth Plane until the commotion settles down and I can assess the damages." Everyone had stopped to listen to Sarin discuss their objectives. "Although hard to find, I do have friends in Fourth who hold no alliance with the Dark Lord. They would help us elude him long enough to bring the both of you up to speed on the ways of the Underworld. I will return shortly, stay here." Sarin ran ahead and began to climb up Ulleren Mountain to better scan the area.

While he was gone, the others stood quiet and waited. David began to feel uneasy, like someone or some people, were watching him and talking about him. He reached up and felt his neck, for it ached and burned through the back of his hair. He turned to Leselle and asked her quietly, "Do you see anything on the back of my neck?" He also felt a burning sensation on his throat, just above his collar. Leselle hesitated, glancing at Ulmed as if waiting on him for direction or assistance. He paused also, looking shocked, then answered for her.

"It is his mark - the Dark Lord's mark. It is his way of telling all others that you are... uh..." He looked down for a second to think of the right, politically correct word.

"What? Just spit it out! Is it a mark of what I am? Am I like HIM? What does it look like?" David whispered sharply, stepping closer into Ulmed's personal space, making the elf step back to maintain enough distance to be able to think next to the beautiful, yet intimidating human. And the dark mark on the human's throat was making him weak.

"Wait...don't stand so close...I cannot think with you so close!" Ulmed sighed, wishing

Sarin could be there at this moment. He continued. “Simply put, it is a sign of property. He placed that mark on you to warn all others that you are *his* property. In a way, it protects you, but it can also hurt you if a strong enough power finds you and can use you to black mail the Dark Lord. You are marked, and others who come across you will not want to be near you for very long...safety issues, you see.” Ulned tried to sound calm and matter-of-fact, but his voice broke in fear a few times, wavering enough that David felt it strongly. He continued when he didn’t get a reply. “You have been marked from the beginning, I’m sure.”

David sighed and rubbed his neck more. “Property? Slavery? Does that actually exist?!” Looking over at Ulned and Leselle, both of them nodding their heads in agreement like it was an everyday occurrence, forced him to turn to Joel, who had pulled the cloak down to his shoulders. His face showed worry. “Then why have I just now felt it? And if it is a mark of ownership, and a warning, then why are you both still here with me? I was right. I’m dangerous to the group.”

He began to walk away, trying to gain enough distance from his group. Stopping to lean against a large rock, David grabbed at his throat and clenched his teeth in frustration. “It’s like a fucking dog collar!” He was so angry he wanted to kick something, but wisely chose instead to breathe. He slid down the face of the eight foot tall boulder and sat on the ground, pulling his knees up as if he were back in the familiar isolation room at The Disciples. Instead of a sour smelling, cheap, itchy blanket, David sat on a soft, mossy piece of Underworld not visible to his eyes.

Joel caught up and sat down next to him against the rock. He looked over at David, who had his hand around his throat, apparently trying to cover it from view.

“What does it look like?” David whispered, his voice cracking twice as he tried not to cry; his hand trembled against his neck. Things were finally settling in and he felt his purpose was to be nothing more than an ornament at Louis’ feet.

“Uh, Dave? Ulned was right, you know. None of us saw it until just a few minutes ago. It wasn’t burning bright yellow like it is right now. Maybe it was dark or black before, and now something – or Him – ignited it to show who you are. It looks like a half moon turned face down and a sword symbol pointed in the same direction – it’s kinda cool actually, and it’s neon yellow.” Joel’s voice sounded enthused for a second, until David turned his head to glare at him, making him hesitate, then sigh. “I’m sorry, Dave. I know it must feel like a dog collar.

Although I don't see it or you that way, and I'm not leaving you either, so *danger* must be my middle name." He sounded confident again, his voice comical as he did his best impression of John Wayne, causing a brief smile to appear on his friend's face.

"Yeah, well I guess he must know me somewhat if he is using this mark to piss me off, because yellow is the only color I truly hate and I've seen this mark before. I've seen it on The Gate Keepers' arms at Fifth's Cavern."

"Where's Fifth's Cavern?"

David laughed softly. "It's in Fifth Plane."

"Oh, right." Joel looked up at the others approaching. "Here are the others – no wait—"

David looked up along with Joel as a group of two, then five others showed up out of nowhere, a few jumping over the rock they were leaning against, and others coming in from both sides. David and Joel went to get up, but one of the strangers walked forward, sword to David's throat, and spoke with authority. Two others had bows and arrows pulled and pointed at Joel's visible head.

"Don't move, and don't even think of getting up, for we haven't properly met yet." The voice was male, and sounded human.

David looked up as best he could while the end of the sword jabbed further into his throat. He saw a male, either human or elf, hard to say, and there were five or six others behind and to the sides of him. He appeared to be the leader.

"Nice marking - I thought so. I thought you'd be marked, especially with the way you played with fire back there. What's your name? And where are the others?"

One of the strangers lit a torch and shone it on the two, so that their faces were lit in the darkness. The leader lowered his sword slightly to allow David to speak. But before he could do so, another familiar voice answered for him.

"The others are here, behind you and those humans are with us. What is it you wish for? A 'thank you' would suffice." Sarin approached as two others redirected their bows and arrows his way.

"Well, if it isn't the great Sarin! I am honored by your presence," the leader bowed his head briefly. "What brought you into our battle? You were there, correct?"

"Yes, we were all there, passing through only, but of course decided the odds weren't fair so we chopped it down enough for you to feel properly represented. And what is your name?"

Sarin took a few steps forward to stand in front of the mysterious leader. The simple wave of the leader's hand caused the arrows to lift, and he in turn withdrew his own sword from David's throat.

"My name is Evan, and I am a member of an elite, renegade band of humans and elves and anyone else who wishes movement in numbers. We have been targeted for termination by the infamous Lord Drake and his posse of stupid lizard men, for our territory comprises the latter part of Fifth and Sixth Planes. The human subtypes or hybrids, depending on how you see us," (he bowed) "and elves share these lands equally, but the Nagul have been spreading beyond their territory like weeds, invading our space and killing off our kind." He then leaned in closely, "We're not pure enough for Lord Drake to have around." He grabbed an unlit torch and turned to hold it out in front of David, who, along with Joel, was rising to his feet. "Here, blow on my torch, brother, and show those who haven't seen it, your powers."

Without thinking, David breathed in the cold air and extended his left hand out, lighting the torch within a foot from his face. Everyone took a step back and whispers began.

"Yes, you were the one to take down one of ours, a dark elf by the name of Master Arms." Evan smiled proudly, making David nervous at the sudden lack of mournfulness in his voice. He shot a quick look at Sarin, then spoke in his defense.

"I am sorry for your loss but it was he who attacked—"

Evan laughed out loud, followed immediately with all the others there in his group. "No worries! I had hoped he would die in battle, but with the way he fought and his aggressiveness, I thought for sure no Nagul or troll would bring him down." He leaned in and whispered to David, "He wasn't very popular, if you follow?"

"Oh, okay...sure." He side glanced to Joel, who in turn faked like he was wiping imaginary sweat off his brow. David sighed and laughed softly, he couldn't stay serious with Joel around.

"Where are you all headed?" Evan remained transfixed on David as he spoke, rubbing his own neck as he checked out David's mark. Evan was a half-breed, human and Elvin mix, with light blond, straggly hair down to his shoulders, always in his eyes. He was about David's height, so they met at eye level, and he was dressed all in black, his clothes nicely arranged and clean, almost too neat in appearance for one who just finished battle.

"We are heading for Fourth, for I have friends there who can hide us for awhile—"

Evan interrupted Sarin. “You will have difficulty getting through Fifth, I tell you. It is being taken over by Lord Drake and the Nagul. As a matter of fact, all of Fifth has been given the option to submit under his rule or prepare for genocide. As it is, he has already instructed all half-breeds to be terminated on sight, so poor souls like me, I don’t even get the option to submit,” as he turned to David he stressed the next point, “Although I wouldn’t.”

“Here, here!” A chorus of voices from his group agreed.

“You might want to be careful saying Drake’s name aloud, for as I have heard in some circles, he will have Arch Devil status before long and you’ll get the unfortunate opportunity of seeing his ugly eyes in person.” Sarin looked stern, not sure he trusted the lively Evan.

Not bothered by Sarin’s future prediction, Evan kept on. “You can join us, for your fighting skills are quite honorable, and you did assist us greatly, especially with the trolls. However,” Evan turned to David again and glanced at his glowing yellow mark and hesitated. “I’m not sure what to make of you – Sirius? What do you think of his mark?” Evan turned to another elf half-breed, who stood at his side. As he brought the torch up to Sirius’ face, the half-breed frowned and concentrated on it for a few seconds. David started to burn over the unwanted inspection.

“It is a mark for Him, no question about it, but tell me, as I am sure everyone here is thinking it, why have you not been caught yet?” Sirius tried to stare down David, his look stern and suspicious. He spoke again before David could answer. “For the Dark Lord shares the same company as Drake, and he is even more powerful and troublesome for our kind. He takes and he destroys what he doesn’t take. He is ruthless and without honor, and now you are his hunted subject.”

“Yes, well, that may be true, but I haven’t been found yet and I don’t plan on being taken, so I am about as dangerous to you as anyone else standing here, and yet unlike most, I can leave and set my own path. I don’t need a group to make me strong.” David spoke quickly and without hesitation. Everyone listened intently, mostly Joel, who lived and breathed David’s words.

Evan smiled at the ground as he listened to David finish his speech, then he looked at Sarin, Ulred and Leselle, all three quiet and standing there with varying looks of frustration on each of their faces as they all watched David too, and he made a decision. “You can join us if you like - all of you. We are regrouping with the others on the north side of Ulleren. There is

another brigade of elves and humans led by Oz - a friend of mine. There is also a small band of orcs coming this way, I think, to spy on our numbers, according to my scout. They look relatively harmless at the moment. So, what say you to our offer?"

Sarin and Ulned glanced at each other again, then at Joel and David. Sarin shot David a look of uncertainty, giving him the opportunity he needed to seize the moment.

"Sure, we'll go with you for awhile. The thought of my mark placing you all in jeopardy is enough of a thrill for me." David didn't bother looking at the elves in his former group as he turned and started walking with the new group. He knew at least Joel would follow him, and the others were just three complications – three friends he'd have used against him as blackmail eventually, or killed off one by one before him, for he was beginning to assess the gravity of his situation, and the means by which Louis would attempt to bring him down to kneel at his feet.

Evan laughed as he tried to size up the overly confident human, but he knew he was intrigued, and willing to take the chance to incorporate a new member into his elite fold.

Once they all started traveling together, and weapons were put aside, most of the elves and half-elves in the newly formed group knew of Sarin, and some knew Ulned as well. There were quiet, whispered conversations going on as they moved along, Evan in the lead with David and Joel close enough to him to converse quietly.

Sarin was avoiding David altogether, shunning him once they all started moving forward. The leader being challenged was going to strain their relationship, but something kept Sarin there. He wasn't ready to leave yet, but he was also not ready to embrace David back into his inner circle either. David leaving the group and jeopardizing all of them had Sarin seeing red for the rest of the night.

"I can't wait to introduce you to Oz. He is in need of new recruits, and has been giving me grief for supposedly allowing unnecessary deaths to result from avoidable wars, but I find it unbearable to sit still and watch them take over. Not while I'm around; I'll make a difference if it is just only me."

David smiled as he listened to the charismatic leader speak. His first impression of the incredibly neat, almost human was that he liked him, found him mysteriously intriguing. He is holding back though, David thought, but I'll find out what it is, rest assured.

As they approached the others, Evan was immediately greeted, accepted and embraced. There were about twenty in the new group, a total of almost fifty as they all conjured together in

a massively wide circle. David was taken back with amazement at the grand display of variety in the warriors represented there around him.

Evan saw him amidst the reverie of the reunion. Oz was sitting cross-legged, hands on his knees on a flat rock mediating while everyone gathered around him. As Evan stood in front of the co-leader and waiting for acknowledgement, another elf whispered in his ear, “They have turned back, my Lord. The Nagul have retreated as you so predicted.” The elf sounded incredibly impressed as he and a few others watched Evan’s response.

“Yes, well, that’s all good news now isn’t it? The poor bastards probably have had enough abuse for one night. I’m sure they’ll return for seconds, be assured. I need three look-outs on the outer post watching for returning or straggling orcs and trolls, for one can never be too secure in a group as large as ours, right Oz?” Evan turned and stared at Oz again, the dark natured elf still sat not stirring. David stood behind Evan and off to the side, watching intently the interaction between the two leaders with Joel always close by.

“Well, since you haven’t asked, I’ll tell you. It was a success, for they retreated if you can believe that! We are all floating on high over our victory—“

“Yes, well, I can also see your forces cut in half, commander, and that is no victory, for the Nagul have a relentless way of multiplying rapidly and a victory tonight will only mean a defeat tomorrow—“

“How can you say you ‘see’ our forces cut in half when you have yet to open your eyes Oz!” Evan was visibly getting annoyed. Oz finally opened his eyes and looked around.

“Huh! What do you know? I was right! We are indeed half our original number! What an accomplishment!”

Evan fumed in response, silent and trying to think of something witty to say, but David stepped in quickly, always a comment on the tip of his tongue. Evan turned to listen, realizing quickly that he liked the young man.

“So what did you expect? Your numbers would multiply *after* war? You would rather run and hide in large numbers than fight for something you believe in? I feel it’s time to extinguish the Nagul. Now let’s just spread that rumor around and see where it lands.” David smiled wickedly and glanced at Evan, who winked back at him, as sly as ever.

“And who are you?” Oz jumped down and looked David over, suspicious as always. “A spy?”

David smiled. "I wish."

A short pause in silence followed, with Evan finally breaking it by laughing spontaneously and putting an arm around each one. "Oz, this is David, he and four others in his group jumped in and knocked down the odds to our favor during the battle. They are on their way to Fourth, so I invited them to join our tribe. They are Elvin and Human."

Oz stood five to six inches shorter than David and Evan, with black, short and cropped spiky hair, dark brown eyes, and clothes rich in color, brown and purple. He appeared worldly, knowledgeable, and David noticed after staring at him briefly, his eyes flickered between dark brown and white, depending on the way the elf stared and changed his facial expressions. He was attractive, neat, and had enough weaponry hanging from his smaller frame to arm ten warriors. He carried himself well.

"Hmm, nice mark, I could see it from a mile away. It'll be such a nice expected surprise when the Dark Lord shows up for the party, don't you think, Evan?" Oz glared at David, then turned to Evan to seek his opinion.

"Give it a rest, Oz. David can take care of himself, I've seen it—"

"I see, so your idea of recruiting new members now involves humans marked by The Ice King? How overt of you, Evan and may I say, brilliant planning as well."

"Ice King?" Joel whispered, a puzzled look meant for David, who nodded his head in agreement, then whispered, "He's known by that name and many others. Apparently, he can't make up his mind which name he prefers." David smiled and winked at Joel, who laughed softly at the reply.

"Look, he represents at least ten of our kind in battle, he is exceptional and—"

"And wanted, you fool! I can't believe you'd jeopardize our group this way! Your careless decisions shock even your most devoted followers, Evan. I believe we need to talk."

Oz shook his head and turned away from David, then addressed the group. Evan pulled David and Joel aside.

"Don't listen to him; he's uptight on a good day. I think he'll relax eventually. Let's listen to what he has to say, for he is incredibly insightful."

"I may need to sneak away in the middle of the night, so don't be offended, but I might need to chart my own way." David whispered to Evan, who frowned and shook his head no in response.

Chapter Eight

Casting Spells

Casually strolling into Esmeralda's study - a large expansive library with rows and rows of shelved books and manuals - Azmodeus surveyed the place. The entire room was made of dark, cherry wood and smelled incredible. He breathed in the immense smell of history as he walked around its perimeter. A long wooden table furnished the middle of the room, with three black kettle-looking cauldrons, all three varying in size, sitting on its surface, sunken in so that they lay flush with the table surface. There were books scattered around the table, tossed here and there, mixed with various bottles of colored liquids and potions. A couple of large gallon sized, clear glass jars collected in one corner of the table contained frogs, spiders, and a variety of small amphibian creatures. Another jar with eyeballs suspended in light brown liquid with a few cut off fingers and ears mixed in stood out to the Dark Lord as he frowned and lifted it to inspect it closely.

“Strange woman who cooks with eyeballs and earlobes happens to be my personal advisor and occasional kissing mate - how interesting.”

He browsed through a couple of manuals on the table then paused and sighed loudly. “Where is that blood sucking bitch when I need her?” He tossed aside a stray cold, stiff finger next to the book he was looking at and grimaced. “Not very tidy is she? I've seen trolls tidier.”

He brushed off the finger juice on his pants and rolled his eyes. He suddenly became overcome with rage at the thought that he was surrounded in Nine by fools and head bowing idiots. “For once I'd like some defiance! Someone to question my authority who, in turn, grabs and maintains MY attention! Where is that one soul?!!!” He screamed loudly, his fists clenched and his jaw set in permanent frown.

Azmodeus felt from that moment forward, the frown template would become a tried and true facial expression he'd be guaranteed to wear every miserable day. He slammed his hands on the table in frustration and it moaned with the impact, for every piece of wooden furniture, especially the main table, was a powerful witch once living and serving in flesh, now absorbed in Ninth Plane and turned to wood.

The impact of his fists made the jars of eyeballs danced around slightly, the eyes jiggling and staring at him in what looked like surprise. The frogs bounced around their jar and the spiders scurried to the other side of their jar as if knowing what company they were keeping.

He smiled wickedly and laughed softly. What a mess he was in, what an exposure to have to deal with - having Drake around nosy and so willing to please for a stiff, high price. “I despise him and he knows it. So, of course now he’ll make sure to visit me night and day just for my own personal hell. Hmmm, wouldn’t that be irony at its best? Ah yes, back to the situation at hand. I need to tighten that little canine’s collar, brighten his mark so that the entire Underworld can see him for who he belongs to, and lastly, I need to send him a message that I will not stop nor sleep until he is here at my feet.” Singing these last few words in rhyme, he was amusing himself.

He almost skipped along an isle of books looking for a particular find, his mood slightly lifted at the thought of doing bodily harm to someone he was so incredibly drawn to, because violence directed in passion was heaven to the Dark Lord.

“A potion book, a potion book - recipe for hellish dreams...here it is. Why am I talking out loud? Strange but that seems to be the motto of the day, for nothing has gone as planned, so I’ll just go along. Besides,” he spoke in a voice slightly enthusiastic, “I’m a new age kind of fellow and a distinguished gentleman - always.”

He turned and pointed to the frogs as he spoke these words, flicking their jar while they all jumped to the other side and appeared to be shivering at his stare. “Sorry, can’t help it. My stare has a certain cold and frigid quality to it - not my fault, mind you, just my nature,” turning around to look closer at the jar of frogs, he noticed one stayed and looked up at him, his eyes shifting and questioning the validity of all the Dark Lord’s comments.

The oddity of the frog’s lonely stand made the Dark Lord stop and bend down close to within two inches of the glass jar. “You must be related to one named David. Are you his familiar? Must be, for I sense the mutual defiance in you both.” He stood up and thought about opening the jar and letting them go; it would make a great ‘welcome home’ gift for his always absent vampire witch. He paused to think it then shook his head, turning to sit in a chair and flip through the potion book instead. The chair quivered for a few seconds with excitement, caught up in the moment of someone so wickedly brilliant weighing it down. Azmodeus paused annoyingly to allow it to calm down, vibrating slightly in his seat from the excitement it generated, then he began to flip through the pages of the book he’d selected while he searched for the right spell. *I’ll just make sure David never sleeps again unless he enters this place and slumbers between these walls in Nine. Until then, when he does sleep, he’ll have these hellish*

nightmares to occupy his semi-wakeful mind.

He smiled as he continued to flip through another book, looking up more information on his particular mark placed on David's neck. Here it is, he decided, as he stopped and read down a page, his nails flickering red and yellow with intense emotion.

“A collar tightening every hour around that pretty neck should do nicely to remind him of my continued hold, and lastly, I will give him a sense of longing for my presence, for he will yearn for me like no other and it will drive him mad, absolutely mad to not be near me.” He closed the book loudly and smiled mischievously as he glanced over at the frogs again, resting his chin playfully on the top of the massive book.

After he finished his array of terrible incantations and rituals, making sure to put his own personal touch on torturing David, the Dark Lord stopped, and became distracted reading other books he found himself drawn to.

Hours went by this way, the books floating off the rows and rows of shelves around the room, coming to land on the table like airplanes as he thought about them. He finally closed the last book he was reading titled, “Human Souls and Acquisitions: The Secret to Taming Those Who Choose Defiance,” and realized he'd spent too much time browsing and not attending to the rest of his domain.

He sat there at the head of the witch's table and rubbed his forehead, his long white blonde hair falling down around him, for he'd let it down as he sat there reading, thinking about the human he was studying. Having been close to two centuries ago since he was remotely associated with humans up above, he knew time had disconnected him from their race. For the first time ever, he thought, it unnerved him greatly. Relationships for that matter – love, marriage, sex and family - were a thing of several centuries past as far as he could remember, but he was intrigued still. For the first time in his angelic existence, he felt desire to know more about the species he once dominated in the living world at his fancy, taking and possessing the lives of so many influential humans over such a broad span of time he was now trying to relive again.

Flipping through the pages of the books in front of him and feeling overwhelmingly not connected with the human race, he began to feel impatience creep in again as he sat back and thought of David's soul and how much he was wanting to torture him forever; the two of them together infinitely. “It's been so long since I was part of the human process, creation and

supervision from Above, and still time has passed and I have occupied their bodies and minds over centuries of time to feel no less connected; I don't think any of these books will help. Truth be told, I simply need to have him to destroy him, and that's all. Nothing more complicated than that, for if I can't have him to control him, then no one will."

Azmodeus pushed himself off the chair and smiled at the dozen or so books he'd left scattered on the table along with the dozen books Esmeralda had left from earlier, and thought he should tidy up, for he was incredibly neat and the thought of the mess here as being partially his was enough to keep him flustered. He sighed and sat back down. Clapping his hands once and waiting, beckoning with his open hands a 'come here' gesture at the books so that they all suddenly stood up on their ends and faced him in formation and at attention. He pointed to the shelves and closed his hands together as if a book were closing itself. The books all floated off the table and danced around, then quickly darted each to its spot in the ten thousand book library. The frogs and spiders scurried around their jars in anticipation of being slaughtered.

Once the room was tidy, the Dark Lord left the witch's study and went to his dining room. Sitting there ordering Sandor to bring out actual food, he shocked his poor servant as he sent him away to retrieve 'human comfort food' – whatever that means, he'd mumbled under his breath, hearing it from listening in to countless human conversations when he did venture above. He then poured his own glass of wine as he fell back in his chair. *I might as well get drunk...*

Soon after he sat down and started to eat and drink, Esmeralda was allowed to enter the room and approach his table. She smiled sweetly as she walked towards him, however he could see the pain in her eyes. She was still devastated by his cold, harsh words from earlier in the evening regarding the misplaced portal. She felt awful and started to speak.

"My Lord, I am so happy to see you uh...eating food!" She smiled weakly and looked down at her hands, as she slowly removed her gloves and her cloak, feeling the familiar sting of shame at his not looking upon her presence.

Azmodeus reached out for his goblet and took a long swig of wine as she waited for him, then continued finally, not heading his silent warning.

"May I please stress again, my Lord, my sincere apologies for the situation tonight—"

"DON'T say another word, my dear, unless you wish it to be your last. I have warned you not to speak about him unless I request it. I am eating and the thought of his escape right now ruins my appetite. You understand, don't you?" His voice controlled rage, caused her to

take a step backward in anticipation of a slap, then paused as she heard the hell hounds creeping up behind her.

“My Lord? The hounds? Are you going to...to do...something...” She held her breath and waited helplessly as she heard them approach behind her, the fireplace where they entered directly behind her as well. She could feel their combined breath move her gown off to the side, the air hot and heavy on her back and thighs. They were large in stature, each poised ready to strike, as if sensing as always, their master’s indecision.

Esmeralda was ready to leap up onto the table when he spoke.

“Lie down. You’ve had enough for one night and you know this.” Azmodeus took another drink as his hounds all turned in unison and walked over to the fire to collapse by it, their full bellies protruding as they lay on their sides and closed their eyes, except for Syrianna; she always had harsh eyes for that nasty witch.

Esmeralda breathed out a sigh of relief. She began to speak but he silenced her with a raised, open hand then spoke with authority. “Sit down.” The chair next to him pulled back to allow her to sit, then pushed back in after she sat gracefully and all smiles again at the table, her head resting on both hands and her eyes batting. He continued to eat trying not to notice her.

“If I may be so bold, my Lord, I just returned here from my study, for Sandor had informed me upon my arrival this night of your visit there. I do apologize for my absence, although I could tell that you were able to find what you were looking for. Is that true? For I can help you—“

“Yes, I found what I needed just as well as you. Do not forget I am a sorcerer well versed in The Craft, my dear.”

“Of course you are my Lord! Indeed, the best in everything. However, I did notice,” she smiled slyly as she continued, trying to make her face as sweet as possible to mask her sudden rage when she’d encountered it earlier. “I noticed the frogs had all escaped except one, and he was rather horribly bound to the candle light fixture above the table and hung by his feet. The poor beast was frightfully annoyed, and I-I – you’re smiling! I do believe you are smiling my Lord - rather mischievously I might add, and it is quite breathtaking to see you this way! So, so...” She didn’t know how to describe his mood with the frogs, but she desperately wished she could have been there to see it. *I’ll just have to find out what books he used and get them to talk about it. They’re such wonderful spies, my books.*

“So...to see me...so?” The Dark Lord’s voice startled Esmeralda’s thoughts and the smile spread across her face at the realization her zoning out had caught his attention.

“It was just so sweet, my Lord. You surprised me - that’s all. Now I have to find all those rare, hard to acquire, magical frogs, for they will be difficult to replace - but that’s okay!” She quickly changed her tone of voice as she noticed his eyes begin to narrow.

“I’m sure you’ll get by with the one frog, and the others will have to be a mystery. Besides, I would love nothing more than to watch you run around Nine trying to catch them all again, truth be told.” He casually took another sip of his drink, then placed it back down on the table, not looking at her. She quickly grabbed the half-empty bottle and refilled his goblet, smiling and thinking to herself if only he could get drunk enough to let her slide him into bed, next to her for a night of her making. What a joy that would surely be, she thought as she placed the bottle down next to her and smiled, watching his lovely mouth and neck move in unison as the alcohol slid down his throat.

Chapter Nine

A Never Ending Reminder

They traveled all night, not stopping to rest. David and Joel were never separated, and it seemed to both of them that it wasn't possible to be apart, for they were becoming co-dependent on one another.

The pack moved quickly through Fifth Plane in two groups, Oz leading the first and Evan, the second. Both David and Joel were in Evan's group, and every hour or so, for they had no mechanism for telling time, David would almost drop to his knees, grab his throat and struggle to breathe. At first it was painfully intense, and Joel felt incredibly helpless as he stood there and watched, trying to get David to talk, helping him back on his feet and keeping him going, but the pain and choking sensation he was feeling would leave him breathless and gasping for air every single time.

After the first four attacks occurred, the first night in the Underworld was going to turn out to be a very hard introduction for both of them. David brushed it off as best he could, shrugging his shoulders and denying to Joel and Evan that it was anything to worry about.

After the sixth attack, he started to curse, tears in his eyes as he could finally feel, after forcing himself to relax after the previous ones, the imprint of a man's hand – thumb and index finger – against his throat. He could even feel the sharp fingernails poking into his skin. He silently cursed the sky in his frustration, his eyes teary as he tried as best he could to ignore it. However it wasn't appearing to let up, and he knew it was Louis' reminder. *He will make my existence miserable and why? Because he picked me, that's why...just because.*

The group made it to camp by dawn, on the edge of Fourth. They encountered one small band of orcs in Fifth, but there was no battle, for the orcs were heading south and appeared not interested.

This time however, it was Oz who wanted to battle and exterminate, and Evan who pushed on. David couldn't quite figure out the dynamic between the two leaders. They should probably just fight to the death and get it over with, he thought as he had yet another, choke and crushing of his throat, experience, reeling and barely able to stay on his feet as it smashed into him.

Asshole! I can't wait to return the favor! He screamed in his head as he recovered from the latest in a never ending series of torture holds. Still, he thought as he rubbed his neck and

breathed in finally, it gave him an incredible sense of purpose knowing there was a superpower out there wanting to either annihilate his soul, or keep him as a house pet. Either way, it was psychotically comforting to David as he slowly filed into a guarded sanctuary along with all the others. He was rubbing his throat again when Joel stopped to stare at him.

“What?!” David said. He had a tendency to become easily annoyed and almost moody around Joel. Joel attributed the mood swings to their intense compatibility and David’s ease of expression when around only him.

“Your mark, Dave, it’s fucking unbelievable...it’s shining through the back of your hand! We won’t even be able to hide the little fucker. I can’t believe this guy went through all this trouble just to mark you. Un-fucking believable,” Joel whispered in quiet, uncertain fear as he watched the image shoot out David’s hand and light his sack of food as he sifted through it.

Once inside, they all dispersed to sleep and recover from the war and the intense night of traveling. After questioning Evan, David and Joel found out that this sanctuary belonged to the oldest elf in existence, a creature with enough magic to protect the city and all in it from just about anything outside its invisible walls.

His name was Oleander, and they were told they’d be able to meet him soon, but to rest for now, along with all the others. Sarin approached David and Joel as Evan left to attend to the other warriors. Sarin then changed his mind and turned away to walk over to a room unmarked, and entered it, leaving them standing there in the middle of what appeared to be a Japanese home away from home – a garden of the likes one would only see traveling to the actual island of Japan, having taken several taxis’ and maybe a bus or two before coming across such a sanctuary as this one.

Everything around them was miniature, almost porcelain-looking by design; the pathways, the plants, the little light posts, and the tiny doors all just slightly about five feet tall. The array of colors and textures around them made it difficult to focus on anything in particular.

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore Toto.” Joel whispered, reaching out and touching a drop of dew balancing itself on a white cherry blossom right under his nose. He turned to see the last of the men in their group disappear into the large expansive setting of tiny rooms surrounding the Japanese garden.

“I’m no Toto, Joel.” David whispered back, then pushed his friend playfully into the side of the little arched bridge they were standing on, Joel with his hands out trying to balance

himself so as not to fall into the three foot deep pool.

“Don’t fall in Dorothy - you’re liable to get your pretty blue dress wet.” David snickered, grabbing Joel by the back of his shirt to steady him on the bridge. “Let’s go find Sarin and the other two. I think we need to regroup with them now, or go it alone.”

“I’d rather go it alone – with you, that is,” Joel interjected quickly.

“Yeah, well, good thing you’re not in charge,” David smiled as he pulled Joel with him across the little wooden bridge towards the room he saw Sarin enter earlier.

The sanctuary was simply called Sanctuary to everyone allowed inside. It was a safe haven for only elves, mixed elves, and humans with elves. Oleander wanted to ‘give back’ to the Underworld after accumulating so much power and wealth. He was an old, distinguish Elvin master, noted for training some of the greatest and noteworthy warriors such as Sarin, Oz, and Emen, among countless others. He was well known, well respected and powerfully protected within the camouflaged walls of Sanctuary.

As a hide out, Sanctuary held two protective keys to its continued existence in violent Fourth Plane. First, it was indeed camouflaged physically in its environment, nestled in a dark wood off the well-beaten and traveled path. David worried greatly during the trip to Sanctuary, not knowing where he was going and having to slow down tremendously through some of the dark, denser sections of forest to get there.

Secondly, a protective dome or magical shield, kept out almost anyone trying to enter forcefully. Its hold could last indefinitely, however the main secret to Sanctuary’s success was its continued nonexistence among the faithful who visited then left in secrecy.

After finding Sarin, Ulned and Leselle all staying in one room, David and Joel joined them, after carrying in two small cots from the bedroom next door. They all slept outward from a circle, David choosing to grab a spot next to Sarin, with Joel lying on his other side. After a long silence between all of them, David broke the quiet.

“I feel like I jeopardize you all by continuing to be with you and—“

“DO NOT feel as though you jeopardize our safety, for we are all here for our own reasons. We all know your history, yet we are here with you. Just leave it at that and remember what you agreed to when you first joined me at Ulleren.” Sarin chose not to look at David, and lay on his cot with his back to the boys.

David didn’t know what to say, but he felt badly for speaking out of turn when he agreed

for the group to join Evan. “Okay, sure, I can realize and accept when I’ve stepped out of line, so I’ll work on that and as far as your safety is concerned, I guess I can at least say you’ve all been warned.” He went to lie down on his cot, his eyes looking up at the ceiling, and it hit him again. He grabbed his throat with both hands and gasped, clenching his teeth to wait out the game of slow torture. Joel hopped out of bed and sat on David’s cot, looking down at him and trying to get him to sit up, but David couldn’t move, his face red. The pain was so intense, and his breathing so difficult, he couldn’t get up. Sarin was there too, looking down, the Dark Lord’s mark reflecting on his forehead as he too, tried to talk to David. Both were speaking but David couldn’t hear a word. This sucks, he kept thinking as he continued to grab at the imaginary hand held to his throat. This was the seventh attack, and he was beginning to give up.

What if I just let go and relax? What if I stroke gently and sweetly the hand that chokes my breath? Would it do the opposite if I just let it attack me?

He fought hard the urge to grab at his throat as he slowly loosened his hold. He began to caress where he thought the hand was with one hand, the other one he made leave his throat all together to rest on his chest. *Just one sweet caress, then I’ll be at rest.* He thought this repeatedly as he felt it slowly hesitate, then quickly release its hold on him.

He grabbed at the imaginary hand in front of him, not able to see it, but sensing it there hovering above him. He touched it, felt its long, elegant, yet strong fingers and traced its index finger and thumb gently, then interlaced them with his own, his palm pushed into the other’s palm. A bolt of cold electricity shot up his arm and ignited his body. The energy tossed David up on the cot he was lying on, only to flop back down like a fish out of water. His body lay still and he held his breath for a second, not knowing what to do, for the sensation was strong and sensual, yet he knew it was Louis’ hand he was touching, and that alone made him panic. *I want to let go, but I can’t! I’m drawn to him.* He tried not to pay attention to Joel and Sarin telling him to wake up, for the experience was all encompassing and he must have looked like he was dreaming to them.

As if reading his mind as well as sensing his hesitation, the hand quickly let go, but not before leaving its mark, cutting into the inner, sensitive part of his palm with what felt like a sharp fingernail, barely breaking the skin. David pulled away and lurched forward in bed, opening his eyes quickly and gasping for air as he clenched his left hand shut, only to open it quickly, viewing the scratch in the shape of the letter ‘L.’

As he went to lie back on his cot, his head reeling over the incredibly contradicting emotions he was experiencing, he couldn't help but feel a strong sense of longing for the electric shock therapy again; wanting desperately to feel what now felt like ancient, raw energy...that old familiar feeling...

Azmodeus was in his own personal living room, sitting on his couch and thinking about the human when the interaction occurred. At first, he was more than surprised to feel the gentle caress and submission by the one he thought would never do such a thing. He haphazardly allowed himself to get caught up in the moment, enjoying the caress, the hand hold, and the electric heat he felt as he watched his fingers, then his hand, then his arm glow with the connection made between them. He had never felt such a sensation, especially with such a simple act, but he wasn't altogether surprised. He'd felt the charge and attraction at Fifth's Cavern and when he'd had David visit Nine the previous night. He remembered having to block out that inner voice that was screaming to keep the soul there, never to return it, but at the time he was enjoying the game. Now, he was sitting back on his couch lamenting his mistake.

He was first angry, wanting to punish and squeeze the life out of the human who was causing him so much frustration, but that turned to intense interest as the two connected hands. Azmodeus knew David's strength and power lay in his hands. If only David didn't know, he thought as he lay back on the couch and stretched out his legs.

If only he didn't know the power in his beautiful hands! We are perfectly matched, for my power resides there as well, but I want to be the one to teach him this, for it is meant to be this way. Now, he must already know it, and when he realizes he has broken my holding spell on his mark by using his hands, he will be even more curious and explorative—

Knock, knock.

He sat up and glared at the closed door. "What?!" The Dark Lord was changing his mood rapidly. First, impatience, anger turning to action, then surprise, then intrigue and interest in the human, then frustration and annoyance, followed by disconnection and then introspection, and now, now he was feeling impatient again.

He sighed and rubbed his temple. "Yeeess, speak now intruder."

"It is Esmeralda, my Lord. Would you like company?" Her voice was shaky and unsure as she began to walk away after the long pause.

“Enter.”

She walked in wearing only an emerald green robe trailing along the ground, lined in jewels around her neck and bosom, her cleavage bulging out as the bodice pulled in right under her breasts, then flowed around her in soft, rich flowing fabric.

She entered the room and walked over to where the Dark Lord was spread out on the couch in a casual fashion that startled her briefly, for he was always so perfect in posture and pose when doing anything - be it standing, walking, sitting and eating a meal, or lying down to rest. Now, she noticed he had a certain ‘I don’t care how I look’ attitude about him and she liked it, at least while he was lying down. He was wearing only a black tunic that buttoned down his front, half undone, and black pants. His hair was falling around his shoulders and back onto the pillow he was resting on, and he was barefoot as he propped his feet on the edge of the couch. Esmeralda smiled as she checked out those feet.

My, my, even his feet are beautiful specimens! I wonder what the rest of him looks like—

“Esmeralda?! What is it you want?! And why are you looking at my feet? They are not for your entertainment.” Azmodeus took a quick sip of wine straight from the bottle, which also shocked his witch as she glanced at his half empty glass positioned close enough for him to reach.

What had suddenly changed him, Esmeralda couldn’t tell, but she quickly inquired. “My Lord, what has just happened here, for I sense an electric spark still lingering around me?” She touched her almost bare chest as she spoke slightly above a whisper, trying hard to make her voice raspy and seductive. The spark she felt upon entering the room was indeed, affecting her nicely.

Azmodeus was still reeling from the earlier encounter, and the electricity was coursing through him as he watched her touch herself. Normally able to control himself around the witch and anyone else for that matter when it came to desire and physical need, tonight would test his ability to turn away. He only wanted to continue the connection with the human, wanted to reach out and grab David’s neck again and squeeze first, giving the intense rush of pain, as his victim would struggle against it, then feel the human submit to his hold, only to follow it with a gentle embrace. Oh how the human played along with him the first time without prompt! *He knows what I like and what I need, but I cannot reconnect with him, not unless I involve her.*

He did not want to talk to her, didn’t want to engage her at all from the waist up, but he

had a need that wouldn't be easily pushed aside. His body yearned for her, although his mind lay elsewhere. He placed the bottle down on the ground and lay back on the couch with one arm behind his head, the other on his lap. He gave Esmeralda a thrill just by looking at her and taking her in, undressing her with his eyes. She began to tremble as she struggled with her bodice, neither one of them talking during the exchange.

This is too easy and incredibly boring, he thought as he continued to gaze upon her beauty. At least she has that going for her, he thought again as he tried not to scowl while she, in her frustration couldn't undo her bodice tie. Finally able to, she stood up and disrobed in one motion, completely naked underneath. She had to fight the urge to go over to him and lay on top of him, towering over him as she so wanted to, but she knew he wouldn't like that and would probably push her off. She had paid attention to her previous mistake and how he had wanted her differently. He was a dominant ruler with only one thing in mind – to control and conquer. Well, I can let him do that, she thought as she smiled at him, then walked slowly over to the roaring fire place and sat down on her knees, looking over her bare shoulder at him and waiting. It worked, for he was there before she could take another breath in.

David was too shocked and stunned to explain to the two concerned friends towering over him in his bed what had just happened to him. He held his left hand with his right, cradling it against his chest as he still felt the pulse and electric thrill course through his hand up to his head and down his body, making him warm and giving him the strong impression he was alive again. It was a tease though, and he knew it wouldn't last, but the sensation was thrilling; a mind blowing experience.

The last time he'd felt this way was when he embraced Julie up above, and that exchange was slightly boring and predictable he decided as he listened to all the thoughts and opinions fly through his mind. Then he began to scream back at the voices in his head. *What just happened?! What did I just play along with? Why did I know what to do and who have I just opened up to and invited in?!* "Holy shit," he whispered, closing his eyes, continuing to hold his injured hand as he felt his body tremble.

David couldn't talk about the seductive hand holding, and kept shaking his head repeatedly when asked anything from Sarin or Joel. Finally Sarin gave up and went to lie down on his cot, while Joel stayed next to David, watching him intently and not wanting to move or

give up.

“Both of you need sleep, for tomorrow I might decide to leave Sanctuary,” pausing to hear them ask why and not getting a response, he fumed and continued. “Because I do not wish to endanger Oleander by having us stay here. I have too much respect for him. Staying here with our threatening presence would not serve my purpose. Besides,” Sarin laid down and turned to face them, with Joel looking over at him finally, but David lying still with his eyes remaining closed. “I’m sure he will send us away once he lays eyes on the two of you, for he is wiser than wise and intuitive beyond any of our combined imaginations. Sleep now,” he looked at Joel with the expression of a parent demanding his kids stop misbehaving and get to bed.

Once Sarin turned over and the room was quiet, Joel sat still, not talking, for it didn’t seem to matter what he could say to David, nothing was making his idol open his eyes to see him. He wanted to tell him how much he loved and worshipped him, and how he would die all over again for him if need be, but without privacy to say these things, he surely didn’t want anyone else hearing his emotion. *Who am I kidding?* He thought. *It’s probably obvious to everyone here how much I care about him. I just wish I could lay with him here...I don’t wanna go back to my cot.*

As the room stayed quiet and the chorus of restful breathing was heard from the other three, except for the two of them, Joel did something brave. Still looking down at David as he laid there quiet and eyes closed, he reached down to touch his face but paused instead, his hand in mid air. He had wanted to touch his hair, to see how soft it was as it laid across the end of the cot and nicely framed that face. He thought for sure David was asleep – *had to be, or else he’d have kicked my ass off his cot by now...right? Sure, he’s sleeping...*

He breathed in and did it, touching David’s hair with one hand, the other draped across his friend’s chest as he leaned down. It was softer than he could ever imagine and he ran his fingers through David’s hair for a few minutes.

David couldn’t believe what was happening with Joel touching his hair. He wanted to jump off the cot in total disgust, but a bigger part of him made him stay still, for it felt strangely comforting to have Joel touch him. He knew how Joel felt about him, he could sense the love there, it just wasn’t what he wanted; it wasn’t even about Joel being the same sex, or Louis for that matter, it was not what he wanted to feel from this moment on and it didn’t matter who the person was or what sex they were. He didn’t want to expose himself emotionally to anyone. His

vulnerability wasn't an option to display, he was sure of that, but this moment felt good and his body was overpowering his mind and his reason. He laid still and allowed Joel to play with his hair and even touch the side of his face a few times, until he felt Joel's breath coming in close. He knew it would have to end now and he frowned.

With Joel a few inches above his face, leaning down to plant a kiss, David opened his eyes and looked at him, the act more than surprising him, "What the hell are you doing?" He spoke in a husky whisper, making Joel fall off the side of the cot in shock.

Sarin woke up and spun around. "Go to sleep, both of you, or I'll have to separate you – I can't believe I just said that." He smacked his head with his hand, his long white hair down his back made him look slightly feminine, and both David and Joel noticed and gazed back at his outline. Sarin, in turn, glared as he watched Joel slowly get up off the ground, face red as he slid into his own cot. David remained still, lying on his back and continuing to stare at Sarin, who was still looking very pretty - until he spoke again. David snickered as he glanced over at Joel, who already had his blanket pulled up over his head, his feet sticking out the other end of the cot, totally exposed. He looked like a grown man in a kid's plastic car bed.

"I don't wish to be your parents, so act your age! And quit staring at me like that!" Sarin sat back down on his cot and turned his back to them again while David still grinned at him, enjoying the show.

"Sorry, Sarin, you just look different with your hair down your back, free flowing—" "Silence!"

David started playing with his own hair and laughing softly. Sarin frowned and turned away, shaking his head and pretending to be pissed.

The room was quiet again, but David knew Joel wasn't asleep. *I'm actually afraid to speak to him for fear of pissing off the dorm monitor person next to me, but I really can't let this moment pass without at least one tease.*

However, as the minutes past and the unanimous breathing increased in the room, David found it probably better to just let it go. *I can't believe he tried to kiss me!*

David slowly closed his eyes, the last two things he thought about were in order of appearance in his mind: Joel leaning over him, eyes closed and getting ready to take the plunge, and then Louis, his hand so perfectly fitting into David's, his presence still lingering there in his left hand and all the feelings involved in both intense moments.

As soon as he drifted off to sleep, he woke up and saw Azmodeus sitting there in front of him, one arm resting on his pulled up knee, the other holding a cigarette. He sat on a white fur rug next to a roaring, beautifully decorated fire place, his black tunic half buttoned, and his pants on, but unbuttoned as well. David let his eyes linger there, turning away as he panicked thinking about what he was catching himself doing.

The Dark Lord lit his cigarette and looked up at David while he took a long drag then blew it out so seductively, David couldn't believe anyone could make smoking a cigarette look that cool and boldly sexual. He felt inadequate as he thought of how he used to smoke those things.

"Don't suppose I could have one of those?" He spoke quietly, pointing at the cigarette longingly as he stared at its red tipped end.

"So, you think you can hide from me?" The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed as he focused on David's face. "I know you. I know all about you, and rest assured, I *will* find you. Resistance is not an option and hiding away like a small pathetic rodent will only buy you a mouse trap of the worst proportions you could ever imagine. And I mean to collect what is rightfully mine." Taking another drag and blowing it in David's direction, the Dark Lord's face and presence was intoxicatingly sensual and breathtaking. David held his breath looking almost hypnotized. "And by the way, I hope you were getting used to my touch on your neck, for as of tomorrow, I will create an even stronger spell not—"

"So I did break the spell with my hands!" David snapped out of his daze and brought his hands up to his face to admire them.

"Nooo! That was simply a coincidence my dear! You were lucky, that's all. Now as I was saying—"

"I wonder what else I can do with them?" David whispered to himself, still staring at his hands, having interrupted Azmodeus and angering him again.

"NOTHING! You can do NOTHING with your silly hands but serve drinks for me! I hope you enjoy never sleeping again! Try to break that spell! As I have fixed it, you will not get more than a minute, maybe two at the most, of sleep unless it is between these walls, where you belong." He took another drag from his cigarette to calm himself down, glaring at Esmeralda as she began to stir, then smiling again as he watched David look longingly at the smoke. He spitefully smashed it into the rug when it wasn't even half-smoked.

“You can have one of these when we have our first toast, my dear. Until then, I hope you enjoy my mark on your neck, my nightmares instead of your peaceful sleep, and my hunt for your person and anyone else who may get in my way...like say...Joel for instance.”

Rage crept into David’s eyes as they turned black. Azmodeus began to smile wickedly again as he watched the reaction he wanted.

“I hope you don’t wait up for my arrival, because it will be a cold day in Hell before I show myself to you—“

Azmodeus laughed mockingly. “Well, actually it is cold in Nine—“

“Besides, I’m just getting to know this vast land of yours – now mine as well – and I think I’ll stay awhile and get to know the locals better. By the way, that caress was me seducing you to get what I wanted, and it worked so I suggest you go back to the drawing board and try, try again.” He seethed and breathed out hard as he watched the Dark Lord turn his head to the side and whisper to someone David couldn’t see.

“Lie down and be quiet. You’ll need your strength tomorrow to work for me.” He turned back to David and gave the young man a thorough, look-over, seeing him as if for the first time, then his eyes turned light blue again as he thought of what he needed to say.

“I have just one word for you to think about as you run and hide throughout my Underworld like a scared, sweet puppy, and that word is ‘Dillon.’ “Remember that and know I have made it so that you cannot sleep and when you try, I will send you images of that fallen angel disguised as your brother and all the ways I plan on displaying him to my world. Such a pity he is wasting all that beauty and talent above.” Azmodeus tried to keep his eyes blue to hide his anger, not wanting David to see the effect his words were having on him, but it wasn’t working. Just like in the Cavern, Azmodeus thought, he brings out my natural state, and that is very, very intriguing. He quickly brought his mind back into focus, noticing David was staring at him in fright and he wasn’t paying attention enough to enjoy it fully. “And to think he is marked for Arch Angel status by the Creator Himself, yet all he really wants is to be with you.” Azmodeus shook his head in false disappointment, his eyes turning yellow as he smiled wickedly, watching David finally take a breath in and choke on his sudden rush of emotion, for the first time, too paralyzed to speak.

“You can’t...you can’t touch him...” David breathed out as he felt the panic rush through him, hurting his chest and pounding in his brain.

“Yes, well, I just thought I’d let you know of my plans, for I’m sure when I have your brother here, you’ll feel like such a fool running around out there away from his much needed company.”

David noticed a splatter of blood on the Dark Lord’s hand as he rested it on his knee. He stared at it then looked up at the Devil quickly, not sure if he should break his gaze for too long, whether or not this was a dream, he still didn’t feel safe. “What are you staring at?” Azmodeus spoke with curiosity, his anger at David’s disrespectful comment earlier suddenly dissipated. Oh, how quickly he softens me when I watch him, he thought as he leaned back slightly and propped himself up on his elbow; his face animated and engaged again as he watched the human attempt to address him as an equal.

“Your hand, it has what looks like blood on it, and who were you talking to a minute ago?” David could feel his eyes return blue as he felt drawn in again against his wishes, drawn back into the devil’s intimate space without any sense of control. *He scares me, he confuses my loyalties, my emotions he plays with, yet something tells me he is just as drawn to me as I am to him. Damn it all to Hell...well I guess I’m already here...*

Azmodeus laughed softly as he continued to watch David stare from his hand to his face, also attempting to see beyond what the Dark Lord would allow him. *He has no idea what a privilege it is right now that I converse with him, does he? But his thoughts are hilarious. I do enjoy reading them.* “You have no idea who you are speaking with, do you?”

David answered quickly, anger taking over without warning, his tongue, afire. “Well, do you blame me? I mean, let’s start with the truth shall we, and cast aside the lies you’ve managed to feed me since I first started coming down to this hell hole you’re stuck in—“

“Stuck in?! A hole?! How incredibly funny! This is my home, you little fool! I *own* the Underworld! Down here I am God! You are speaking to me right now only because I *allow* it, so consider yourself privileged! This is my playground and you are simply a guest, like you were before, and only allowed down here because of my doing!” Azmodeus shot up again, wanting to pounce on the human, if only he could touch him.

“So what the hell do you want with me? Was all this trickery your way of snagging my brother? Did you just use me - what, two souls for the price of one? Is that why they call you The Collector? Am I supposed to feel privileged, because right now I feel everything but!” David, furiously angry, seethed as he screamed his accusations at who he once thought of as

Louis. He watched Louis smile again, although his eyes stayed yellow, not changing back to blue since their first words spoken. *He's like me that way, David thought. I hope all our likenesses don't become a trend.*

The Dark Lord laughed as he watched the human sitting before him looking more and more interesting the angrier he became, his eyes a lovely shade of black. “Are there any more questions you'd like to ask, for I don't think you've asked enough of them?”

“Yeah, just one more actually, why do they call you the Ice King, because I think it would be better fitting to refer to you as King of Lies. I bet Louis isn't even your real name is it? I have yet to hear anyone use it to describe you.”

“All that I told you was true at the Cavern, my background, my *private* name, my history, and what I can offer you. The longer you wait to face your destiny by my side, the less likely you will be granted such a prize—“

“More like destiny at your feet,” David whispered, not completely wanting the words to be known, for he wasn't sure he believed it, and a growing part of him wanted to believe what Louis had said and was saying again to him now. He wanted more than anything to believe this stranger's words, because he knew it was all he had to hope for and that was the human condition after all – *but he's the devil...*

The Dark Lord heard his thoughts, sensed his hesitation, but chose not to pursue it at the moment, instead letting the human chart the course of their very entertaining conversation. Truth be told, but not to anyone anytime soon, the Dark Lord was enjoying this time - the first in ages. *And to think I actually did research on humans before this night's conversation! I really didn't need to, for he's playing right into my hand.*

He waited a minute for the human to ask him again what he already knew he would ask. *He is easy to read, which will serve me well, and his temper I find entertaining, especially at this time of night.*

“Did you use me to get to my brother?” David's voice challenging as he threw out the only question he wanted answered, for he suddenly didn't care about himself. He realized he was already caught and it was only going to be a matter of time before he would be there in person, but Dillon, he was still above and unprotected. *He won't fall into the same web, Dillon will resist because he's a stronger Christian than I ever was...*

He wanted to believe his thoughts, but he couldn't and he clenched his fists thinking just

that – *Dillon was NOT strong, not strong at all – and so what if he’s a Christian! I’ve already seen how God gets involved...*

The Dark Lord got up and walked over to his almost empty wine bottle, picking it up, along with two glasses and walked back over. He still felt intoxicated, but it never lasted long. Alcohol left his system quickly, and although drunk earlier, he was feeling too sober again. He glanced over at Esmeralda as he walked by her and frowned. *Shouldn’t have touched that*, he thought as he sat back down in front of David and poured wine into the two glasses, then took one and placed it in front of him, motioning to David with two fingers like he was hired help and the glass needed refilling, then took the other one and sipped.

He’s avoiding the question, just like he’s managed to avoid all my questions tonight. I do feel like a fool at the moment. David glanced at the wine glass and frowned. “Wouldn’t you like that?” He whispered as the Dark Lord finished his drink and placed it down to look upon him again like they were having a drinking contest. *You’d like me drunk right now asshole, but I won’t be an easy manipulation.* If only David knew all his thoughts were easily readable.

Azmodeus chose to withhold telling David he could read his mind like an open book. It made for more engaging entertainment and he rationalized that he was getting an education about humans in general, just by reading this newly descended one’s thoughts. “I did not use you, as you put it, to get to your brother. I did not even know he existed until just recently when it was pointed out during a rendezvous with you at Fifth’s.”

David closed his eyes and flinched at the recent memory and his apparent blindness to the fabrication laid out before him at Fifth’s Cavern. Azmodeus grinned as he watched and continued.

“But rest assured, he is not untouchable, for I sense he will deteriorate quickly into a very self-harming depression. He will follow in your footsteps, besides,” he smiled as he watched David look down, a nervous expression of worry on his face, “You already know the two of you share a connection - your souls somehow affected by each other. He cannot exist without you up there...his stronger half is now gone...such a dilemma.” He began to relax as he felt the alcohol kick in again, his speech slowing down and the sarcastic bite Azmodeus normally owned, dissipating as well.

David thought for a second, trying to think of a comeback worthy of demonic retribution when it dawned on him, something he already knew but didn’t think was possible in the animal

kingdom.

Azmodeus watched him intently. So pretty, he thought. *I bet he's even more magnificent when he experiences pain and anguish.*

“The crows,” David looked up again at the Dark Lord, who was smiling now. “You used those crows to spy on us, didn’t you? I knew it, for they were everywhere we were. I knew it, but no one would have believed me, except Dillon. He knew they were spying and he tried to get my attention!” He sighed and rubbed his forehead as he thought about the crows still up there right now, watching and reporting on his brother, perched on their Eucalyptus tree. There’s got to be a way I can reach him, he thought, then shook the thought out of his head before the devil could pick up on it. “What about the blood? What is the blood from and who, who were you talking to earlier?” He changed the subject quickly, half-relieved and feeling less guilty over the fact that maybe Louis didn’t know about Dillon before his meeting him. He couldn’t bear to think he was to blame for Dillon’s targeted soul, yet nervous to continue to talk about his brother to the Devil.

The Dark Lord glanced at his hand, then frowned as he looked over at his witch, lying prone on the floor asleep, or passed out, he didn’t know for sure. She had been an easy take, but with the mood he was in, she should have known better than to offer him her backside so willingly on this night, especially with his disappointment earlier. Her ass glistened with drying blood; strands of her long hair were lying in clumps nearby.

He looked back at David and smiled. “My witch’s blood adorns my hands. She had wanted a little attention this night, and well, I was in just the right frame of mind to give it to her. Along with adding my own personal signature towards the end of our meeting, when I saw she was enjoying it more than I was.”

David gulped some air as he watched the Devil speak so casually. Did he kill her? He didn’t know, nor did he care at the moment. Any idiot who would venture to sleep with the Devil himself would get all the pain and torture befitting the whore. “I see,” David whispered, then frowned as he watched the Dark Lord smile at him longingly, looking him over again as if undressing him with those yellow eyes. “Quit looking at me like that! I’m no whore you can beat up and toss aside like all the others I get the distinct impression you use—“

Azmodeus threw his head back and laughed heartily, enjoying the visual and the moment.

He looks so beautiful, David thought. *I can’t believe I let him in once, and now, now he*

has me almost pinned down.

When the Dark Lord finally collected himself from the most comical comment he'd heard in ages, he grinned in triumph over his newest, future addition to Nine. "Well, you are finally right, for once. You see, I most definitely wouldn't toss you aside after I was finished - I'd reuse you." Azmodeus leaned in as he smiled wickedly, sensing David's continued frustration and what now felt like embarrassment over walking into that particular insult, "Over and over and over again, for centuries probably."

"Well, this is a dream, so I'll just keep sleeping!" David spat out in disgust, turning away, his face glowing red as he heard another laugh follow his words. *He thinks this is so funny, asshole. I'm not going to play into your hand again so easily.*

Azmodeus suddenly changed his mood again, his eyes glowing as he leaned in to make his words sharper, with greater meaning, for their poking fun and chit-chat was now over as far as he was concerned. He also didn't like the tone or the words the human was feeding him. *He has grown into a nice specimen of a young man, however his sharp, forked tongue both makes me want to hear more and yet cut it out of his pretty little mouth at the same time.* "I am going to remind you just once, for that would be all the warning you would receive should you be here in person and not in a silly dream. I am to be referred by everyone as 'Lord,' except for my personal subjects under my direct control and influence. That person, for there is only one at the moment," as he stressed this David glanced up at him again. "That person will refer to me as 'Master.' So I would advise you to address me that way, for you are the only one privileged to refer to me by that title."

David smirked as he looked down, trying to bite his tongue to keep from returning a sarcastic remark. "I am not under your control or your influences, so your rules don't apply to me, and may I add another comment? Your eyes change with your mood, as do mine so maybe that would imply we are equals? Should I just refer to you as King of Lies then and drop the mastermind routine?" He smiled sarcastically back.

"I THINK YOU CAN—"

David forced himself to wake up at that moment, making sure to interrupt Azmodeus in mid-sentence just to piss him off. "How do you like that?" He whispered as he sat up on his cot and looked over at Joel, who was lying on his side and staring at him.

"Hey - who are you talking to?" Joel whispered. "I've been waiting for you to wake up.

You were thrashing around a lot and it was making me nervous. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay eventually. So, how was my hair? Was it as soft as you had predicted it to be? Would you like the name of the shampoo I use?" David whispered, flipping his hair around like a model, trying not to laugh as he said those words in the dark.

"Shut up, Dave. Just shut the hell up."

"Good night Dorothy." David whispered sweetly.

"Good night Toto."

Chapter Ten

Headstrong

David didn't listen to Azmodeus' warning and immediately fell asleep, only to wake up quickly - although not quickly enough - to have the worst nightmare of his new life so far. Gasping for air, sweating, and clinging to Joel who was leaning over him in his cot again, he shook all over. David didn't know it at first, but he was crying as he buried his head and face into Joel's chest, holding onto him as if his life depended on it.

Images of Dillon in pieces around him in a cold, dimly lit room; each piece reaching out for him, while Dillon's blood drenched his hands and face, splattered everywhere. Letting go of the knife to watch it slip and fall to the floor and realizing he was the one to cut and chop up his better half, David couldn't bear to watch his own nightmare. Lying there with his face still in Joel's shirt, listening to him breathe in and out, David felt more anguish as he relived the rest of the dream. Reaching out to feel the wound run the full length of his own body, where he'd cut his brother off him like they were conjoined twins, he could swear he actually felt the wetness from the side of his face down to his ankle.

He woke up after he saw Dillon's severed hand lying near him, the red friendship bracelet lying on the ground, having fallen off at the wrist. David had reached for his but it wasn't there. He woke up grabbing his hand and frantically feeling for his brother's bracelet, relieved to find it there. He breathed out in slow anguish as the tears began to flow. Joel held him in silence, grabbing him and pulling him in for support, knowing he'd probably dreamt of his brother, for he'd heard him talk earlier in his dream about someone not being able to touch him.

"Shhh...it's okay, Dave. It was a dream, that's all. You're safe. Go back to sleep now." He sat there and let David cry for a few minutes, silent tears so as not to wake the others, then, as if finishing purging his soul and after having reeled there in guilt and pain over leaving his little brother, David finally stopped and laid back down, exhausted and more tired than he'd ever felt in his entire existence, but knowing he would never be able to enjoy the comfort of sleep again. *He's taken that joy away from me, robbing me of my rest, and my dreams, now scripted, bloody nightmares.*

Joel sat there and played with his friend's hair, this time, to soothe his weary friend, for he could see him in the dark, every inch of his face in detail, his pain and turmoil making Joel want to cry as well. The emotion was heavily detailed on his friend's face, and he couldn't tear

away from the image, so he watched David lay there still holding his hand to his chest. Joel reached down to gently grab the guarded hand, but David pushed him away, then quickly changed his mind and reached for him again, pulling Joel down to him; the two of them lying on the cot side by side. Joel froze there next to David, excited and nervous for the invitation.

He's just grief stricken and I'm the only one here he can reach for, that's all.

But in the quiet of the dark, they both laid there together, and Joel couldn't contain the happiness of being invited in. He didn't sleep the rest of the night and neither did David. The two didn't talk, for fear of waking the others and each surely thinking the other was asleep anyway. After a while, the distance between them disappeared as they huddled together.

As morning came, Joel got up quietly, letting go of David's hand and retreating to his own bed. David laid there and listened to him do so without saying a word. Within a minute's time, Joel was fast asleep and breathing heavily. Hmm, David thought. *Why couldn't he sleep with me?* He rolled back over on his back and stretched out. It was nice lying with Joel, although he would never admit it. He'd only just recently let Dillon lay with him in bed, and they had shared the same room all their lives. *I guess I have always had trust issues, but maybe now I've left them behind?* He glanced over at Joel's body outline and thought about what he'd just invited in. He sighed and allowed his mind to drift back to his earlier marathon conversation with Louis, or whatever his name was. He thought about all they'd spoken about, the smug overconfidence Louis exhibited and breathed out as he looked through him like he was a piece of meat already sold, cooked and ready to eat. He thought of the witch probably lying in pieces nearby while Louis wiped the blood casually off himself; the intimacy he'd shared with her obviously not something he'd wanted. *He must have been drunk and once sober, realized what he'd done. He had invited her into his personal space, although somehow I think that's not his nature, yet he and I had shared intimacy earlier with just our hands. Strange, but I think he's conflicted, as am I.*

The day came and went quickly for everyone but David, for the Dark Lord was right when he had warned of an even better torture in store for his young apprentice. Instead of choking, gasping for air and pain at his throat, David experienced intense cold shoot through his body, starting with an electric shock at his neck, only to shoot down his spine then extend out the rest of his body like he was being submerged in icy water. The first time it happened he was getting out of bed and making small talk with Joel, for there was an awkward space between

them, and Joel was trying without success to make and keep eye contact with him. He fell over his bed and landed on Joel's as the shock first hit him, gasping and pulling up into a fetal position on Joel's bed as he suddenly started shivering and chilling intensely, his teeth chattering as he felt cold hands on his body, caressing him vengefully. *So this is what it feels like to be near him? I can see now why he's doing this, shouldn't have made the comment about him being 'The Ice King.'*

He screamed out as the cold fingers caressed the back of his neck, making his teeth chatter even more. He swore he was going to lose all of them at that moment, but it finally passed.

"How could he?!" He sat up on Joel's cot and shivered. Joel threw another blanket over him and rubbed his back rapidly.

"Geez, Dave, you feel icy cold! Oh my God!" He pulled his hands away from David's back and flung them around like they were on fire, then breathed on them, his face grimacing in pain. "Holy shit, holy shit, holy sh-shittt!" He felt a small fraction of what had been coursing through David. *Mental note to self, do not touch David when he's experiencing his mark's curse.* He dove onto David's cot and pulled the blankets up to his face.

"How Joel - how could he lay his hands on me like that, like I'm some piece of meat?!" He felt cheapened, a whore serving the demented needs of a Devil he unknowingly sold himself to. And for the first time ever, his voice had a pleading quality to it, catching Joel off guard as he lay there speechless, not knowing what to say and feeling once again empathetically confused.

A brief silence followed, with David continuing his monologue. "I-I don't know how he could do that! I f-feel so fucking cold! I'm already dead and yet I fight it! I want to disappear I tell you! I can't take this! I won't be able to take this much longer." He shivered as he lay there, talking was hurting his chest, the cold air in his lungs bruising his ribcage.

Joel found his voice after searching for what felt like an eternity. "You can Dave! Don't talk like that! I'm here with you and you can do this, you can beat him at his game. You just have to turn it around and make it your game. I think every minute that goes by and he hasn't found you is a minute of pure hell for him, so just by hiding here with me of all people, you - we - are torturing him and his pride, so just be patient. I'm here for you, so you're not alone, and after experiencing a tiny ounce of what you just experienced, I also now have an amazing shit load of empathy for you." He shivered as he finished his sentence, lying on his side in David's

cot and facing him, trying to get warm and wanting desperately for body heat. Instead, he watched and waited with baited breath for a response to what appeared to him as he heard himself speak, a horribly scripted cheerleading chant for the downtrodden football team loosing by two touch downs, with ten seconds to go in the fourth quarter.

David was lying on Joel's cot and looking back at him, not knowing how to respond to all the positive regards projected at him like vomit. He couldn't return a smart reply, not with Joel. Instead he did what he enjoyed doing most, he enjoyed the silence. It was a nice moment of quiet, with nobody else in the room with them. He began to warm up as he watched Joel. It took only a few seconds for his fire element to reheat his center. Joel however, was shivering across from him.

Later on he would rationalize that the cold spell had warped his mind, but in that moment, with nobody in the room to invade their space, he slowly rose and walked around his cot, with Joel lying there huddled under that blanket, and slid next to him. He didn't even have to touch his friend, the natural heat David emanated was enough to warm his soul.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being an ass last night. I was awake while you were, well, you know, and I-I—"

"That's fine, Dave. I knew you were awake, and for a second or two I actually felt like you wanted me to...well...you know, (*awkward! Say something funny...*) but anyway, it won't happen again...today, so rest assured." Joel spoke very matter of fact, and David started to laugh at the comical nature of his timing.

He's so funny, and I am so glad he's here, and at least now I really know how he feels about me, although I know that isn't a good thing, but hey? Could it be serious if he is cracking jokes? David sighed, but felt warm again, and he and Joel got up together and walked outside.

The day went by uneventfully, as did the next day and the day after that. They were all hiding out and recovering from the battle, for there were a few injured. Oleander was nowhere to be seen, however word of his talking to a few select guests had everyone else gossiping. David was interested in meeting the legend, however Sarin was absolutely against it, although he had agreed to keep them there. Apparently Sarin was one of the few selected to see and talk with the ancient elf. "Well, la-dee-da," David mouthed silently to Joel as they overheard Sarin talk about his visits with Oleander to anyone who'd listen.

After the third day of being there without seeing Oleander, or sleeping for that matter,

David began to tire and grow impatient. With the fatigue, his moods became almost unbearable. The only person who could tolerate him and continued to stay with him was Joel.

They did not discuss their first night at Sanctuary however, and although the cold spells David endured were less frequent than the earlier episodes of choking, when they did occur, he was completely debilitated until they passed. It pained Joel greatly to watch him suffer, and he refused to leave his side, even when the verbal assaults took place, and they did, frequently.

It was the morning of the fifth day, and as they all woke up, David lay in his bed and waited. Sarin rolled over to get up, sitting on the edge of his cot.

“So, any chance I could see Oleander today?” David spoke very matter of fact, almost expecting a ‘no’ in response, not looking at Sarin as he spoke. David had become distant again over the past few days, only making occasional eye contact with Joel, and not talking to hardly anyone else for that matter.

“I can find out, however, may I remind you to be on your best behavior today? You have managed to offend several here, and the only reason you haven’t offended us is because we have learned to ignore your comments. I need your word on that, for if you are disrespectful—“

“I will check myself at the door, that’s my word.” David spoke quickly, already impatient and so incredibly tired that his eyes hurt and burned fire. *So, this is hell? I am feeling it; the repetition is absolutely killing me.*

Sarin got up and left the room. Joel began to stir, waking up slowly and stretching. Great, rub it in, David thought as he tried not to watch him sprawled out in bed like a little boy waking up after a long winter’s nap.

As the morning came and went, and afternoon was leaving as well, Sanctuary was busy with activity, with everyone socializing, drinking and relaxing. David felt different, on edge, and he kept looking behind him and around him for what felt like eyes watching, coming in and inspecting him closely. “Why do I feel like I’m on display?” He whispered to Joel who was lounging in a wooden patio chair next to the little Japanese fountain, admiring the greenery and a white butterfly going by his face. He smiled as he looked up at David, his face dreamy and relaxed. “What?” Joel asked in a daze.

“Fucking hell, Joel! Are you listening to me?! Are you high?! I said it feels like I’m on parade! I feel like I’m the God-damned head baton twirler in a death parade! There are eyes watching me - up close! Why?” David whispered the last sentence again, so as not to cause too

much of a stir, although several elves in a group nearby looked over at him and began to whisper. He shot them all a mean look, then turned back to Joel, who had finally gotten out of his chair to look David in the eye, for he could feel another argument kicking in between the two of them, and he was trying so hard to be the Lord of Patience lately.

In characteristic fashion so as not to allow Joel sufficient time to answer, he continued, quickly changing the subject. “And by the way, Joel, I hate to burst your sunshine bubble but the daylight in this dome, the butterfly gone by, the plants, hell - this whole God damn place is make-believe! All of it magically created!” He brought his hands up in front of Joel’s face and wiggled his fingers for effect, which only served to piss a very patient Joel off. “Just remember that! You are not in happy land. There is no Ronald MacDonald playground to romp around in after you’ve had your Big Mac and large fry! No fucking magic carpet ride! YOU-ARE-IN-HELL!”

David turned and walked in the opposite direction, suddenly not wanting to talk to anyone. He felt Dillon strongly today, more so than any other day gone by minus the first night he was sent down. “Dillon? Can you hear me? What are you up to, Louis?” He whispered as he walked down a long hall in the open courtyard. Several of the bystanders were watching him, all of them whispering and pointing. He turned his head to the side, away from them all as he walked. His mark was bright yellow constantly, more intensely during the cold spells, but never relenting in shining the Dark Lord’s mark on everyone who stood in front of him, like a mirror. So David made the effort to sidestep them all when they’d walk his way, just so he wouldn’t have to see it. The reminder bothered him greatly, but he was beginning to get used to it. He smiled as he remembered Joel telling him the other day, “Just think of it as a built-in flashlight! I mean, how cool is that? And handy down here!” the image of Joel nodding his head as he tried to convince David the relevance of such a ‘neo-birth mark’ as he termed it, made him almost smile at the memory.

Joel was walking behind him now, trying to catch up without getting in his face. David felt him without seeing him and startled him with a yell over his shoulder. “Leave me alone, Joel! I just want to be alone right now! Go find yourself another butterfly!”

“Dave!” Joel grabbed his arm and stopped him.

David pulled his arm away and glared back. “Don’t touch me! I said I wanted to be left alone!” He stopped and shot a look to kill in the opposite direction. “What the hell are you

staring at? Ever seen a human before? We come with instructions, you know! The first one is to *not stare*, the second one is to *fuck off!*” They started to walk away while he continued to scowl at them. He turned back to Joel and met his glare.

“Don’t say it! Just don’t give me that look Joel!”

“What? Give you the look of ‘hey, you’re acting like an asshole’ look?” Joel nodded his head ‘yes’ to answer his own question. “Or how ‘bout this one? Gee Dave, care to unwind your underwear from that knot you’ve managed to cram up your ass?!”

David pointed his finger into Joel’s chest with each word he spoke. “I-said-leave-me-the-fuck-alone!” He pushed Joel backward with the last word.

“No, you didn’t, you said ‘you wanted to be left alone,’ not ‘leave-me-the-fuck-alone!” Joel pointed his finger back into David’s chest, and with the last word, David caught Joel’s finger and pushed it away, then pushed him backward, followed by Joel pushing him back, then a charge into Joel’s midsection, sending both of them over the wooden side rail lining the walkway, breaking it in two as they landed in a smaller version of the Japanese pond near the front of the complex.

Joel shot up out of the water, a green lily pad stuck on the side of his head with its white flower over his right eye, dressing him like a brilliantly colored eye patch. David, lying on top of Joel, tried to get his footing, but Joel reached over and grabbed his leg, throwing him off balance and backward into the two foot deep pond water, rolling over him and going to get up to side step onto a rock nearby, but David reached up with one hand and grabbed Joel’s off balanced leg, sending him backward into the pond again, the lily pad now sitting on his face like an alien. It was quickly losing its beautiful foliage.

David pounced on Joel, getting ready to throw a punch down when the cold shock hit him again, right as he raised his fist. He let out a cold gasp, hesitating long enough to allow Joel to take the lily pad off his face and shove it up David’s nose, knocking him off balance, pushing and shoving him into the pond, face-first into the water. Leaning over him, finger pointing and yelling, Joel tried to sound authoritative. “That’s enough! Knock it off, Dave! Just stop this right—“

He then yelled out in pain as David reached up as best he could and grabbed Joel’s ankle, the cold shock quickly traveling up. He began to bounce around in the pond in cold pain, hopping on his good leg while David tried to crawl out of the pond twice, each time shivering

enough to roll back in. A smack with a bamboo cane on his head and a matching one to Joel's thighs caused them both to stop and look up.

"Oww!" Joel shrieked and grabbed his leg, jumping up and down again. David spit a piece of lily pad out of his mouth.

"Get out of my pond, fools! You scare the fish!"

"Oww!" Joel screamed out again while David grabbed his head and lowered it as another thwack on both of them occurred before either one could move or answer.

Looking up gingerly, thinking maybe the coast was clear, David braved a glance upward and saw him. Oleander stood there, hands on his hips and glaring between the two of them; his movements with that bamboo cane faster than the eye could register. As he started to speak, he moved his cane around on the ground like a blind person, keeping tune with his words, causing both of them to watch it intently, expecting more thwacks. "If you want fight, let's go -now, tough guys!" He turned and walked past Sarin, who was utterly shocked to see Oleander outside, as well as all the other bystanders standing there. They had come over to watch the supposed love birds' duel, for word in Sanctuary was just that: David and Joel were two birds of the same feather. And it was lovely to watch.

Chapter Eleven

No Regrets

She woke up immediately following the Dark Lord's conversation with the young man. The yelling bolted her up in a flash, although she quickly remembered the state of her body and tried to rise, unable to do so. Esmeralda found herself crumpling back to the floor like a house of cards, looking over just in time to see the Dark Lord launch himself up to curse, throwing his half-empty glass of wine against the double doors.

“You ungrateful, spiteful, human beast!” He yelled then stormed over to where David was once sitting and stomped around still barefoot, kicking the empty wine bottle into the fire place. Esmeralda flinched as she watched him stand there, hands on his head, fuming as he looked at the ground where the human's image once was, his face twisted in disbelief and shock. She'd never seen him this way before.

Trying to sit up, but unable to do so, Esmeralda whimpered as she felt as if her backside was slashed in several pieces. She then muffled a sob, not wanting to make any more noise, after spotting a clump of her hair off to the side on the white fur rug she was lying on and touched her scalp, her hair disheveled and tangled in knots there. She finally sat up and looked down at her body, naked and sitting near the fire place. It glowed – or glistened if the dried blood caught the light just right - in the low fire. From the front, she looked unharmed, but as she tried to rollover on her buttocks, she flinched and reached around to touch them, lightly rubbing her hand along deep bloody grooves and flaps of flesh. Just the slightest of movement and repositioning caused small rivers of dark, almost black blood flowing down her sides to gather around her middle, pooling in her belly button then flowing down her pelvis. She was able to watch as more blood ran down one of her legs. She sobbed again, as quietly as she could and went to get up, but the room began to spin, so she slowly laid herself back down on the rug. Azmodeus looked over and watched her struggle, his face disgusted as he saw her attempt to muffle her cries and lay back down.

“Are those tears of joy?” He growled. “Tears of relief mixed with gratitude for experiencing and surviving to be in fact, one of only two creatures to ever live after a session with Yours Truly?” He looked over at her and watched her pause to think of what to say, her head bowed and appearing embarrassed for him to see her like this, even though it was his doing, her ripped up appearance. Esmeralda chose to remain silent, knowing her show of weakness was

not attractive to him.

“I thought so,” he spoke with disdain as he looked away from her and walked over to the couch, flopping down and grabbing for another bottle of wine. Not bothering to get a glass, he popped the cork and took a long drink to numb his frustrated self. *He’ll pay. He’ll pay for spiting me. No one ends a conversation with me first! I’ll beat every ounce of flesh on his backside for mocking me!*

Azmodeus paused and took yet another long drink, trying this time to not think about him at all, but failing miserably. Not in the cards tonight, he thought. *Well, while I’m thinking about all the ways to inflict bodily and mental harm on the pretty little beast, at least he’ll in turn, think of me every time he closes his eyes to enjoy the thought of sleep, and first thing tomorrow morning, a personal wakeup call directly from my open, caring, taking hands.*

“My Lord?” Esmeralda looked up after a few minutes, when she’d thought he was finally settling down.

“I thought I told you to save your energy to serve me tomorrow? Lie down, or else I’ll get the impression I didn’t do an adequate job carving my signature into your backside.” He took another swig of wine then lowered it to the ground next to the couch, laying his head back on a pillow and closing his eyes, his breathing still heavy as he tried to contain his anger. He had to fight the urge to rip her apart in his rage over David’s rude, unexpected departure.

“My Lord? Please, help me? I-I am too weak to retire to my chambers, and I am grateful you spared me. I suppose it not the right time to discuss what we shared—“

“No, now would be the worst time to remind me of what I shouldn’t have done. The fact that I spared your poor, defenseless body tonight should indeed make you wish to serve me in any capacity.” He spoke in barely a whisper, eyes still closed as he lay there.

“But my Lord, I already serve you in every way, and now tonight, at least I know I served to help you release your frustrations—“

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO MENTION MY MISTAKE! Would you like me to drag you by your hair to your bed so that I can recover in peace, because I’m beginning to reconsider my generosity in keeping you around!” He paused and changed his tone of voice to reflect a smug sarcastic quality as he spoke mainly to himself. “I honestly do not know why you are still talking. I can cut your tongue out and throw it into the fire if you’d like?” He kept his eyes closed, however, his face was enraged as he pretended to relax.

She answered him quietly and with much resolution not to push what powerful emotions she was feeling his way. “No, I do not wish that. I am grateful and I will rejuvenate by the morning, if not sooner, for I already feel my strength somewhat returning and I think the bleeding has now stopped—“

“Excellent! Bravo! Might I add a sentence? Don’t talk - just lay there and look pretty for me, my dear. I am going to numb myself now and when I am finished, I will expect you to help me create an improved Mark Spell for my little canine, since he has managed to break the one I created yesterday. This time, I want to create a spell to inflict not only my personal version of pain and torture, but something more intensely *personal*. Instead of it coming from the mark itself, and my hand pressing on it, I want to violate his entire body with hands of ice and deathly cold running along anywhere and everywhere I please to send my own message of ‘hello, remember me?’ He will suffer by my hands – how new and innovative! And to think he doesn’t even realize how lucky and privileged he is to have my personal touch!” His eye twitched as he tried to resist the incredible urge to throw yet another bottle of wine he was drinking. “I cannot remember the last time I actually laid hands on anyone, either for pleasure or pain. He will be the first! And you, you will help me do this from several Gates away.” He finally opened his eyes and looked over at her.

Esmeralda in turn, looked puzzled as she debated how to ask him gently about being able to perform such a spell in a way that didn’t involve him throwing the very full bottle of wine her way. As if reading her mind, he smiled and showed her his hand and specifically his index finger, sticking it up.

“I have a drop of blood, his blood, from whence we danced earlier this night, taken directly from his palm. He has no idea what’s in store for him, but I do.” He smiled wickedly again, his mood suddenly changed - sinister and more natural for his spirit. It suited him best to be this way, for he never seemed to do the ‘spoiled child having a tantrum at not getting his way’ routine, Esmeralda thought as she watched him light up at his suggestion. “And what makes it all so ironic, unbeknownst to him, is that he invited my hand to take his, for I only had license to touch my Mark on his throat. By extending his hand to mine and embracing me so willingly and for so long, he allowed his skin to be exposed. Strange, but his innocent invitation will in the end, serve as his downfall, because he will not be able to tolerate such a frequented intrusion.” He took another swig, staring at his affected hand, for it still tingled and pulsated as he stretched

his fingers out, then pulled them into a fist. *Isn't love grand?*

Esmeralda lay still on the rug, having reached for a pillow to tuck under her head, doing what she was told to do – look pretty for him, she thought, as she tried to keep her backside away from his view and quickly tried to flatten her straggled, nest-like hair, although quickly realizing he was way too enamored with his hand. She smiled weakly as she thought of their moment together. She drifted off to sleep thinking about his beautiful form as he came to her.

By morning, she had awakened refreshed and anew, as only a vampire could do so quickly. Unaware, she wandered back to her room in a semi-daze, content and very much elated state of mind after having experienced and survived such an amazing night of passion. It took a few minutes for the inevitable truth to sink in for her battle wounds were not even scars to remember.

Looking into a mirror, the vampire became incredibly sad as she stood naked in her own private tub and slowly, then with urgency, washed away the clumps of blood to reveal smooth, perfectly intact skin. Still standing there, she turned to the side to see her reflection now completely clean of self debris, holding her breath in disappointment as she noticed with sudden, intense despair, her backside intact and beautifully adorned with new, unbroken, unscarred skin. Her lower lip quivered as she tried not to sob.

“No! It cannot be! I loved him and he left his mark! NO!” She broke her mirror with a well placed, hard left punch only a female vampire could deliver. She stared at her fragmented reflection and screamed.

Chapter Twelve

Pay Your Respects to this Remarkable Young Man – No Pictures Please

The funeral was delayed a few days to allow for the autopsy and coroner's report to finish. This allowed word to spread like wildfire in the football community of Vista. Soon people from all over told their own tales as to what had happened to David Smith, the 'Dark One' as they all began to refer to him.

Most of the Smiths were understandably in a state of shock, locked up in their house. With the help of some heavy duty tranquilizers, thanks to the quick house call by Dr. Steven Young, a close friend and church member, Mrs. Smith disconnected herself from the rest of the family by remaining in bed following David's death. It didn't take long however, for the eldest child Samantha, to instill some much needed Christian words of encouragement before she began to realize what had been dealt her. As she began to lecture, telling Mother that she had her family waiting for her and Dillon was in bad shape, that she 'better rise up and be the pillar every mother was supposed to be at times like these.' "He's checked out Mother, please know that. We all need you...but Dillon really needs you."

Hearing his name shot Mother out of bed and forced her to take a good look in the mirror. Oh, what a horrible sight she thought as she turned away and rubbed her forehead. She felt groggy and numb and that wasn't a good thing to feel so soon after a child she never knew was taken in his sleep. "Taken where?" She whispered.

"What was that Mother?" Samantha peered around the door frame into the bathroom and watched as her mother leaned her back against the counter, looking suddenly very pale.

"Huh?" Mother shook her head and imaginary cob webs flew around her. She had done the right thing in bringing her second son home. She knew this as she turned and watched her reflection in the mirror. That religious school for wayward, lost boys was anything but what she had wanted for him. She didn't believe he belonged there anyway, felt coerced the entire time they were there that sad day, not a little less than a week ago. It seemed like a lifetime away she thought. She sobbed again as she stood at the sink while Samantha put toothpaste on her toothbrush then handed it to her. Sam then grabbed the silver plated family heirloom brush and started to work on her mother's long, gorgeous blond locks.

It wasn't my fault! I loved him and brought him back home! Was that wrong, Lord?

She continued to stand there, leaning against the sink with her tooth brush hanging out of

her mouth and paused, suddenly feeling so shaky and weak. Her body felt fragile. At almost six feet tall, Mother used to be a towering pillar of strength, seemingly taller and wiser in the past week, but now, she thought, as she looked at her devastated exterior, how badly she had fallen to more than half her size.

Her second son taken from her was a sign from God, Himself. She was sure of it. He had taken the boy from her loving arms before she could effectively care for him the way she had always wanted and needed to do but somehow, could never manage on her own. Not having the support of her husband beside her, being a single parent to a troubled youth like David was no simple feat. He blocked and rejected every move since she could remember. So why would he be taken now, when she had finally gotten his permission to get close enough to him to matter? It just didn't make sense. All Mother could see now was that a fraction - a fifth of her life had been subtracted from the equation and only God knew why. Would David go to Heaven? Was he saved? She cringed at the thought as she hovered on her feet, barely touching the carpet. He was a soul lost, in need of love, guidance and acceptance. *Why Lord? Why would you take him from me now? What was my crime – my taking my son out of that school was the only thing I could do, and yet you disagreed. Now he's gone and I have to live with it! I have to live knowing if I'd only kept him there, he'd be alive right now!*

She thought all these things and more, and her guilt and shame would haunt her, eventually changing her relationship with God Himself. Mother wasn't a hateful person; never had she experienced such an emotion. She was in denial and felt only the self criticism a mother could feel. She just couldn't convince herself, as hard as she tried these past few days, that she was wrong in bringing him home; she just knew she had done the right thing - the only thing - but God didn't approve, didn't feel she nor her husband were capable of bringing him into the light of day.

As if trying to answer God right there in her bathroom, she whispered in protest, "But he kissed me good night, right here." Eyes glazed over as she weakly pointed to her cheek, "He's never done that before..."

"Uh...of course he loved you Mother. He loved you very much, but he just-he just didn't know how to express himself very well. We all loved David." Samantha stood behind and wrapped her arms around her, steadying her, semi-relieved she was at least talking and moving around the room.

Mother flinched at the sound of his name. “Do not talk about him in the past tense yet... I’m not ready to put him there.” She let go of Samantha’s hold and staggered into her bedroom, climbing back into bed. She stayed there for a couple of hours before getting back up again to begin dinner. This time it was Father who brought her out of hiding.

Although Sara Smith was having a very difficult time adjusting to David’s death as permanent, John Smith was a changed man over night. He was hugging his children every chance he got, which was frequently, and he no longer raised his voice. He instead chose to speak calmly, placing his hands on them whenever he spoke, bringing them physically close to him so that he could value them again, all of them. Unlike his wife, John had made peace with God during the rise of the morning sun the very next day. He had taken care of Sara, watched his children suffer and grieve, then in the early hour Sunday morning, Father made peace with God.

For Dillon, however, it wasn’t going to be that way. He chose not to stay in bed all day like his mother. Instead, he spent all of Sunday, and most of the days the following week, on the roof above the porch, watching the horizon and taking stock at the crows that would come and go, all the while noticing how they all watched him each time they were near. He knew their mission and passively accepted their intrusions. They were watching him and taking notes, he was sure of this, but he wouldn’t give them a show he thought, at least not yet anyway.

On one occasion, a crow Dillon had seen numerous times before flew and landed on the rooftop next to him, almost at arm’s length. It sat there quietly with the boy for a good hour before leaving, neither of them speaking. It was eerie, but Dillon felt from the moment his brother had left his world, life would indeed be this way – strange and other worldly - far from predictable. And he was right, for life as he knew it would change for him indefinitely. Glancing over at the crow, Dillon could tell he knew it too and although only thinking it for a second, he could swear to no one he felt the crow’s sympathy.

Sunday night came quickly, announcing the end of the weekend and Tommy’s visit. He finally went home to see his parents, after avoiding their phone calls most of the day. He’d never had permission to stay to begin with, but his parents hardly questioned his whereabouts. They knew his celebrity status granted him occasional Saturday night adventures, but this had extended well into the next day.

Dillon refused dinner, excusing himself upstairs to his room. It was the first time he’d been up there since the early morning hours following David’s passing, and now as the daylight

slowly left the sky Sunday night, he walked up the stairs alone to his room. His feet felt heavier with every step he took, so that he was breathless by the time he took his last step up. As he leaned against the railing and closed his eyes for a second or two to catch his breath, he could feel small beads of sweat on his forehead trickle down his temples. He turned and walked into his room. The first thing to hit him was the temperature. It was ice cold, the freezing air turning his sweat to ice on his face. Taking a breath in only to heave it out of his aching chest, Dillon stumbled over to his brother's bed and sat down on the edge. He allowed his eyes to first travel from his empty bed, to the closed window, and finally, to the closet door.

He'd inspected the closet the first night, but found nothing, not even a scent of his brother, or jasmine – nothing but the lingering stench of old sneakers floating up from the floor. It was as if nothing had ever happened in that small, confined space. He slept in there anyway – well, he didn't sleep, but he laid there and waited for it to happen. He'd never dreamt into the closet like David did, although he wanted to – desperately. David's dream travels had created a substantial distance between the two of them. Sharing a brotherly bond stronger than any friendship, Dillon felt as though the closet door had isolated him from his older brother. He wanted to have the connection with the closet, but it had eluded him. The door was just a closet's entrance for Dillon.

Sitting there now, staring at it with a contempt that screamed obscenities in his head, he tried to keep composure. After a few minutes of silently breathing his thoughts to the room, he finally settled down. Thinking about the closet door again, he could vaguely remember on more than a couple of occasions, dreaming of trying unsuccessfully to open the door. He remembered standing there and knocking on it lightly in the dark, but never going in. Now he knew why. He knew why and it burned him madly, the anger welling up in his chest making him breathe out forcefully as he sat there thinking about the deception that had taken place in his very own bedroom. And that vampire was behind this somehow, he knew it.

I saw her eyes in there, and then I met her. The coincidence was undeniable. What was she doing here anyway? She never did answer me when I asked her, but she looked like she was trying to find something here, or someone – maybe David?

“I'll find him and when I do, I'll find you,” he whispered without a stutter, his conviction, as he closed his eyes to better picture her face again.

The funeral took place Wednesday, with an open casket viewing, followed by a five o'clock service and a six thirty burial. It was Dillon's suggestion to have the service at dusk, "David liked that time of day because it prepared him for night time which was what he always looked forward to," he said to his father as they were sitting at the kitchen table discussing the details. Father agreed, however he would not allow Dillon's second favor, which was to have a closed casket. With all the media involved in the sudden, unexplained death of a teenager, there was going to be quite a large turnout at the funeral viewing.

"Son, look, I know it's going to be tough today, but it will be tough with or without his casket open, and every member of our church and most of the high school students and faculty will be there to say their goodbyes. It's disrespectful to have him closed off like that—"

Dillon had been quiet during most of the conversation with his father and siblings, all of them sitting there at the table. Mother was resting in bed again. He suddenly interrupted his father, not able to handle the thought of David on display.

"That's not what David would want! This sh-should be about h-him! He w-would never want people to l-llook at him l-like that—" he broke down again and sobbed, thinking to himself that eventually the tears would have to stop, his eyes would eventually run dry, but not yet.

Samantha stepped in, her voice calm and motherly as she laid her hand on his clenched fist. "Dillon, it's what we have to do for his memory. He doesn't care - why should he? They're paying their respects to his memory. Besides honey, you're forgetting one thing - he's in God's hands now. David has gone to Heaven—"

"NO HE'S NOT! HE'S NOT THERE! HE'S DOWN, L-LIVING BELOW - AND HE DOES CARE!!! "

Dillon shot out of his chair, amidst a sea of shocked, horrified Christian faces, and stormed upstairs, feeling his stomach giving way, but keeping it in his mouth until he could reach his most frequented room - the bathroom.

He didn't want to see his brother's body sitting in that box, waiting to be buried underground. The thought of him exposed there for everyone, including probably half the high school population, to look at him up close and personal, inspecting every inch of him, made Dillon want to vomit, and he did, several times as a matter of fact, after his argument with his family and especially his father, proved futile.

Using it like it was his own private confessional, Dillon sobbed into the toilet upstairs when the heaving was over, for what seemed like the tenth time since that horrible beginning of the end of his life. It had all started on that sad Wednesday morning, exactly one week ago. Amazing, he thought, how a person's life could be so quickly redefined in seven days. The world was created in six days, with a day of rest – when would his rest come? He looked into the toilet again and vomited for a third time, greenish yellow strings of saliva mixed with bile. His stomach curled up and tried to lurch out his mouth like a spring. He reached out blindly for a towel and felt a cold, wet washcloth magically go into his outstretched hand. He wiped his face and looked up, his eyes teary and his vision blurry.

“Hello Sweetheart. I think you're probably done, there shouldn't be any more in there to bring up. Your poor stomach is so sensitive, darling. Come on, let's go lie down – I've missed you.” Mother reached down and gently helped bring Dillon to his feet. Had he grown another inch she thought as she suddenly became startled at his height. He was growing and the thought that he was so close to adulthood and would grow up without his older twin made her reach out for the countertop and steady herself. She wiped away a quick tear and smiled at him as he went to sit back down on the toilet, face pale and eyes a warm, crystallized blue.

“M-Mother, w-why does Father have to show David to the world, when David never w-wanted to be recognized by anyone. H-he wanted to be l-left alone.” More sobbing as he leaned against the counter top, his head in his hand, tears dropping to the floor like beginning rain. “If I have t-t-to see him like that, in—“(sob).

“Breathe, darling, just breathe for a second.” Mother placed her hand on his shoulder, and he felt a warm sensation, surprising him as he looked up at her. In the cascading artificial light of the bathroom, mixed with the light from the window, his mother looked like an angel - an angel from his brother's passing night. He held his breath and remembered. These past three days he'd forgotten the feather, and the angel with the stubby fingernails. The thought calmed him immediately, and he looked back at his mother and weakly smiled, then spoke in a whisper.

“If I have to see him like that, in that wooden box, I'm liable to crawl in there and go with him...Mother,” his eyes determined as he watched her face begin to crumble at the unexpected comment just made. The panic washed over her face as she watched him look at her with his melancholy eyes and more importantly to her, his determined expression of resolution. No, that will not happen, she screamed in her head.

“Darling, please don’t talk like that,” she began to sob, throwing her hands up to her face; her body was trembling and shaking itself gently as she then slid down the cabinetry until her bottom hit the floor.

Dillon sat there and watched her for the next ten minutes without speaking. He felt numbness creep in again; it visited him several times in the course of day usually, starting since David’s death, and it never gave sufficient warning of its arrival. He would just feel nothingness take over, like a dark cloud over his head, and his emotions locked up. He hated to think about it, hated even more to admit it, but the numbness also gave him much relief when it came to visit.

He tried to blink but couldn’t as he watched her cry, she on the ground at his feet as he leaned against the counter. His mind began to wander to the image of David not blinking on his bed that night, staring off to the ceiling as he coughed and breathed in his last breath. Never waking, he was never waking again...and now, the day Dillon had been dreading for four long days, was here. He would get to see his brother not waking in just two short hours. He quickly got up and lifted the toilet lid to dry heave again.

Mother got up and washed her face as she glanced over at her youngest, watching his hands tremble as they braced themselves against the porcelain seat, his fingers pale and thinly fragile looking. She offered the same routine to her boy, then helped him to his room to get him dressed for the funeral.

As they all piled into the family van, Dillon sat as close to the window as he could, and as far away from Daniel as possible. Usually David took the window seat and Dillon was sandwiched between the two diabolically opposed brothers, but today, there was just too much space, so he squished himself into the door. Looking down at his hands during the silent trip to the funeral parlor, Dillon played with the grab bag his mother had given him in case his stomach acted up again. No chance of that happening, he thought as he stared into the bag. He didn’t have anything left to bring up and he hadn’t eaten today.

They were all dressed in black, Dillon wearing David’s nice black dress pants and his own white button down shirt, paired with David’s black jacket; the same one Dillon had worn all last week while his brother was away at that horrible Disciples’ school. He contemplated taking the trench coat and using it, but the thought of David underground without it made Dillon sad; all the time and energy his brother had devoted to the décor and the personality in that article of clothing made it uniquely his. It just didn’t seem right to take it and wear it now. The coat of

many colors wasn't his to have - none of it was.

He was at least able to pick out what clothes he wanted David to wear to the underground. His parents, his mother mainly, had agreed to it with much persuasion and tears on Dillon's part. He felt it was the least he could do for his brother. If they all had their way, David would be dressed in a suit and tie with a matching suit jacket – no way.

As they drove to the funeral, Dillon played with his friendship bracelet. He'd given David one too, a matching one, last year for Christmas. They were both red and earthy looking, slightly girly, but David didn't seem to care. More importantly to Dillon at the time, it was the only present David even looked at, allowing Dillon to place it on his wrist – his left wrist for that matter – and he kept it there, never taking it off once. Dillon twirled his bracelet and wiped a lone tear away as they pulled up to the circular driveway of the chapel reserved for family only.

The chapel was huge - the biggest one in town. The donations started pouring in Sunday from all over. Members of John and Sara's church collected and donated money. The high school started a collection as well, organized by Mrs. Sands, Tommy, Julie and Jason, since the Smith children were on leave from school for the week. Not including the general, unknown community of Oceanside and Vista combined, just the church and Vista High raised and donated five thousand dollars to help pay for flowers and funeral arrangements. Adding to the community support, thanks to the media showing of his mysterious death, another five thousand dollars was received in just three days.

The outpouring of generosity for such an unknown, non athletic anti-social rebel was unbelievable - and he didn't even play football. Dillon could have turned blue in the face at insisting David have a closed, private viewing but it wasn't going to remotely happen. David had acquired too much community support and empathy. Funny, Dillon thought as he got out of the van last, *David would have never wanted any of this. Why does he now get recognition? What is it about being dead that gets you noticed? Why wasn't he ever appreciated when he was around?*

Some of the money donated went to flowers – and they were beautiful, decorating the halls and every pew in the grand chapel. As they all walked in, Dillon was psychically punched in the face by the massive size of the seating arrangements. There was room for a maximum occupancy of three hundred people, and there were that many, and more - many more - standing in the four hallways leading down to the bronze casket on the mini stage at the front of the

chapel. The room had huge stain glass windows on both sides of the walls, a massive, wooden cross hung up on the main, center wall, and the entire room felt and looked like an elegant theatre; the seats slightly elevated upward to allow better viewing. As the Smith family walked in and was ushered down the main center hallway, the entire chapel fell quiet. Father first, then Mother, then Dillon, followed by the three remaining siblings, Samantha, Rachel, and Daniel.

As they began to walk towards the front of the theatre and the closed casket, Dillon froze as he looked up and saw a massive school picture of David mounted on a large easel next to the casket. It was at least three feet by five feet high as it loomed over the shiny box; David staring at everyone there with a bored, not amused to be there look on his face, but beautiful as ever with his raw, brutal eyes, his perfect complexion, and hair nicely out of place. His picture made Dillon freeze in the middle of the hall, followed by Samantha smacking into him, then steadying both of them.

People began to whisper as all eyes were on the youngest Smith, the hushed voices spreading like wildfire across the chapel rows. He began to sweat as he prayed and closed his eyes, trying hard to keep the vomit from coming up again.

“Please, sweetheart? Please go on now. You need to see him again, you need this.” Samantha gently pushed Dillon forward amidst the whispers and he moved ahead, breathing deeply and trying not to look at the casket or the massive picture in front of him.

The Smith family sat up front, in the reserved seating section. The noise quieted down as the music began and the funeral service was under way. Dillon sat next to his Mother and Samantha, two of the most nurturing women in his life, but he couldn't keep it in for very long. Staring at the casket as the Pastor giving the service walked over and opened its face, so that the shockingly pale white side profile of David could be seen lying in there, eyes closed - that was all it took. Not two minutes after they were all seated and the organ began to play, Dillon leaned forward in his seat and threw up what little liquid bile was in his stomach into the grab bag.

There was a quick rush of audience whispers, then everyone was quiet again, to listen to the religious service begin; the complexities of life and death and how God helps us deal with grief and suffering. Great, Dillon thought as he continued to lean forward in his seat, looking down at the ground in front of him. *My brother is getting yet another sermon by a stranger who probably knows less than he does on the subject - hmm, how ironic. If only I didn't have this stutter, I'd be up there right now talking about him the way he should be talked about; a short,*

sweet dissertation on why David Smith was so brilliant, then I'd tell all of you to get out...and take that humungous school prison photo and those smelly flowers with you...

The sermon finally ended with Dillon still looking down, hands trembling; they hadn't stopped trembling since he leaned over the toilet at home. Sitting there being so close to his brother, and not being able to feel the old, familiar connection they had had their entire lives was terrifying to nobody but him. *My brother is now a memory? No, that just isn't possible, not with our connection, not with our bond. We are two parts to a whole, two halves of one person, so his leaving must mean I must be next in line...*

Suddenly, Samantha nudged Dillon out of his dazed state. Apparently, the Pastor had called everyone to form a line behind the Smith family to pay their last goodbyes to David Smith.

Was the hour already gone by? Where had it gone! I'm not ready to go up there...say goodbye? Never! And all these people - what are they going to say to him?! Who are they to be here, sharing my time with him, invading my space, sharing my moment!

Dillon stood up with the help of his mother and Samantha. His hands were trembling fiercely now, and the room was coming in and out of view. As he stared at the coffin and began his walk over to it, assisted on both sides by the women, the wooden box kept coming in close, like a magnifying glass, then pulling back out in a blink of an eye, so that it was being stretched several feet in either direction. There was suddenly no sense of depth to Dillon and he had the sensation his world was blending with another one, two dimensions merging as he walked towards what appeared to be his sleeping brother.

Samantha held onto him while the family each said their goodbyes up close. Dillon had to turn into his sister's chest to avoid watching the scene of his mother draping herself over the opened casket, her one hand on his forehead, lightly playing with his hair, the other arm across his chest. She was the only one in the family to touch David. All the others spoke quietly to him one at a time, including Samantha, who finally let Dillon go to walk up to the casket herself.

During the time the family had with David, the rest of the crowd remained quiet and in their seats, waiting for the call up front by rows, to keep things organized. Samantha finished and hesitated, almost touching David's folded hands laid across his upper chest, but she didn't. She instead turned away quickly and started to cry into her handkerchief.

The Smith family all walked into the adjoining room in their grief to be alone while the

others waited to say their goodbyes. In leaving the room, they all forgot Dillon still standing there, three feet from the casket and stunned, not moving forward, not leaning backward. The Pastor remained at the podium, finally clearing his throat three times. Dillon flinched at the repeated sound. I really hate that sound, he thought as he stood there. *I'd better move forward and see him – it's okay, he's already gone, Dil. Can't you tell? The connection is long gone and you've been imbalanced since the night he left. Just walk on over and say goodbye to his Earthly body, for you already know where his soul has gone.*

He took a step towards the casket and the crowd simultaneously whispered a few words. The coordinated audience presence, combined with the on stage movements Dillon was executing, was grinding his nerves. He stood at the side of the casket and looked down at what he considered to be his better, stronger half and smiled sadly, watching the details of David's amazing face; he had such a majestic, overpowering confidence about him, he thought. *Oh what I would do to have your confidence now, Dave.*

"Dave. It's me. I-I d-don't feel you anymore. W-what am I t-to do now? W-when w-will I see you again?" Dillon whispered these words softly, not wanting anyone in the audience to hear him speak, his back to them as he waited like he always did with David - whenever he asked his brother anything - waiting on his every word, the answers always enlightening. He leaned in as he finished his last words, trying to fight back the tears that were already coming down. "I love you and I'll find you, I promise. I'll make it right again for us..."

A single tear hit David's cheek and slid down, making a line in the makeup they'd used on him to give him fake, pink color. Dillon watched it travel down the skin, making it look like old leather. He suddenly dry heaved, but quickly bent down next to the casket to vomit nothing but air. The audience started whispering again. Suddenly he felt his mother's presence at his side, as she gently laid her hand on his back while he came back up, wiping the saliva off his mouth. He looked down at David again, as if expecting him to say something, but his eyes stayed shut, his face expressionless. He looked so nice in his favorite black button down shirt and his trench coat. Dillon wouldn't allow anyone to comb his brother's hair; it had to look like it always did - perfectly messy. He reached out and touched David's left hand with his.

My God, his hand is so cold. There is nothing to feel, no spark, no magnetic pull, no connection at all...

Standing there for a minute to watch their red, woven bracelets touching, David's once

tanned skin looked now so white. Comparing hands made Dillon's normally white skin look tanned. He leaned in and hugged his brother, smelling his neck as his head lay in the coffin for a brief minute before his mother panicked, remembering what he had told her earlier, and she grabbed his arm and started to pull him away. Soon Father was there too, talking softly and trying to now pry Dillon out of the coffin and off his brother's chest.

I just need to smell him, I need to remember his scent - but it's gone! There's no smell now! What in God's name did these stupid people do to him?! They encased him in formaldehyde like a high school cadaver!

"GET OFF ME!" He whirled around and glared at his stunned father. The chapel was quiet again.

For the first time ever, Dillon was facing the chapel. He met eyes with three hundred plus people, most were crying silently into white handkerchiefs as they watched him, like he was the star in a very sad movie. "Why are you here?" He whispered silently to the crowd. He thought about damning them all for being there but couldn't say it, so he swallowed hard instead.

Suddenly the Pastor cleared his voice, and Dillon flinched and glared over at him, causing him to lose his train of thought as he stood there silent again. Dillon then turned and walked over to his seat and sat down, hearing the all too familiar sound of hundreds of whispers, lots of loud sobs and handkerchief blowing in the background. Mother and Father both followed him and sat on either side, giving him the impression they weren't going to let him out of their sight again today, or the rest of the week for that matter.

"Well, that was an emotional goodbye but we honor that here."

Dillon had to fight the urge to flip the Pastor his middle finger, so he wrung his hands together instead, watching the ground.

"For the life passed on of one so young is never, ever an easy thing to overcome. But we have each other, a strong family here today, a strong church to guide and support them through this terrible time, an amazingly supportive high school to assist these wonderful kids, and an even stronger community to back them, for that's what it is all about – love and support."

A few "Amen's" and "Here, here's" thrown around the room for good measure from the actively participating audience made Dillon close his eyes and clench his teeth.

"We will show our support for the Smith family in their time of sorrow and grief because that's what a strong Christian community does – we look out for each other. Only God knows

why this young man was taken so quickly in the course of his young life, and it is therefore not ours to judge, but it is ours to grieve. This is our time to grieve for David, however as you all leave today, go with the knowledge that life is indeed a gift to marvel and wonder about each minute of each hour of every day, and do with your precious time here on this Earth all that God would want you to do,” (more amens’ and interjections of agreement from the audience.) “Now I will allow viewings a row at a time, so please be courteous and not take too long to pay your respects to this remarkable young man here today.”

Dillon scoffed and continued to look down at his trembling hands, the anger beginning to course through his veins again.

“Let us now begin to our right, up front please.”

As the procession started, Dillon and his parents were soon joined by Samantha, Rachel, and Daniel, all three sitting back down up front to watch the people walk onto the mini stage to say their goodbyes in single file formation. It was one very large people circle of mostly black and gray colors, mixed with white handkerchiefs. Dillon watched them all walk by David slowly, most of the teenagers in the crowd stopped completely to get a good look at the mysterious boy who had managed to keep so many interested people at a distance of several feet.

The girls all cried like they’d known him for years and he was their first love. A few took pictures, which almost caused Dillon to leave his seat and lurch forward onto the stage, however the Pastor was still at the podium and as if reading Dillon’s mind he quickly reminded the crowd to refrain from taking pictures. He was speaking to the mass of teenagers there, for at least half of the mourners in attendance were students.

As they strolled by him, the line of people moving along at a snail’s pace, Dillon met eyes with Julie standing in line with Jason behind her. They had both been crying, Julie’s eye mascara running down her face. She whispered something to Jason, then quickly left her place in line and walked over to shake hands with Dillon’s mother and father as they continued to sit in their pew. She then turned to Dillon and leaned down to give him a quick, awkward hug, whispering in his ear, “I’m so sorry Dillon. I know how much you loved him, and he told me how much he loved you. I am here for you, always.” She kissed his cheek, stunning him, and then walked back to the line, which had put her almost at David’s side.

Dillon sat there and remembered Julie and David in their bedroom. He could hear what David had said to her after he’d left that night at the stairs in a huff. He remembered David

telling her it was over and he needed to concentrate on his little brother. He had dismissed her so quickly, Dillon thought. *Why did I continue to ignore him that night? I am such a sick, twisted, vengeful soul. I should be the one in that casket. I bet nobody would be here too. My service would be in the tiny back room reserved for the homeless people without names; a charity service for the disposal of my pale, white, non-athletic, puny body.*

He sat there sullen and watched Julie cry at David's side. She reached out and touched his arm, making Dillon lean forward in his seat, his heart pounding again.

It's okay, Dil, she knew him, quite well if you remember the bedroom scene, so just chill out. Okay, okay...

He breathed in long and slowly, closing his eyes and trying to quell his stomach. Jason also touched David's arm as he went by, crying and talking in slang; Dillon tried to hear his words.

...I bet David would get a kick out of that monologue.

Mrs. Sands went by after awhile, almost fainting as she stood there next to David, but one of Tommy's football friends caught and steadied her. She had been crying hysterically, which puzzled and frightened Dillon greatly. He could understand Julie being hysterical and grief-stricken, but Mrs. Sands? *No way. She's acting - damn her too.*

After about an hour of watching grieving strangers look at his brother, Dillon began to get restless and angrier by the minute.

Who the hell are all these people? Leave him alone!

He began fuming in his seat, watching the people staring down at his brother, a few being bold enough to touch him, making Dillon have to look down at his feet to keep from bolting up there and slamming that casket cover down and screaming obscenities to everyone, including his parents, for allowing such a private event to turn into a public affair, all for a mere ten thousand dollars in donations. Money – the root of all evil. It makes everything possible and acceptable. Well, he was just about at his limit. I feel David creeping in, he thought as he sat there, feeling suddenly confident. He quickly glanced up at his brother's side profile and watched him for a few seconds. He looked peaceful, not like he ever did in life, even when he slept. Funny, but he looks almost relieved, Dillon thought as he rocked back and forth slightly in his seat.

Suddenly, the familiar image of someone representing evil itself came into Dillon's peripheral vision. He glanced over and saw him. He held his breath and seethed in his seat as

they both made eye contact from across the room.

Daryl was in line, with Alvin and Allan standing behind him, all three of them smiling smugly at Dillon. Daryl tried to act forlorn, mocking Dillon by keeping his face looking sad and wiping fake tears off his cheeks. He then mouthed the word ‘Cupcake’ and air kissed him. The chipmunks behind him started to giggle quietly, only to quickly stop as they were met by several mean stares from Tommy and a few other people, who were standing right behind them. Tommy of course, looked quite menacing.

Dillon quickly looked back down and thought he would vomit, but didn’t. His mother whispered in his ear, “It’s almost over darling. Would you like to get up and go into the quiet room next door? I’ll go with you and we can sit in there and relax. Come on.” Mother stood up and went to gently grab Dillon’s arm to assist him up as well, for his legs felt suddenly paralyzed. He quickly looked up as he stood tall and saw one of the cheerleaders leaning over David looking way to comfortable, touching his hand and lingering there, and he lost it. He bolted up the stage and roughly pushed her out of the way as he positioned himself at the head of the coffin and slammed the viewing partition shut. It made a loud noise, causing everyone to jump and waking up the Pastor, who had nodded off while leaning against the podium. He went to clear his throat to speak, but Dillon already had the floor and he was screaming – he’d found his loud voice.

“THAT’S IT! IT’S OVER! VISITING HOURS ARE OVER! NONE OF YOU EVEN KNEW HIM, AND I AM SURE I SPEAK FOR DAVID WHEN I SAY HE WOULDN’T WANT TO KNOW ANY OF YOU!!!!!!”

His parents rushed the stage and tried to escort him off, while the entire chapel remained silent, stunned and at a standstill. Most of the procession of mourners had passed by the stage and were sitting back down again, watching the show and pissing him off even more.

Daryl stood at the foot of the casket and leaned his arm on it, watching Dillon with new found interest since their last meeting on the quad. You are indeed, a witch, aren’t you, he thought as he teased Dillon with his menacing eyes.

It worked, for as Dillon was being consoled sternly by his father while still on stage, his mother still trying to escort him to the quiet room, he pretended to go willingly. Then as soon as his father released his arm, he turned quickly and rushed for Daryl, knocking the boy off guard, hitting him right in the gut. They flew over the top of David’s casket with Dillon barreling into

Daryl at a superhuman intensity while the massive arrangement of white lilies laying over the midsection of the casket fell on top of them as they sprawled out on the floor behind the stage. David's massive picture shot backward out of view from the seated onlookers. Dillon managed to land on top of Daryl, punching wildly while Daryl tried to get wind back in his lungs.

It was eerie for sure, for at least a flash of a moment, as the two boys flew over the smooth casket, with its top portion closed, it actually moved and shook, causing the hushed, up to this moment, respectful and quiet crowd of mourners into an uproar, some of them gasping and making a run for the halls; fear of the coffin's contents scaring quite a few of the teenagers. More screams ensued as it looked like it had taken on a life of its own, or maybe, as some of them would recall later that day to hundreds of other kids around the valley, David Smith was trying to get out.

Of course, no one from far enough away could see that the two boys were fighting and kicking the supports behind the coffin. The line for the viewing quickly dispersed. Alvin and Allan went for Dillon, but Tommy and his buddies pushed both of them away and held his arms out to try to give Dillon a chance to get at least one good punch in. Tommy never liked Daryl, and now he knew why.

Within the short time span of a very long minute of moving through the rush of the forward moving crowd, Father finally got to the boys, a circle of teenagers around them watching Dillon repeatedly punch Daryl in the gut and face. As he went to pull Dillon off the boy, Daryl repeated his version of Dillon on the quad at school, and got one good punch in across Dillon's lower jaw, throwing him backward into his father, with Dillon spinning around him to land against the middle of the casket, in a dramatic position with his arms thrown over it like he wasn't going to let it leave without him.

After the crowd settled down and left the chapel, Dillon was quickly escorted to the quiet room to cool off, while the rest of the family was in the main chapel finalizing the rest of the burial service details. Dillon's mother could be heard through the closed door apologizing repeatedly to the shaken up Pastor, who was exclaiming over and over again, "In all my years in the bereavement business, doing God's good work, I have never, EVER seen such deplorable behavior!"

Dillon turned away from the closed door as he stood in one of the waiting rooms off to the side of the chapel and slapped a stuffed toy teddy bear probably used as a prop to distract

little kids, as it sat on a nearby table, knocking it forward on its face. His jaw throbbed with a searing pain but it only fueled his fire. He couldn't believe this was happening. *Since when was a funeral, a freak show? Why did all these people need to see him up close anyway?* He fumed as he began to pace.

The room he was in was small, maybe twelve by twelve feet wide; a box with a sofa, two lounge chairs and a couple of high back chairs thrown in as well. The lighting was dim, to provoke a mood that supported the somber feel of death. Dillon walked around it and his anger grew. He didn't need to be here, his family also didn't need this fancy place, and David sure didn't want to go out this way.

All the community, church and school financial support was meant to help the Smiths afford the ten thousand dollar funeral arrangements, but it ended up being nothing more than a showy social event, with David's corpse the star of the show. People were allowed to see him up close, like he was some kind of freak on display, and all because some of them gave money to his parents. He felt the hypocrisy, followed by the all too familiar nausea kick in again as he paced the room. David didn't need a ten thousand dollar funeral, and he wouldn't have wanted the donations. The entire event today wreaked foul play.

He finally sat down on the middle of the couch and waited. The door opened almost immediately and Father came in, looking stern. With him was Daryl, Father's hand on the boy's shoulder. Daryl looked steaming mad, his lower lip swollen and cut and his right eyebrow reddened and appearing to swell as well. Dillon looked back down at the floor, rubbing his jaw again.

"Well, I'm going to make this easy on you boy. You are to come over here and apologize to Daryl for attacking him – NOW! I want the two of you to make peace, for this is not how any of us wish to remember your brother's passing - GET UP!" He was authoritative again, like his normal, more violent self. *Gee, Dillon thought as he looked up at his father, that didn't take long did it?*

"Get over here!" He was quickly losing his patience, while Daryl looked like he was relishing the anger as he stood there suddenly amused and looking back and forth between father and son.

"Yes sir," Dillon mumbled as he stood up and walked over to stand in front of Daryl, his hands in David's old jacket.

“Hands out, boy. We approach those we’ve provoked with our hands exposed.”

Dillon sighed and put his hands out, showing them briefly to Daryl, who nodded in silent, albeit almost disappointing agreement that they were indeed, empty.

“Go ahead and say what you need to say, since you accosted this boy, along with insulting the Pastor and everyone else here.” Father’s voice seethed with anger as he glared at Dillon, forcing the boy to look down at his feet again, breathing out loudly.

“I’m sorry for—“

“LOOK AT HIM!”

Daryl fought back a wicked grin that tried to spread across his smug face; his lower lip looking more pronounced as it started bleeding again. He reached up and wiped it, not taking his eyes off Dillon, not wanting to miss anything.

Dillon felt David’s strength creep back in as he let his anger seep out through his mouth. He suddenly felt confident. “Yeah, I’m sorry Daryl for maliciously attacking you. I feel really, really badly for my actions. But I guess I just couldn’t help it...the stench emitting from your person caused me to want to eradicate all evil from the room—“

“Dillon!” Father raised his hand half way up to hit the boy, but was stopped short by Daryl.

“That’s alright Mr. Smith. He’s upset and I’m fine - really. Luckily, the punches didn’t hit me hard enough to do much damage.” He smiled back at Dillon politely, then turned to Mr. Smith. “Can I go now? I should leave, actually.”

“Well, that’s up to you son, but I was hoping the two of you could talk in here for a few minutes to try to reconcile, but if you want to leave—“

“Uh...no...I can stay for a few minutes.” Daryl walked over to the couch and sat down, immediately making himself at home.

I hate him, Dillon thought. I hate that he’s here—

“Dillon?! Do you hear me boy?”

“Yes sir - what?” Dillon was zoning out again. The day was becoming way too intense for him. He felt like he needed to sleep for a week just to catch up from a week of little sleep.

“You are to stay in here with Daryl, and if there is fighting and I have to separate you two, you will not go to the burial. Is that clear?”

Dillon looked up at his father with a surprised look on his face. *You can’t do that! Well,*

yeah, I guess you can with that dangerous look on your face. “Yes, sir.” He swallowed hard again the lump that tried to form in his throat.

Father left them alone. Dillon walked over and sat on one of the chairs opposite the couch and threw his legs up on the coffee table and leaned back, trying as best he could to look completely bored and disinterested in Daryl’s presence. It didn’t work.

“Nice try. I know you like me. I also know that you’re drawn to me, the same way I’m drawn to you. It’s magnetic.”

Dillon quickly shot him a glance at the word ‘magnetic’ and thought of David.

“Oh, I see, so you feel it too - good. So, how do we deal with this because it really pisses me off to see you at school avoiding me and ignoring me when I try to talk to you—“

“What are you talking about?! I don’t like you, and I’m certainly not *drawn* to you.”

“Yeah, right. Look Cupcake, I know—“

“And s-stop calling me THAT! I don’t even want to know w-what you mean by using that, that term. Look, here’s the short and sweet of it all, I hate you!” Dillon paused and took a deep breath before continuing, feeling like he could cry again. *Oh, God, Dil, please don’t cry in front of him.*

In the meantime, Daryl watched him intently, enjoying the speech this pretty boy was giving him. It was the most Dillon had spoken to him all year. He was enjoying the show. *Go ahead Sweetheart, take your time. Go ahead and cry if you need to, I’ll wait for you.*

He breathed out forcefully then looked over at Daryl again, who looked like he was making himself more comfortable on the couch. “I never liked you, and I wish you’d just leave me the hell alone. We aren’t magnetic, as you put it. W-we are opposites - completely opposite! I will continue to not talk to you at school, b-b-because that’s my job – not t-talking to you.”

“Says who? Oh, come on Cupcake. You can talk to me!” Daryl glanced over at the door and heard the familiar sound of soon to be intruding Christians nearby, then smiled as he gazed back over at Dillon. “Look, I’m going to leave now, because I can see by the look on your face your panties are all in a wad, but think about what I said. We should be friends, if for no other reason than to be completely opposite together! Besides, you being a witch could help me out a lot—“

“I’M N-NOT!” Dillon paused and sighed, finishing his sentence quietly and with much restraint. “...a witch. I’m not, s-ssso ssshut up.” He glanced at the door with a look of fear and

sudden apprehension on his face.

“Sure you’re not, sure...” Daryl got up and walked over to him, enjoying watching Dillon getting more pissed. Spoken in perfect southern drawl, “Aren’t you gonna walk me to the door? That’s what the head cheerleader does you know. He walks the star football player to the door and opens it for him.” He turned and pointed obnoxiously with his finger, “And that’s most definitely you.”

“J-Just sh-shut up and go.” Dillon remained seated, staring intently at the floor to keep from tackling him again, suddenly feeling as though he needed to get just a few more punches in for good measure.

“That’s too bad, ‘cause I think your old man would sure be less willing to whip your ass if he saw us coming out all friendly like and all. And besides, I AM being quite the good sport here. After all, I let you attack me in front of our fellow students just to show my support for your grieving and all - you know - therapy from me to you? So did it help work out some of that bottled up anger and frustration, hmm?” He winked and grinned sadistically.

Dillon shot off his seat and got in Daryl’s face. “You l-let me attack you?!” He scoffed and walked around him so that he couldn’t see the triumphant smile Daryl was showing over finally getting the reaction he so wanted to see. *I got you where I want you...witch...*

Dillon walked to the door and opened it.

Daryl ran after him, still beaming. “I knew you’d come around, Cupcake - I mean - Dillon.” He followed Dillon out of the room smiling. Father looked over at them and watched curiously.

“Good bye Mr. Smith, and once again, I’m sorry for your loss.” Daryl walked over and shook Father’s hand firmly, his image as the all star varsity football stud with a community backing once more showcasing what Daryl did so well. He then turned and waved at Dillon as he went to walk away, winking when no one was looking.

“Good bye asshole,” Dillon mumbled as he walked over to the casket to open it again.

“What was that dear?” Mother called out.

“Uh, n-nothing, Mother.”

He opened the casket carefully and looked down again at his brother. All the fighting earlier hadn’t disturbed David’s sleep or his position. He smiled down at David weakly and whispered softly. “I think you’d be proud of me Dave. I was finally able to give you the funeral

you wanted – I pushed Daryl’s sorry ass right over you. Here...I want to give this to you, so that when we meet again, you can give it back to me.” Dillon reached into his pocket and pulled it out, placing it in David’s inner pocket of his trench coat. The picture of the two of them would be protected in there. It was after all Dillon’s most prized possession. He smiled and leaned against the casket without saying another spoken word, but his mind went on and on, telling story after story to David’s sleeping face. Somehow, he felt David could hear him, somewhere anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

Zion Cemetery

As the Smith family piled into the black limousine to follow the hearse to Zion Cemetery, Dillon sat next to a window and watched the earlier blue sky turn increasingly dark and gray. He hadn't wanted to leave David at the chapel. It took both his mother and his father to escort him away from the casket after his long visit watching David. He began to panic not having his picture.

"M-Mother? D-do you still have the negative for that picture of David and me on my shelf?" He leaned forward in his seat to better see her.

"No, honey, remember I told you last year not to damage it by taking it out of the frame because it's the only one we have. There aren't any back-ups. Why?"

"No reason." Dillon looked back out the window and watched the scenery pass by. He looked at his partial reflection in the window, his eye, nose and mouth, and thought of David's experience seeing Joel.

Please come to the window Dave?

After watching intently for the next ten minutes for his reflection to change to his brother's and having it not occur, Dillon finally relented and got out of the limousine, his family all standing there watching him and waiting, most of them patiently.

The funeral burial was reserved for family and close friends. Dillon didn't see any kids there from school which was a monumental relief. The coffin was positioned right next to the incredibly large hole it was to go into, causing Dillon to fantasize about wanting to jump in and measure exactly how deep the cavity was so that he could have a reference in case he needed to rescue his brother, or worse, join him in there. He had to turn and look away as he found himself staring at the pit and feeling as though falling forward face first would not be too difficult a thing to do.

As they all stood around the casket, nobody wanting to sit in the white painted aluminum chairs the cemetery provided, Dillon felt a cold breeze hit his face and play with his long bangs, brushing them off to the side of his face like a gentle hand caressing him. He looked up to the sky and watched the clouds roll in. At first, white clouds flew over head; thin, almost transparent wisps of cotton, turning to black clumps of ink spots, rapidly moving by, so quickly, Dillon held his breath to watch. Were they coming together and moving apart in succession? He couldn't

tell for sure but it caught his eye and he didn't blink as he observed them fly above his head.

The grave site was surrounded by three large oak trees, their branches creaking and waving in the steady breeze. Within seconds of the cloudy ink parade moving above his head, the breeze turned to a windy gust, howling through the branches and whistling along the twisting trunks of the massive trees. Dillon flinched as he heard them pop in places near their roots and groan with the strain of what appeared to be Mother Nature.

The leaves gathering on the grass suddenly started to spin, twirl and dance around while Pastor Thornton continued his speech on the complexities of life and death – a continuation of the same speech Dillon didn't want to hear back at the funeral home, and most definitely didn't want to hear now. Just leave and let me talk to David again, he thought as he stood there shifting his feet. Suddenly glancing again at the Pastor, he couldn't help but think he looked like a padre from the days of Robin Hood and he smiled weakly, thinking about all the derogatory comments David would be making right now knowing this guy was preaching his case.

Suddenly the wind kicked up as the Pastor started to really get into his speech, catching him off guard as his Bible began flipping its pages rapidly back and forth, causing visible, almost comical panic to set in, with him losing his place and grabbing at the Book to find it again, but to no avail. Dillon was transfixed on it, thinking to himself as he watched the Bible's pages flip from one end to the other, that an imaginary hand had taken hold and was playing a game on the poor Pastor. *Could it be the wind trying to take the Bible out of his hands? Or was it...Dave?*

Standing there with his mouth opened in awe, Dillon wasn't sure whether to feel sorry for the pompous man or laugh out loud thinking maybe it was his brother making one last joke before he moves on. *He's gone already Dillon, and you know this.* He shook his head to shake off his sorrow. *I don't want to go there right now...*

Meanwhile, Pastor Thornton was struggling to gain access to his Bible again. His hands began to tremble as he actually felt the tug on the Book. Impossible, he thought, but fear began to choke him. He looked above his head then around him, what little was left of his hair sticking out behind him as he frantically tried to see what he felt was there, watching him. Everybody around Dillon seemed oblivious to the Pastor's moment of panic, but Dillon watched him intently, for he felt it too. *Hmm, guess we have something in common after all, Pastor What's Your Name...*

Finally, as if bored already with teasing him, the wind settled down. Pastor Thornton

cleared his throat as he flipped through the pages to get to his passage again, smiling to the small gathering of mourners and mumbling something about the forces of Mother Nature and blah, blah, blah. He looked like he'd just stuck his head out a car window going at least sixty miles an hour, Dillon thought, smiling weakly to himself then looking down to avoid eye contact with his own father. Glancing up at the bronze casket, he noticed the white lilies were placed back on it, a few with their stems broken, after they had been rearranged since the boys' tussle earlier in the evening.

It was strange, beyond disturbing to stand there watching David's now closed casket. Suddenly, Dillon wanted to see his brother in there, and leaning over to his mother standing next to him, he whispered into her shoulder. "Can we open his casket for a few minutes, Mother? I'd like to see him one - one more time...please?" He looked up with pleading eyes, then quickly returned them to the bronze box sitting perched over the ground, the draw to it hypnotic.

"I'm afraid we can't Dillon, the casket has already been sealed shut. Now please listen to Pastor Thornton," she pointed to the obvious preachy person in the group and made a fingerlike expression to her lips, the universal symbol for 'shut the hell up,' as David would say, and she patted her hand on his shoulder gently but disapprovingly.

"Why should I listen to him babble on and on like he's running for President," Dillon whispered back harshly, apparently loud enough, Pastor Thornton cleared his throat again and glanced over at him, his tiny spectacles barely balancing on the tip of his nose.

He looked like the typical medieval parish priest – a round, short body type wearing a white and black robe ensemble that couldn't touch the ground and lifted up in the front due to his belly protrusion. He was mostly bald on top, except for a rapidly disappearing half ring around the lower portion of his extra large cranium, and no visible neck to speak of. His multiple chins wiggled when he spoke, distracting even the most polite, especially Dillon.

"Why don't you go for a walk dear? I can call you over when the sermon is about to finish, okay?" Mother whispered with a harsher tone in her voice as she gave Dillon a side glance, smiling down at him. Truth be known, she didn't want him at the gravesite at all, for she feared he'd get his own grandiose, larger than life ideas about death and his brother's passing.

He was shocked by the suggestion, but quickly excused himself to take advantage of the free time. *Sure, I'll take a walk, better than listening to this guy toot his own horn any day. Besides,* Dillon thought as he looked back up at the sky, *looks like rain, or maybe a storm*

coming in on the horizon.

The sky was indeed looking more and more menacing with the clouds coming in thick now and fast - incredibly fast. He stood there again, transfixed on their quick movements across the sky. They are in an unbelievable hurry to get somewhere, he thought as he watched for a minute with his mouth again open in awe.

As he walked along the dirt path off to the side of the funeral gathering, surrounded on both sides of the trail by two long rows of oak trees, he noticed their branches forming and touching in the middle of the road like a canopy. Feeling suddenly protected from the elements, he slowly clambered along, thinking about David's life and how lost he was now without him. Tears began to fall down his face but he didn't fight them this time. Instead, Dillon stood still and glanced up at the sky, noticing the tree canopy instead. It was really pretty to have a natural enclosure with all the trees. *I love trees and I bet David would enjoy this too if he were here –*

“What am I to do, Dave? What am I with you gone? I have no purpose now. My life is without purpose and I'm alone. All I have is the wait, and something tells me I'll be waiting an eternity to see you again.” He stopped abruptly as if someone was invading his privacy, but all he could hear was the swinging branches and the rustle of leaves around him. Sighing and feeling slightly touched, Dillon closed his eyes and bowed his head, but he didn't stand for very long. Within a few seconds he was on his knees, hugging himself to keep the self pity from leaving him. “I'm not going to see you again, am I? We're meant for two different places...” He looked up at the canopy of branches and leaves again and whispered, “Why God? Why separate us? Wasn't I supposed to help him? Isn't that why I was sent here?” He sobbed and ran his hands through his tussled hair.

The wind picked up again and he thought he heard the trees talking to him, whispering in hushed voices with their branches swaying and cracking under the weight of the wind as it picked up and began to blow. It was ominous and foreboding in a second's time. He froze there on his knees and held his breath, trying to listen hard to the activity suddenly buzzing around him. It took a few minutes of concentrated listening and desensitizing himself to the earthly sounds he was already familiar with, when he finally heard it - faintly spoken but distinctive enough he could register each word.

“Go to him...below...bee-low...”

Dillon stood up and looked around, realizing he'd walked too far away from the grave

site. He quickly ran over to where the collection of tombstones and statues began along the edge of the walking path and started back, but he still felt something or someone there. The hair on the back of his neck stood out and his skin began to crawl. It felt like someone's hand was on his neck, tickling his skin as he brought a hand up and rubbed it. Quickly turned around but seeing nothing except the line of trees he'd just left, he chose not to look down at the tombstones he was surrounded by, chose not to focus in on the ground for fear of what was underneath the expansive green lawn. Instead, he forced himself to move forward slowly, almost on tip toe, afraid he'd awaken the dead.

As his mind continued to race, he heard cracking and popping noises behind him, as if someone was walking over sticks and gravel, so he turned around one more time to see what would certainly be someone, but there was nothing; only the wind carrying leaves, making them dance around in circles before him in a parade of yellows, browns and oranges.

Waiting for a few seconds to allow the procession to go by, Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief and leaned against a statue of the Virgin Mary and tried to catch his breath. Funny, but it was still there, lingering behind him. Turning around quickly to look over in the direction of his family, there was nothing there, but Dillon wasn't convinced with his eyes' view. *Someone is playing a trick on me. Sebastian must be near, look for feathers, Dil.*

Listening to his mind's voice, he began looking around on the ground and glancing up at the sky when something dark caught the corner of his eye, making him freeze in his tracks. He stood there silent and thought he could hear the scratching of what would be long nails on cement. A scraping sound going silent every ten seconds—

There it is again!

Dillon flinched and closed his eyes. *That was not my imagination. I saw someone, a person in a black cloak, tall, and, and beautiful looking...graceful; a graceful gait, no doubt.*

Just when it seemed too much idling time had gone by without a response from the invisible stranger, Dillon finally looked over at where he thought he saw the figure, but once again saw nothing.

“W-who's there?” He whispered to the rows of tombstones off to his side, silently hoping none of their underground residents would answer back.

He began to walk over to where he saw the shadow earlier, all the while listening to his breathing and nothing more. Once he was able to travel the ten feet over to the row of

tombstones, he looked down at one of them and touched it, tracing a gouge he noticed running the full length of the cement slab. He pulled his fingers up and inspected the residue from the gouge and thought it odd and impossible to have been just created. He suddenly felt the cold sensation of fear creep up his spine as he revisited the sound in his mind and the markings his finger was touching. Quickly withdrawing his hand and turning around in a full circle, frantically searching the area for signs of her, he glanced up to the sky to notice the twilight creeping in.

Suddenly his chest began to hurt after breathing in all the cold air the wind had brought to him. Dillon grabbed his chest and heaved as he breathed out, watching his breath leave his mouth a misty fog. He didn't want to do it, but he had to, for he knew it would haunt him if he didn't. He finally glanced over at the tombstone next to the one he was looking at, not six feet away, and he saw it too, the same long gouge running the full length of its top. He thought of Esmeralda and her long, sharp nails as she tapped them on that tea cup in his living room. She could be here, he thought, looking up at the sky again, feeling hopeless and unable to stop the time from flying by.

Once again looking over to where he thought his family was located, Dillon walked over a few paces to see them better as he gingerly passed a statue perched atop a gravestone of an angel placing a finger to her mouth to silence the unwary visitor. Trying not to stare at the beautiful statue but unable to stop the voice in his head from asking why such beautiful art resided in graveyards, Dillon ventured forward. He could now see his family standing about fifty feet away and he began to usher himself towards them again talking out loud along the way.

“It's just your imagination Dil. After all, you didn't see anything. Those gouges could have been there for decades. You're just scared because it's a cemetery to begin with, and- and cemeteries are scary places. Besides, what would Esmeralda want here anyway? They're all dead!” He made himself laugh out loud to reassure himself, but it didn't work. Nothing was working today. “She should like her people warm and still pumping body fluids...” His voice trailed off as the wind pushed him forward, almost knocking him into a large cross sticking out of the ground. He turned around expecting to see her, then continued to walk towards his family, moving backwards a few paces out of fear before turning forward again, almost at a run. *If she is here watching me, I bet she's enjoying this. And what if he's here? No, he wouldn't want me, he...he wanted David.*

As if a piano had just fallen from the sky to land on his head, Dillon stopped in his tracks and stood there, hands on his hips, his face concentrating on his memory of David talking about this Azmodeus person he enjoyed spending time with. “He liked him, a lot if I remember well, and he said something about this guy taking him to his place and giving him something yellow to drink.” He froze. He hadn’t thought of any motives as to why his brother had died so mysteriously. He had figured David’s soul had separated, like his did that one night, and it went into the closet and got lost down there in the Underworld, or worse, someone or something down there hurt and mortally wounded him, killing him down there, which would have killed his body up here.

“But now,” he thought, “Now there could have been some kind of Un-divine Intervention in all this. If this Azmodeus person is as powerful as David implied he was, maybe he somehow seduced him down there, promising him power, independence and very few rules - three traits my brother would have wanted - in exchange for his staying there? And knowing David like I do, he wouldn’t have stayed - he would never leave me, not after just coming home to see me. Plus, we were fighting, and if he had a say in any of this, he would have waited until we were on good terms again. So, that means one thing.” He stopped and stared off for a long minute before saying it aloud, afraid he’d awaken the dead but more fearful he’d be right if he heard himself say it, so he whispered it. “He turned down the invitation...so they took him, and now he’s trapped down there.”

Dillon whirled around as he spoke this latest revelation, his heart pounding and his breathing heavy as he looked around the cemetery, making a full three hundred and sixty degree turn, not seeing anything but once again, feeling someone near him, watching and possibly listening to him decipher what he knew was the truth. “I’m not afraid of you. I have n-nothing to lose now.”

He stood there for a few seconds, only hearing the leaves rustle along the ground at his feet. A metal cross attached to a tombstone creaked and rattled loudly as the wind hit it, causing Dillon to flinch and jump back as he looked over at it. He steadied himself on a tombstone then shot off it too, afraid to linger there too long for the very same reasons he was spooked to begin with.

Suddenly the large, ornate cross fell off its perch and hung by what appeared to be a thread; a newly created upside down cross swaying in the wind alongside the grave it was

perched on. Dillon shuddered with new fear, but swallowed and looked around again; new determination on his face. I have nothing to lose, he thought again, as he slowly walked away, glancing up at the darkening sky at that moment, knowing with a sudden panic the sun was not on the horizon and it would soon be dark. He jogged back over to the gathering of family, but once he got to within hearing distance of the boring, ever monotonous Pastor Thornton's speech, he quickly turned around and started walking around the plots of graves again.

No way, Dil - don't go back there, it will only get worse listening to that man enjoy the sound of his own voice. "I think I'd rather be sss-scared." Dillon said aloud, not completely believing the sound of his voice or his conviction, but turning away anyway. He walked away from the eastern side of the cemetery and the funeral party, and went in a straight line south this time, passing over cement structures more packed in and almost on top of each other, this section of Zion older and more utilized in its plots of human underground cubby holes – or maybe this part of the cemetery was like flying coach in an airplane? He grimaced as he climbed around taller structures and maneuvered around smaller stones and grave markings.

Zion Cemetery was the oldest cemetery in Southern California, as well as the most prestigious. It reserved a small, privileged portion of its best land for the well-to-do dead, and it showed, with two large lakes, white swans and ducks, and rolling green hills, dotted with large, old and stately oak trees. Some of the tombstones were massive, large family plots, similar to those seen in the southern and eastern parts of the country, reminding Dillon of vampires, New Orleans, and black and white scary cemetery scenes in movies, with the night fog rushing in as the innocent strolled along unaware. It gave him a rush to walk around and read the many interesting grave sites along his path, and of course he felt safer being in eye sight of his family.

He chose not to go out of sight of the burial, not wanting to miss his mother's call, but he felt a desire to see who would share the same underground space as his brother, so he quickly dotted around from tombstone to tombstone to family plot, admiring some of the massive stone sculptures along the way. *Wow...David loved history, and now he'll be dwelling in the same vicinity as these other tombs, most of them from the early nineteen hundreds.*

All the while checking out the stone artwork, Dillon couldn't help but continue to look behind him everywhere he went, still feeling that old, familiar sensation he was being watched. He saw a cross like the one fallen earlier and quickly looked away, afraid it would loosen from its hinges too.

He finally stopped walking around in circles, trying to stop himself from searching for the dark figure and instead, stumbling upon a tiny plot of land. Kneeling down, he read the small tombstone that had caught his eye. There was a little porcelain angel perched on its top, leaning forward slightly, her wings spread out as if she was guarding the ground - or maybe she was watching the little boy while he slept there? Dillon read out loud the inscription. "Here lies Samuel, our little angel. May he bless the heavens with his sweet face." He read the dates on the tombstone and quickly realized the boy was only four years old when he had passed on. Standing there at the foot of the littlest grave site he'd seen so far today and bowing his head, Dillon paid his respects, for he'd never been to a cemetery before.

Another breeze blew by and this time, a howl came with it, shooting past his shoulders to spin him around as it stopped suddenly behind him, creating a six foot high mini tornado of leaves swirling upward and then quickly dispersing. He half-turned to glance at it, but once again for the fiftieth time today, didn't see anything so he looked back at the tombstone.

Life is fragile, he thought as he stood there waiting to hear his mother call him. And then he really felt it. A cold sensation shot through him, causing him to gasp as he stood there frozen, feeling it hit his skin, absorb through it only to leak out his back. He looked down expecting to see ice surrounding his midsection and instead the autumn leaves were there, spinning around him, starting at his feet and encircling him. They rose up with him as Dillon raised his arms above his head to allow the leaves to continue their ascent upward, like a multi-colored oversized shirt.

Expecting something horrible and dark to envelope him, Dillon waited for something sinister to fall from the sky or attack him as he stood there. Instead, the spinning tower of leaves shot up into the sky thirty or so feet in the air only to come down softly around him like snow. Standing there stunned, he watched the display, an almost smile trying to form on his face as the breeze they created brushed lightly against his cheeks and played with his hair. It felt so lighthearted and childlike; he let his arms out and allowed the remainder of the rain of leaves to touch him. And then he whispered up to the air.

"David?" Dave...is that you?"

He stood there breathless, waiting for another sign, but the wind had altogether stopped, and the air was completely still - unnaturally still. Dillon looked around and behind him, trying as best he could to visualize his brother all dressed in black, leaning against one of the

tombstones and watching him, but no such luck.

Could it have been David back there? Would he really scare me like this, just for his own amusement?

Maybe, he thought, however he couldn't help but feel disappointed after a full minute went by and nothing else happened. He sighed and turned back to look down again at little Samuel's tombstone. His hands began to tremble and he couldn't breathe. *This isn't happening - it's not real. The angel isn't crying tears of blood. Blink and look again...okay blink again.* "M-M..." Dillon tried to call to his mother, but his voice wouldn't work.

Once again, he stood there frozen as he watched the grass under the angel quickly turn red.

"Red paint for the little boy to play with - put your finger in it and draw on your sweet, sweet face...don't forget your throat...I'm watching yooooou..." A lovely, all too familiar female voice tickled his ear as she whispered those words. Dillon whirled around again as he tried to brush off the invisible hand resting on the side of his face.

"D-i-l-l-o-n—"

The wind howled his name in a deeper, masculine voice as he stumbled around to see what might be in front of him again. The wind blew him with a force that took his breath away.

"I-seee-yooooou." The masculine voice and the wind made those words clear and sharp, almost growling in his ears, making the boy spin again this time in a panic as the leaves went up around him again, his brother's jacket floating up and around his sides. He quickly glanced up at the sky as he became disoriented and saw it turning black - no longer gray. *What time is it?! Could it already be night fall?!*

At that moment, he lost his balance and slipped on the blood, falling on his face. The smell of dead blood seeped into his ear and around his neck, clinging to him like cellophane. Trying to scream, but his voice not working, Dillon saw a dark image fly closely over his head to land on a tombstone behind Samuel's. A single crow sat balanced on a cross at the top of the tomb and ruffled its feathers. Dillon's eyes began to blur, as the world suddenly blackened.

"Dillon? Honey wake up."

He rolled over and looked up at his Mother and Rachel, both looking down at him in their black matching dresses and hats, with mesh covering half of their faces. He blinked twice then

felt his face and throat, quickly bolting up off the grass and turning around, staring at the ground while wiping invisible blood off his neck.

Nothing was there.

He turned and met eyes with his mother and sister. “H-h-how—“

He shook his head and placed his trembling hands on his face, trying to breathe calmly so that his voice would return. He bent down and lowered his head with his hands and stared at the ground in disbelief.

“Honey, you must have fallen asleep. It’s almost dark and the burial, well it’s done now. Rachel has been watching you sleep while they buried him – I-I didn’t think you needed to see that, dear.”

“W-what?” Dillon whispered. *He can’t be gone...*

Chapter Fourteen

Just Paying My Respects

The wind rushed him to Zion Cemetery as he followed the crow flying ahead of him. He enjoyed watching the dark clouds fly in to cover to block the sun from view. The camouflage was yet another tool the Collector used to visit the world of humans.

He had been so fowl lately, his mood more than temperamental. Now at least, he could find reason to smile if his predictions held true, and he felt he would be right.

“I’m always right, oh how I just love being me.”

He spotted the cemetery and the family gathering around the opening to his world. Hmm, he thought, as he looked down from the tree top. *I wonder how many humans I could pile into that hole they’ve created? Wouldn’t it be nice to toss them all in there - the Pastor first, of course - then throw that box on top of them all and call it a day?* He snickered to himself as he walked along the top of the trees lining the perimeter of the property, his black cloak blowing in the wind he had created.

Stopping long enough to play with the pastor for a few minutes, he began to laugh louder. *Funny thing, religion is. It’s so easy to make a mockery of it to those who cling to God’s every word.* He smacked the back of his hand outward slightly, smiling wickedly as he watched the Pastor look around.

“Yes, you fool - it is I who smacked you. What would you do if I ...took that damn Book from you too?” He grinned as he fiddled with the air, then he hissed into the wind, “Where is your God now?” As if answering his own question, Azmodeus thought of those damn Arch Angels Gabriel and Sebastian again as he scanned the landscape, making sure they weren’t in attendance. Of all the angelic bounty hunters above his head, Azmodeus was most cautious with Sebastian - his ultimate nemesis. Apparently Sebastian wanted his soul on a platter to serve to the One who probably wouldn’t care about it anyway. “He doesn’t care. He’s lost interest in this world, but I haven’t...how can I? This is my refueling place, my animal kingdom, and my hunting ground.”

He looked down again and saw what he hoped he could see. *There he is, sweet and pure, standing there, amongst the mediocre following. But he isn’t pure anymore. His soul has lost its balance.* “Then it is true.” He smiled. *That will make all the difference in the world. I just have to keep an eye on that fool of an angel Sebastian, for he has a fire in him that will test my*

patience.

The Collector started to walk again. He wasn't alone for long though, for within a minute's time, he saw her standing there. "She's right on time - no doubt," he spoke to no one in particular as he looked out at the horizon and saw that it was dusk. *Too bad, I would have enjoyed watching her burn...*

Esmeralda stood with her head down in silent, fake prayer, wearing a long, black coat while holding a bouquet of red roses in her hand as if preparing to leave them at a large tomb she stood in front of. She wore a black lacy dress, its edges peeking out from under the coat tail, making her look like a lovely mourner. He half-smiled as he watched her try to pretend to play the part of the forlorn widow, thinking to himself that she probably was the killer.

He crept up behind her and whispered in her ear, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the passing of some poor bastard at the hands of one so deadly, yet so, so lovely."

Esmeralda smiled a big, cheesy grin, her canines shining under the rapidly darkening sky. She slowly turned around to gaze upon him leaning against the backside of a large family plot in the shape of a tiny house. He looked smashing as always, wearing his long black cloak with his hair tucked away and his eyes dancing with hers, a pale cold blue. He drummed an unknown tune with his long, sharp nails against the backside of the cement wall while one pointed black boot hovering slightly above the ground so as not to disturb the Heavens, the other one tapping in unison against the wall.

"Hello, my Lord. I am here to serve you in any—"

"Yes, yes, of course you are, and you will serve. I will have your eyes, my Sweet, for you mustn't disappoint. You have his description. That young, foolish idiot who serves the One up high – he will be your watch. And you have my permission to distract me in any way known to a witch to get my attention should he decide to pay a visit. I am frankly surprised he isn't here already." The Dark Lord glanced around timidly, a suspicious look on his face.

"My Lord, I can tell you when he approaches, and with the portal we've created, you can descend quickly enough. Please, rest assured, I have made it much, much easier for you to pass through, in return of course, for your dear, sweet pardon of my unfortunate mistake earlier with David—"

"I have already made myself perfectly clear. DO NOT bring about that discussion

again.” He glared at her, his eyes giving themselves away in a flash, turning from icy blue to neon yellow.

“I-I’m sorry, my Lord! I just wanted to show my appreciation—“

“That’s fine,” he waved his hand up as if he were already bored with her presence and their discussion. “I have much work to do, and we will not be given much time with the boy. He will need to be distracted and far removed from his family’s influence. Now, let’s go pay him a visit, shall we?” He pushed himself off the wall with his resting boot, then he was gone in a blink of her watering eyes.

Esmeralda tried not to succumb to the sadness that was trying its best to overcome her. The night at the cavern was so painful, especially after her ‘Gone with the Wind’ moment just beforehand. Shuddering as she replayed in her lovely head, the complete linear spectrum of romance, lust, indifference, violence and hatred that night, she just didn’t think she could recover. The verbal onslaught of horrid and degrading words he threw at her was bad enough if one didn’t include the violence and shunning. Remembering his voice venomous as he hissed those terrible words, she cringed in agony as she thought back to that night, four nights now gone by.

Having received word of David’s descent to the Underworld in his usual dream state, Esmeralda felt she had performed her duties by quickly informing her Master, but when they both departed to the Cavern to retrieve the human for the Dark Lord, he wasn’t there; the portal had not been changed from his last visit to their world. In her desperate state of depression the night the Dark Lord rejected her during the still vivid bathhouse scene, Esmeralda had merely forgotten to change the portal’s location back into Fifth’s Cavern - their usual meeting place. It was still where the human had ventured before, and of course the young fellow was apparently too stupid to walk upright, so he tripped and fell, ruining her portal’s location. *How is it my fault he can’t walk through a door correctly? And this is the one the Dark Lord brags about?! Please...*

“Changing the portal just slipped my mind, that’s all,” she whispered as she watched the Dark Lord walking over to the younger brother to inspect him up close and personal.

The vampire allowed her mind to once again drift back to that night not so long ago and the look of disappointment on his face - that alone had almost killed her.

And to think I wanted so badly to go along, just to see the excitement on his face when

he'd claim that useless human idiot he'd placed so much stock in, but instead of gratitude, I received pure hatred mixed with humiliation and disgust as he tore into me. His eyes - those eyes were the worst for my memory to bear. His eyes cut me and bled me dry. Now I have only the thought that if I serve him well enough from this moment forward, then maybe I could at least become his colleague again, for I need to have that connection with him once more, that servitude he values again. What I have now isn't good enough...I want more...romance...I want another fucking kiss—

The vampire witch snapped out of her gaze thanks to the repeated cawing sound of Lascivious staring down at her dreamlike stance, warning her to do her job and protect the Dark Lord. She glanced up at him and frowned, then walked over near her future Master to watch him admire the mysterious human walking around her playground. For Esmeralda, cemeteries were great places to meet new victims and she particularly enjoyed coming to this one. The wealthy took such good care of their blood supply, eating lots of iron rich meat. She grinned and flung her long, dark brown hair back and behind her shoulder.

Thinking about the mediocrity and simplicity of the human race made her act of hunting for food so easy. Most people were too distraught to think about visiting the dead in the safety of groups. There were always humans here alone, weeping at a gravesite, not noticing the time as the sun settled into the horizon. She could swoop down and be done in minutes, sometimes feeding on two, maybe three mourners in different sections of the same cemetery. She'd have to dispose of their bodies in most cases, but sometimes when she felt extra dangerous, the vampire would leave them lying there, freaks of wild and scary imaginations and pranks. Mysterious deaths at graveyards only got noticeable mention during the month of October, and here it was that time again.

She perched herself on top of an angel statue, crossing her legs as she sat on the large head of the winged angel, her black heels barely on her feet as they dangled there while she settled her bottom on his bald head and smiled to herself. "Are you enjoying this?" She whispered as she reached down and patted the side of the cement head, her canines poking out from the red lines of her lips as she smiled wickedly.

The boy off in the near distance smelled absolutely yummy – and she was hungry, so very hungry. "I bet his blood would taste divine," she sang softly as she played with a strand of her hair, allowing herself to once again dream about that kiss at the gates of Nine.

She glanced over and watched as the Dark Lord walked along the line of trees parallel to the boy, then she saw him raise his arms up slowly, making the wind move the trees as he put his hands to his mouth and spoke through the branches. The Dark Lord is so incredible she thought as she sighed loudly and smiled over at him. If only he knew, she thought. “Wait, actually he does know.” She blushed and looked up to the sky, looking for the bald headed angel and his stupid bow and arrows to come flying out of nowhere.

The Collector watched the boy cry and mourn, taking in every centimeter of his physical beauty. He heard the boy’s words too, noted his worries, and smiled unsympathetically. Poor, poor marked soul, he thought. *Most human souls would rejoice at the thought of a direct ascent into Heaven, for marked souls usually attain high status immediately upon entry, but not for you, my Sweet. Something tells me you’re ascent would be your own version of Hell.*

The Collector laughed out loud - the first real laugh in days - and the trees shook, making Dillon glance over and freeze. The Collector leaned against a tree directly across from the boy and watched him again, the area of the tree where he leaned turning black as that section immediately died away.

He folded his hands across his chest, his smile widened as he enjoyed the boy’s immensely growing beauty. He could be so entertaining, he thought. *I’d cut out his tongue, of course, and just put him in a glass box for show, like a porcelain doll, that is, if I had a collection to display...but I don’t. His beauty is otherworldly...appearing neither masculine nor feminine; a perfect specimen of a soon to be fallen angel. Yes, he is angelic isn’t he? Maybe I won’t destroy him after all? I mean, after viewing him right now, I think it safe to say we have something powerful in common – we’re both fallen angels.* He sighed to mock the moment then found himself continuing to watch as the boy wandered back over to the gravesites. As he followed the boy around, the Dark Lord was suddenly, surprisingly amazed as he watched the boy’s accurate psychic intuition. *He has something, this one; a gift of divination and an aura, for no one in this world can feel my presence such as this one can - I KNEW IT! I knew there was something in those eyes...*

He reached out, not able to hold back any longer, his excitement brewing, and lightly touched the boy’s neck with his hand, but quickly withdrew as if he was afraid he’d break the young human in two by the gesture. *No, not now; good souls fallen from Divine Grace always come to those who wait...and I have all the time in the world. Strange, how he carries himself. I*

expected a more timid, shy and insecure version of his brother. But then again, I have yet to see his brother...

Anger welled up in the Dark Lord as he turned away and started walking down a long grass isle of tombstones, his fingers of his left hand out, scraping each tombstone as he walked along, flicking pieces of grave up in the air, all the while his breath seething as he thought of the one that got away, and has managed to stay away. *I'll get him. I'll find that little beast soon enough, and this one here will be waiting for him at my feet...or maybe in a few pieces?*

“W-Who’s there?” Dillon whispered to the rows of tombstones. He stood ten feet away from the Dark Lord.

He smiled and watched him for a minute while Dillon tried to gather enough bravery to walk over, his emotions and thoughts clearly evident on his innocent face. Taking a few steps backward, the Dark Lord smiled in amusement as the boy traced the gouge mark from his fingernail.

He's quite intuitive, for being one of so much fragile beauty. There's definitely more there than meets the eye. After watching Dillon for a few more minutes, The Collector blew air at the boy from his mouth, hitting him in the face and chest.

Like that?

Smiling first as he watched Dillon clutch his chest painfully then heave out ice mist with his next exhale, the Dark Lord suddenly felt another emotion completely out of character, stunning him.

Watching the boy suffer his cold air actually made him pause for a second, his face changed ever so slightly as he actually held his breath hoping the boy would breathe and not suffer his at times, mortally wounding cold spell. Quickly turning away, he walked a few paces before looking back, only to watch the boy’s back as he staggered in the direction of his family. It was a full minute before the moment passed, but it left its mark on the Dark Lord.

“He’s getting away, my Lord,” Esmeralda whispered in his ear.

“Yes, and he’s talking about you, my dear.” He half turned to Esmeralda and glared at her, his eyes a threatening yellow again, causing her to step aside and stumble backward on a tuft of grass, catching and balancing herself on a tombstone.

He turned to verbally degrade her lack of grace when he heard the boy talking aloud again and in an instant, he was there, standing three feet off to the side of Dillon, leaning against

a tombstone, his arms across his chest, his face fuming as he watched the boy stand there and figure out all too quickly what had happened to his brother. He then observed the young psychic spin around and stare his way, at one point thinking maybe the boy had actually seen him, for their eyes met for a brief second.

“I’m not afraid of you. I have n-nothing to lose now.” Dillon stood there and waited, the confidence slowly leaving his face as the Dark Lord decided quickly to show him who he was dealing with.

I’m more than a powerful prince of deception, my Sweet. Just take a look for yourself, with your human eyes, that is.

His mood quickly changed towards the boy; the earlier moment had passed and his frustration returned as he’s eyes lingered on the boy’s face.

He shot his hand out and grabbed at it from the air, bending and manipulating it easily – *metal, wood, gold, cement; doesn’t matter really, for I just love crosses, especially when their upside down of course. They are indeed the perfect symbol of pain and suffering.* He looked back over at the boy as he finished his creation and shook his head back and forth slightly. *Too easy, it’s all just too easy...run to your family...I’ll be watching you from afar...*

Dillon hurried back to his family gathering, while The Collector leaned against the tombstone and watched him scurry off like a fluffy white rabbit in a field. He smiled at the image of the boy being such an animal – the most defenseless animals on the planet.

Esmeralda came over gingerly, smiling as she watched the upside down cross swaying in the wind. “Brilliant, my Lord.”

“This is just child’s play, my dear. We have much to plan. I need to return soon. What say you, my dear? Shall we give the boy something to think about before we leave, like say a parting memory of our good times here on this glorious day - our first meeting? Hell, if we can manage to knock the lad out for awhile, he might just get pissed off for having accidentally slept through his poor departed brother’s dirt and throw down.”

“Most definitely my Lord,” Esmeralda breathed out as she spoke, biting her lower lip in a seductive play for his attention. He glanced at her then pushed himself off the grave and shot off to the opposite side of the cemetery, walking along on the tops of the tombstones, gracefully leaping from plot to plot, his cloak flowing behind him beautifully.

Azmodeus stopped just short of five or six feet from the boy, and he leaned down and

balanced himself on top of a large grave, a massive five foot white stone cross perched on top of a tomb. He stood there on the cross first, looking too powerful for the world to see, then squatted down on the small ledge effortlessly, watching the boy stand in front of a child's grave.

Esmeralda watched her Master from a distance and found herself holding her breath, for the picture of him on that cross, his black cloak blowing behind him, perfectly balanced, his side profile glowing in the evening twilight, it was all quite surreal. She couldn't even remember the last time her master had ventured to human land to play with her, yet here he was in all his majestic grace, standing there of all places, atop a cemetery cross.

She continued to admire him as he held out his hand and began twirling his finger around in a circle, causing the leaves and the wind to dance around the boy, after blowing more of his air through Dillon's midsection, harshly this time, with great force to show his anger.

That darkly angelic, reaffirming smile while the boy panicked, holding his chest and gasping at the cold air hitting him, made Esmeralda sigh in relief. She had observed her Master's face lose its wicked delight the first time the boy felt his presence. She was hoping the boy's suffering hadn't upset him. "Of course it didn't bother him, how could it?" She whispered, throwing a hand up to her chin to rest herself as she sat on a tombstone, legs crossed and showing her assets perfectly. She was a sexy mourner no doubt, and she knew this, winking at an angel statue nearby. She turned back to watch the magical show just in time to watch the leaves fall like snow around the stunned, foolish looking human cherub. Clapping softly from her seat, "Idiot boy," she hissed, rolling her eyes to the sky.

He motioned to her and in an instant she was there at the foot of the shrine he was perched on.

"David? Dave, is that you?" Dillon called out, looking around frantically, his expression fearful again.

Oh, poor, poor defenseless baby. I am so sorry you are dreadfully scared...I promise it will only get scarier, especially now that I have a 'welcome into your home' invitation.

Suddenly, she smiled as she watched her Master work his magic, blood spilling from the angel and Dillon, looking completely petrified. In a blink of an eye she was there at his back, whispering into his ear, her body remaining invisible to his eyes, for she chose to delay feeding to keep herself transparent for as long as possible this night. Dillon's body began to tremble as he heard and understood her words and recognized her voice. Oh, how she loved to play and this

one had been such a naughty boy during their last evening together.

As he took a step away and started looking around frantic, pale and breathing heavily, his eyes wide open, waiting for anything and everything to come falling down on him, the unexpected happened. The dark tormentor jumped down in front of him and grabbed his hands in a dance, twirling the boy around and around in the waltz. Not skipping a beat along their graveyard path, the Dark Lord turned him around and around, hovering with his dance partner two inches off the ground; their cloak and long coats matching in color and intermingling along the way.

His face lit up at the thought that he could actually touch the human marked for Heavenly greatness, especially considering it wasn't allowed, nor was it possible to even attempt to make contact with such a pure soul. But he was no ordinary Arch Devil, and this boy dancing with him had allowed himself to become reachable with his recent and current desire to end his precious life.

In the gala of the unnatural dance, Esmeralda stood back and began to fume as she watched her master's face light up as he kept his gaze steady on the boy he chose to dance with. She had never seen him dance before, and now, he chooses to dance with a mere mortal - a boy no less? Just as she turned to sulk off and pout, she saw it. A portion of the dark, almost black sky parted and a lightness shown through. She pushed a small gust of air with her outstretched hands towards the Dark Lord and he let go of the boy, causing him to fall and slip on the blood.

Turning around quickly, Azmodeus pulled out his staff. Before he could think clearly, Esmeralda had the portal opened and ready, but he hesitated. For the first time ever he actually wanted to challenge the angel. He had gained so much power as of late, he felt incredibly confident in his presence in the Living World and his violation of God's rightful order seemed no longer a threat. He pointed his staff at the approaching Sebastian right as the angel shot a lightning bolt arrow. The two counterpoints connected in a diagonal, the angel hovering in the air, his grey wings allowing him suspension, and Azmodeus on the ground, his eyes yellow, his staff emitting a cold stream of liquid ice up to meet the lightning.

Although his actions caught Sebastian off guard, he managed to swerve to the left just in time, missing the bolt of ice as he spun around, only to throw what appeared to be a sliver metallic disc. Humming and spinning, as if it had a life of its own across the cemetery, Sebastian

drew another arrow while he called out, his voice like thunder. “YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF HIS SUPREME LAW! A LAW FOR YOUR PROTECTION I MIGHT ADD, AS WELL AS THOSE DEFENSELESS SOULS YOU PREY UPON! IN THE NAME OF OUR FATHER, IN SPITE YOU AND DRAW YOU OUT OF HIDING! Come play with someone more your caliber,” smiling sarcastically as he darted back and forth in the sky, looking for Esmeralda, but she had gone through the portal already, leaving her master to choose his own destiny.

The Arch Devil barely had time to change his mind, for the disc Sebastian had thrown into the game was called a Seeker, and its purpose was to relentlessly pursue any soul from the Underworld it had been called upon to find. Nothing could stop it, and if not able to escape, most Underworld inhabitants, including the Arch Devils, would fall victim to its slice and dice capabilities. It could move through anything, but it had a weakness - one very timely, premeditated flaw.

It followed Azmodeus through the cemetery, down and around several rows, with the Arch Devil soon realizing nothing in his newly found powers could stop it, although he tried everything as he maintained lead in the chase. It finally dawned on him. Although he wasn't quite sure it would work, his pride refused to let him leave - not after the week he had already had.

As the idea began to take form, he leaped over several rows of tombstones, dodged another arrow by Sebastian - the third one since the chase began - and he dove, gracefully rolling on the ground to quickly land on his feet just in time to grab and pick up the boy, holding him like a human shield.

The Seeker stopped abruptly to within two inches of the boy's sleeping face, hovering at his nose. It hesitated, trying to decide if it wanted the notorious Arch Devil Azmodeus enough to risk killing a marked soul.

Sebastian yelled out as he watched the hesitation, fuming while he hovered in the air. He obviously had no control over the Seeker's actions once he released it into the Living World. It indeed, had a temperamental mind of its own and most importantly, a conscience.

“NOT FAIR! THAT'S NOT FAIR! How did you...? YOU VILE BEAST NOT MEANT FOR UNDERGROUND RULE! DROP THE BOY AND PREPARE TO TAKE YOUR PLACE AMONGST THE OTHERS WHO TRIED AND LOST BY MY HAND!”

“Now, now, let's not turn into a sore loser, Bastian! Although your childish temper

tantrum is noteworthy and entertaining, there's no need to be fretful. The time will come for us to play, and when that time comes, I'll find a way to repay you for your many interruptions, but not now. I have other matters to attend to you see? Do give my disregards to your Majesty, and know that the next time I see you, it will be I who sought you first."

The Seeker retreated, but not before coming back to within two inches of the boy's face and hesitating, scanning the boy's body until finally retreating, the twelve inch wide oval weapon returning to its master. Not having ever backed away before, it was temporarily stunned and disappointed in itself.

"How were you able to touch this marked soul?! You aren't *allowed*! I will report this! Rest assured - *He* will know." Sebastian caught his Seeker and tucked it away, watching Azmodeus drop the boy and exit.

"Well, I guess I'm just full of surprises!" Azmodeus called out as he quickly left.

He landed near Dillon after the portal closed and disappeared like a thin line from each end into the middle. Walking over to where the portal used to be, only to frown down at the space it once occupied, Sebastian noticed the grass burnt and smoking where it had made contact with this world. He then returned to the human shield.

Gazing down at the crumpled up blond rag doll and sighing loudly, the bounty hunter stood over the sleeping boy. It was the first time he'd laid eyes on the human since their first meeting. "You stood between me and glory...already you test our relationship, child." His wings folded inward and disappeared as he knelt next to Dillon.

He wore a light gray matching blazer jacket and dress pants, with a pink tee shirt underneath. Sebastian was all about appearances, being the youngest bounty hunter to date. He was chosen for his dedication to his duty and of course, he took it very seriously - almost too seriously, endangering and sometimes sacrificing people getting in the way of his many hunts.

He touched Dillon's tussled hair and gently brushed it aside to show his face. "Well, my young one, you are the first soul my Seeker chose to spare. It's quite a shame you weren't awake to see it." He frowned again at the thought of Azmodeus getting away, and then inspected the boy closely, leaning down to examine him and thinking the Arch Devil will return soon enough. "Hmm, I may need to tighten security around you, starting now. You'll be seeing more of me. In fact, we could become best friends and partners before you even obtain your wings - we'll be twins!" Sebastian's voice became sarcastically excited for a second, but it lasted only that long.

Returning to being one hundred percent business as usual, “Oh, and speaking of best friends and twins, I need something back from you that belongs to Yours Truly.” He hunted through Dillon’s pockets, laughing softly and whispering, “You sure can sleep through anything, can’t you?”

He finally found what he was searching for, and held it up for his sliver eyes to see, watching the gray feather twirling in his thumb and index finger like a long lost pet, until he caught Dillon stirring out of the corner of his eye. Impossible, he thought, kneeling down to within two inches from the boy’s face, holding his angelic breath in disbelief. He rested his hand on Dillon’s forehead, then checked the boy’s hands and held them between his for a brief second, only to finish by looking up at the motionless clouds. “Can’t be...” He whispered to the Heavens, but as he searched the sky for an answer, all he heard was a human stirring at his feet, an impossible and unnatural act for any human to perform in the presence of a celestial duel. Swooping back down, he whispered the words, “Sleep for the time sufficient to bury your brother, then you may rise, for I feel you would be better kept here - not at that hole in the ground. So sleep and when you wake, he will be already put to rest. Let it be done,” Sebastian held out his hand and waved it over the wakening boy, and in an instant, he lay still again.

Slowly, he rose as he scanned the cemetery, while the scenery and the people remained frozen in time, and blinked once, his metallic eyes restarting the play and all in it as he shot himself straight up in the air faster than the eye could register. All the while asking himself why the boy would faint at the collision of the two superpowers, for he should have simply stood still, where he was, no less. *His body and soul shouldn't have reacted at all. I'll have to mention that little oddity to His Grace, for I fear it not be something kept secret. No, the boy is more fragile than I had originally predicted. His soul may be tiring quickly from his body's hold...but then again, if I do tell...no, probably shouldn't.*

“Dillon? Honey wake up.” Mother stood there with Rachel as they both watched him slowly open his eyes and focus up at them both.

“I’ve been like, watching him like you said, Mother, but he just wasn’t waking.” Rachel chewed on her fingernail while transferring her weight back and forth from one leg to the other, her high heels smashing her toes together, while Mother looked worried as she thought of how she would break it to her youngest. He was the only person not counting herself who was closest to the son she just buried. She paused in thought, thinking maybe she had done the wrong thing.

Dillon shot up to his feet, feeling the ground under him for what seemed like the first time and steadied himself, as he shook his head and tried to calm his breathing down so that his voice would return. He panicked at first, swiping nothing but air as he touched his face and neck while he panned the cemetery looking for anything, but it or they were gone. He couldn't say for sure why he knew this, but the feeling of nothingness had now crept back into his soul, calming him again. I need to feel numb all the time, he thought. As he looked up at his Mother's face, he felt a rush of disappointment hit him. *Wait, that's not numbness I'm feeling.*

"Honey, you must have fallen asleep. It's almost dark and the burial is done. Rachel has been watching you sleep while they buried him – I-I didn't think you needed to see that, dear."

"W-what?" Dillon whispered. *He can't be gone, no way...*

"Come on now, Honey. They're all waiting for us, and I thought you would want to visit him alone, so everyone is at the car, to give us some privacy, just the, the three of us," Mother glanced over at Rachel who was twirling her hair and swinging her tiny beaded purse around one extended finger and quickly thought maybe she'd be better off with the others.

"Rachel, Sweetheart, why don't you go over and wait with the others—"

"Uh, no way, Mother. He was my brother too, like...we were closer than anyone in age, and, and I need to see him again." Rachel looked at Dillon, who was staring straight ahead at the horizon like he'd just seen a ghost, then back at her mother, and smiled big with a look that screamed in defiant song, 'I am not going to cooperate.'

Mother rolled her eyes and touched Dillon's shoulder. "Honey, come on – what's the matter Dillon?" She looked behind her to see if she could see what her stunned son was looking at, her voice concerned.

"Don't touch me." Dillon didn't blink, but continued to stare off as he pulled away from his mother's shocked face and walked in the direction of the burial.

"Dillon! Come back here! I was talking to you!" Mother felt the crushing blow from his rejection as she held her breath while she watched him leave.

"Not anymore," he whispered as he walked over to where David was laid to rest, not looking back. I hate everyone, he thought as he stormed past several tombstones, pointing to several as he whispered, "I hate you, and you, and you, and especially...you." He pointed to David's tombstone, as he approached, his finger trembling with sudden, new found anger, as he curled it into a fist. The ground sealed shut and the tombstone marking the spot angered him

even more. *I'm not ready for this...*

“Whoa,” Rachel whispered, then smiled quickly at her mother. “He must be mad about our not including him and all,” she paused then quickly interjected as she watched her mother’s sad face turn to her, “But I’m sure he’ll get over it, right?”

“Just be quiet, Rachel, please. Just go to the car and wait for me.” She started after Dillon, leaving Rachel standing there with her hands on her waist, feeling indignant and pouting.

He stood on his brother’s grave site, making sure to stand right on top of the newly replanted grass pieces, and spoke quietly as he read the inscription.

“David Smith

Beloved Son and Brother

May you always rest in peace.

We love you,

Father, Mother, Samantha, Daniel, Rachel and Dillon.”

“How touching – and I get mentioned last? Great! How typical - why Dave? Why did you leave me again? And this time, you made it so that I can’t follow you, let alone find you and help bring you back. I h-hate you and, and I-I d-don’t want to think about you anymore.” He sobbed and heaved in with his breathing as he stared away from the tombstone and took a step back from standing on the actual plot so that he was just beyond its borders, then continued. “But I do, I always do. I’m stuck in the background now, finally numb and hanging on your return.” He sobbed as he rubbed his neck with his right hand, then remembered what he wanted to give his brother, something he knew David would like more than the flower display leaning against the tombstone. He reached into his pant pocket and felt for it—

Where was it?! He panicked and searched all his pockets, then thought of his little ordeal with ‘The Others’ as he thought of them, then Sebastian, for he saw him come through the sky before he passed out. “Oh, brilliant! Just fabulous! Thanks for taking what was left for me! If you shed, then whatever you leave behind is fair game, Sebastian!” His voice frustrated and sarcastic, Dillon stood there pissed at the heavenly sky, his beautiful, once angelic, peaceful face, now filled with anger and fury. He paused to stop and think about angels shedding and why he felt justified to keep what wasn’t his, then decided not to think about that. He wanted to feel indignant for as long as possible right now to hide the hurt.

“Dillon? Honey who are you talking to?” Mother stood behind him, having watched and

heard just about everything. She was growing more and more concerned for her youngest by the minute.

Dillon froze, not turning around to face her. “I would like some privacy please. I-I’d like to, to...oh, never mind! There’s nothing left to say or do! Good bye, Dave - see ya around.” He threw his arms out in an act of frustration and exasperation, having given up on life and not seeming to care anymore. He felt numbness finally kick in again as he glanced over at his crying mother then continued to walk to the distant car, not bothering to look back at her while she continued to talk to his back.

“I’m sorry - please forgive me Darling!” Mother followed him trying to catch up to her son, but deciding at the last minute to stay three to four paces behind him, for his walk gave her the impression he wasn’t in the mood for company.

Chapter Fifteen

Tough Guys

David shoved Joel's hand away as he struggled to get out of the pond, his cold spell finished in its relentless pursuit to control his now habitual hell. He climbed out of the pond and stood up slowly, meeting Sarin's disapproving stare as the elf stood there smugly, arms across his chest and a disapproving frown on his face.

Leselle reached out and gingerly removed a lily pad off the side of David's shoulder. A green frog climbed out of his tunic and hopped on his shoulder, giving him a look that could kill if frogs had that capability, then jumped in dive formation back into the pond.

"Follow me you two," Sarin spoke sternly as he flashed them both looks of disgust. Joel stood there still shivering, having not fully recovered from the cold spell quite as quickly as David had. Leselle smiled at them behind Sarin's back, then followed right behind him dutifully to the dojo. "She's been closer than close to him lately, hasn'tttt s-she?" Joel shivered a whisper to David's shoulder and backside as he followed behind him.

"Why do you care? You would never make a move on her! Just shut your mouth and drag your soggy ass along, Lily." David was suddenly pissed again and stormed after Sarin and the others, for there were only about thirty spectators, all gathering around them to follow along, nothing better to do apparently. David tried not to look at any of them, as they parted to let him walk by. A few were whispering and others were smiling sarcastically, and he had to clench his fists and hold them behind his back as he walked by them in order to keep from fighting anyone else. He wanted to see this Oleander, up front and personal, and no other fight would delay him from what he'd been waiting for.

As they all filed into a large Japanese style gym, David was stopped at the door, along with Joel, by Oleander's outstretched bamboo stick. He silently pointed to two gees, one white, one black, then walked to the center of the dojo. Turning and sitting on his knees, back to the two of them, the master elf waited.

Joel and David were completely soaked as they stood there staring down at themselves, then each other. Silently relenting, they each grabbed a gee and began to change out of their wet clothes. All the elves and humans, Evan and Oz included, filed in and walked along the outside edge of the gym, not touching the inner matted section that spanned the full length of the room,

minus a three foot circumference around, as if they all knew it was sacred ground. They either stood or sat to watch, for there wasn't much allowable room to gather. It enraged David even more as he watched them all stand there, about fifty total, most of the group present at Sanctuary, just to watch them supposedly fight. Leeches, he thought.

As they changed, Joel checked out the room while David fumed at the visitors standing around them. It was large and expansive, the size of a regular high school gymnasium and simple in design. There were banners on the walls hanging down in red and gold, and along the far eastern wall, a long row of weaponry, either hanging or shelved, mostly swords of various lengths, daggers, axes, and other assorted weapons Joel couldn't categorize. All that silver gathered in that corner of the room hurt his eyes, they shone so brightly.

There were several wooden dummies, lifelike in human form, against the northern wall, and along the western wall, a row of spears in various lengths and sizes. They stood on the southern wall and robed. David entered first, with Joel tentatively following him, looking up at the ceiling made of rafters and wooden beams. David marched up to within five feet of the elusive Elvin master and stopped, not because he wanted to, but because the bamboo cane came out of what appeared to be nowhere and slide along the ground, trying to hit his ankles to knock him down. He quickly jumped over the stick. The audience stirred quite a bit. David stood still and waited. Oleander remained sitting on his knees, his back to them both, his head bowed as he too waited.

David and Joel stood there for what seemed like an eternity. Oleander didn't move or speak during that time. David started to look around the perimeter of the room and saw Evan trying to get his attention, motioning for him with his open hand to sit down. He nudged Joel and the two of them sat on their knees. Within seconds, Oleander was up quickly in one fluid movement. Turning to meet them, his bamboo cane behind him, smacking the ground lightly with each step he took, he ignored the fifty or so visitors along the gym walls and focused only on David and Joel. Sarin approached behind the two accused and bowed his head before speaking to the elf master.

“My Lord, these two humans are traveling with me and the one—“

Oleander held out his hand to silence Sarin. “No matter. I know this already. I wish to see a fight. The loser cleans out my pond and fixes bridge and railing. So,” Oleander looked at David, then Joel, winking at him as he whispered quietly. “Nice blue hair - very distracting -

good in battle,” then raising his voice to allow all to hear, “Now, you will each have a weapon of my choosing, understand?”

David and Joel looked at each other, then back at Oleander, who was beaming like a child on his birthday. “Now, you – Joel Lee – stand up.”

Joel stood up then shot David a disapproving glare as he watched him smirk and look away, trying not to laugh at the mispronounced name as he coughed into his hand.

Oleander walked around Joel, making odd, quick noises of recognition and affirmation. Within a minute, he had sized up the competitors by walking around them both, finally standing in front of Joel again. “Raise your hands out - right, not much. Okay, good. We will give you this.”

Oleander walked over to the western wall and stared at the selection of long staff weapons there. He was incredibly small for a male elf, standing under five feet tall, but his walk had purpose, and his gait immediately commanded attention. He had perfect posture, as if counting on every centimeter he could gather from keeping his back completely straight and his head level to his body. His hair was nonexistent, not a single strand or stubble could be seen on his bald head. He looked regal and noble though, and his ears, long and elegant against the sides of his head, with multiple earrings dangling there, gave him a South Indies look – kinda like the dude in the movie “The King and I,” David thought. *Oh, how Mother loved that movie, especially all those poufy dresses – circus garb, that’s how I’d describe the wardrobe for that musical.*

Oleander’s age - his many years - could not be seen in his body either, for he was perfectly proportioned and lean, but all muscle as he stood there thinking and looking at the weaponry. He wore all white, his pants rolled up to just under his knees. His white jacket came down his front and tucked into his pants, baring his smooth, muscular chest and abdomen down to his belt.

His outfit was lined in gold thread, and he wore brown sandals that looked like flip flops, making David smile as he heard him walking around the dojo with that old familiar sound of sole hitting shoe. He was already home sick and now this? He cringed and closed his eyes.

Oleander was quicker than any elf David had ever seen, and his grace was immediately noticeable. His age could only be seen in his eyes, for they were cloudy white and blue, as if blue at one time, and now, a mixture of color and wisdom. He had a mischievous smile and a

sparkle in his eye that invited trouble. David liked him from the beginning, and now, he would perform for him against the one person he would die for here. Something inside him spoke to him as he looked over and watched Joel's side profile. He saw the nervousness there, as Joel rubbed his hands together and stretched his fingers, trying to bring life back into his almost useless wrists. David tried not to feel sorry for Joel and he didn't wish to fight him, but he also did not have any desire to fix the oasis pond. *What a dilemma. And what the hell is that little character doing anyway?*

Oleander stood in front of the spears and thought about what he would do. He wanted to bring the new talent down a notch. He could sense the Dark Lord's influence on the young man, even if the mark wasn't present and constantly blinding; he saw the rebellion in the human's eyes as well – but that's a good thing, he thought – *still though, he needs discipline and direction. He has so much power, so little knowledge of it, and such disregard for anyone else - not good.*

The other one has useless hands for heavy weapons, but if he brings his hands together, combine his strength, he could make use of what he is lacking. So sad, he thought, shaking his head. *Stupid youth...*

“Why's he shaking his head? What's he thinking?” Joel whispered towards David who just shrugged his shoulders in response, not wanting to let Joel know he was even listening to him or that he cared. And then it hit him like a ton of bricks, and he grabbed at his chest, then ran his hand up to his face and lightly rubbed it, a single tear fell down the side of his cheek, but not his own. He panicked as he wiped it away inconspicuously, but not before Joel could notice.

“What are you doing?” Joel whispered, beginning to panic himself at the thought that he could cause David to cry.

“Sshh, it'll be okay, I won't forget you either. I feel your pain, and I'll find you, that I promise, and when I do, it will be our reunion – I'll make sure of it.” David whispered so quietly, only Joel could hear him, and even with him sitting right next to David, only a few words were audible.

Oleander had seen so many humans descend with wounds such as those, self-inflicted injuries that cry out to everyone how weak they were and how marked they are now, completely unarmed and defenseless in a world that preys upon that very attribute. He finally found what he was looking for and pulled it out. It was a lightweight staff connected by silver rings and divided into three equal sections. It would do for today's demonstration, he thought, smiling and shaking

his head again. *Try to master this little trinket.* The weapon were perfectly suited for the duel at hand, so he grabbed it and walked over to the boys.

The gym was stone quiet, no one was even moving. Oleander walked over and laid the weapon down in front of them, then continued walking over to the opposite wall and quickly scanned it, picking out a pair of sword-like weapons and quickly twirling them around nimbly, making more inelible sounds as he did so. The spectators all watched him in awe as he handled the weaponry with ease and agility, looking through until he found what he needed. He finally turned and started to walk towards the middle of the dojo again, carrying two large sword-like sickles, each spanning the full length and then some on each arm past the elbow and protruding out eight inches from the grip of the hand as would be held, blade out, shaped like an elongated half circle. One on each arm as he walked; they showed as impressive weaponry, however oversized for such a small warrior.

David and Joel made eye contact as Oleander approached. David felt his knees begin to ache from kneeling for so long. He began to squirm a little, and Oleander smirked, then thwacked him on his head with the end of the sword and sickle, its protected sleeve still on.

David flinched and grimaced slightly; the spectators began to laugh, but Oleander silenced them all with a quick look over.

“Okay, let’s do this tough guys,” He flipped up the three sectioned staff with one flip flop foot and flicked it over and into David’s startled arms, controlling it easily and effortlessly, although it had three moving parts. David tried to grab it but he looked like he was holding a newborn baby for the first time.

Oleander then turned to Joel. “Stand, arms out. You grip here and here, they are extensions; extensions of your arms and hands. You work them as such. Shield, cutting blade, stabbing sword – understand?” Oleander’s words were choppy, his English broken, but he was so expressive in describing what he spoke; each word purposefully spoken with meaning as he acted out what he said with the weapons.

Joel stood up and held each weapon in hand and marveled at the extensions, his arms wielding the swords as he moved them around to get used to them. He looked at David and grinned. “This might be a fair fight after all,” he whispered.

David, on the other hand, frowned as he also stood up and held his chosen weapon, the three ring staff. Holding it at one end like it was a used towel, while the rest of it dangled down

and rested around his feet, smacking into his ankles as he shifted his weight around, he immediately hated it, wanted to discard it, but decided not to say anything. It was indeed heavy, cumbersome, and flimsy and worse for David, easily self-harming.

Oleander smiled slyly as he watched David react the way he'd expected he would. His patience is his downfall, and he secretly praised himself for having selected one of the hardest advanced weapons in his company.

He didn't even assess me like he did Joel, David thought as he watched Oleander take his bamboo staff and first tap it on the ground like a conductor, then usher it out first to the right, motioning David to take a few steps toward the western end of the dojo, then out to the left, cueing Joel to do the same. When they were at least ten steps apart from each other, both of them staring the other down, trying as best they could to continue to be mad at each other, he casually walked to the middle, between them and bowed to them both, motioning them impatiently to bow to each other as well. He sighed as he watched Joel bow without looking at David. "Look! You fools! Match eyes! Right, good, now let's go!"

"What the hell?" David mumbled as he grabbed at the staff at one end and twirled the other end around, feeling like a foolish girly drill team leader at half time. The crowd started to laugh as they watched him fumble with it while Joel literally ran up to him exposing himself by throwing his arms out. Oleander shook his head in disgust as he watched them dodge each other and barely miss hitting themselves in the process.

David, having to hold the awkward three piece staff, wasn't as nimble and quick with his usual acrobatics he'd displayed earlier in battle against the orc. The first time he turned to flip to the side to dodge Joel, thinking he could buy some time to get used to his complicated weapon and to figure out how to wield it, he tripped over one end and stumbled, falling and rolling along the ground while Joel was hitting each spot along his route a second after David had been there. Damn! David thought. *He's out for blood!*

While still on the ground on his back after finishing rolling, David threw out his staff with both hands in the middle section while Joel came down hard with his dominant sword. After a brief second of standstill, David kicked Joel in the back with his leg and flipped up himself, throwing one of the outer ends at Joel's shoulder, followed by the other end on the other shoulder, both blocked by Joel who was wearing a stupid grin, pissing David off immensely.

Joel was getting stronger by the minute as they fought. He was newly balanced by the

double weaponry, blocking and turning as he moved around David, who on the other hand, was still fumbling with what he was rapidly referring to as his 'broken staff.' He couldn't hit or punch with one hand while holding the staff with the other, because it was too clumsy and long, he also quickly noticed that with Joel coming in close to fight, his only defense was to block Joel's armor with the middle of the staff section, using both hands to hold it out and push Joel back with it. The whole interchange was getting rapidly boring.

After another minute of watching the painful exchange, Oleander came in from the far end of the gym, bamboo staff swinging, first attacking Joel in two quick movements, then turning to address David, who was standing there in shock, having been taken off guard.

"Never, never," Oleander smacked Joel on the side of one knee, making him hop in pain, then jabbing him in the gut to knock him backward, "Choose sides and break ties while your true opponent smiles and waits." He twirled his bamboo stick around his body so gracefully, David got caught watching him perform, until of course the bamboo stick landed across his left shoulder, knocking him back as Oleander engaged him. Joel stayed sitting down nursing his injured knee, appearing afraid to get up.

As David retreated across the full length of the gym slowly, trying to block the hurricane of bamboo that was Oleander, the crowd watched breathlessly, awaiting the outcome, for although he hadn't mastered the offensive trick to the linked staff, he was quickly learning its defensive properties. Dodging quite a few of Oleander's hits, he looked more and more confident, and the show between the two was a breathtaking work of art, until David decided to test the staff. He started to spin one end using the chain link above his head to attempt to snag Oleander's staff, throwing it but not timing it right, and the end hit the top of his head as it came out towards the master elf. He, in turn, jabbed David first straight in the abdomen, then up to his chin, knocking him backward in a whole body flip over to land on his stomach, reeling in dizzy pain.

At that moment, Joel came running up behind Oleander and tried to ambush him, after receiving several disgusted looks and gawks from many of the spectators while he sat to rub his knee, most of them wanting to get involved in the fight somehow and jealous he was chosen. The feeling in the dojo was simply that: Joel wasn't seen by anyone after his weak performance at the battle on the plains as a warrior of sound, strong reputation. He certainly wasn't given any vote of confidence by anyone watching, except maybe Evan, Leselle and Ulned and he knew it.

So he rose and hobbled over to Oleander, knowing he was going to get a severe ass whipping but resigned to ‘take it like a man.’ *I’m so stupid...*

In perfect choreography, Oleander threw his staff behind his head just in time to block Joel’s attack as the crowd ahhed and oohed, then threw a round house kick, hitting him across the face with his studded, at one time cute, flip flop. More oohs from the crowd, but these sounded a little more empathetic for Joel. He then came after Joel with a vengeance, his sparkly eyes twinkling in pure joy.

Joel, still standing, threw out both his arms to block a horizontal hit, but Oleander came in close with his staff, holding it in two hands and quickly, moving so fast Joel could only helplessly try to look on while he engaged and locked Joel’s two weapons with his staff, then pulled him down with it. He finished the move by smacking Joel hard across the forehead twice in succession while he swept his feet, laying him out on the floor. He threw his staff behind him casually while he walked away, smacking Joel again across his stomach. This time, the crowd was united in their empathy for Joel with very quiet, long and drawn out oohs with a few shaking of heads for added effect. Joel pulled his legs up and laid there in the fetal position with a large red spot spreading across his forehead as he gasped for air

David had thrown his staff down during the exchange against Joel and had run up to engage Oleander without it, performing a double kick to only have his leg met with Oleander’s; their feet touching suspended in the air, David clenching his teeth as the studs bore into his bare foot, however, neither swayed as they balanced there perfectly. Finally, Oleander made a move and tapped David’s leg, spinning it around, dancing with him for a few seconds until he spun his staff around as well. David threw up his stationary leg and block-kicked the staff back in a perfect round house, knocking Oleander off balance for a brief second. The crowd moaned in anticipation of another ass whipping by Oleander, as if they were as a group, predicting the next series of moves like a veteran audience. They were correct, for Oleander then turned on the heat and brought it down on his opponent.

“Never discard...your weapon...in battle!” Oleander went from defensive stance to offensive position in a brief second and let go, first allowing David to block one move with his arm, then swinging the staff around and under him, smacking him in the ankle with the bottom portion of the cane. He smiled as he watched David handle the hit perfectly, barely flinching as he threw a jab with his open arm. Oleander blocked it easily with his open hand and pushed

David back. He then tossed his staff to the side, smirking, and engaged David in hand to hand combat, motioning him to come with an open hand. David couldn't help but think Oleander looked like Bruce Lee at that point in every one of his movies when he finally gets pissed and encourages his opponent to come at him - *great, then that would make me the stupid opponent who dies while the audience claps their approval.*

The crowd began to stir and whisper as David thought for sure they were placing bets on how long he would last. He glanced over at Joel, who had crawled over to the side line and knelt next to Evan, who was talking and pointing at David.

Oleander pounced on him swiftly and without hesitation. David surprised not only himself, but his opponent as well, when he unknowingly displayed skill in close combat, at first blocking most of Oleander's hits, but the master elf was too fast and his moves not predictable, and after two quick hits to his already throbbing abdomen, David stumbled backward, performed a back flip just in time to block Oleander's fist, only to watch in dismay as the elf gracefully displayed a front flip to follow. The scene was perfectly choreographed again, their timing with each move almost purposeful, their movements, poetry as they almost danced around the room, squaring off one with the other.

David's arms began to throb with the blocks he was performing, hardly able to get any offensive hits in, and when he did, he was met with a mischievous smile and a wink from Oleander as he quickly denied him access to his chest, or his face, or anything else for that matter. David tried to sweep the master elf with his legs as he dodged yet another hit, dropping to his knees in time to sweep a leg under the elf, who quickly flicked David's sweeping leg up and grabbed it, twisting it and flipping David around one hundred and eighty degrees while he was still on the ground. This time however, the human was staying face down. Oleander then dropped David's leg and ran along it, launching off David's head as he was trying to get up, only to slam him back down.

He triumphantly walked a few steps, slapping his hands together as if brushing off David, then turned and put them on his hips and bent over and forward to look at the human, who was rolling over and getting to his feet, albeit slower this time around and in visible pain.

Oleander smiled as he watched the determination begin to falter on his young opponent's face. "You finished yet?"

David tried to get angry, tried to let his dark side take over, but it was as if it had become

blocked or paralyzed here under the influence of Sanctuary and Oleander.

Maybe I just can't get mad at this person, maybe my intuition is holding me back so that I can learn from him and take what I need to move on and become self-serving? Maybe I just need to admit the small bald guy kicked my ass? Maybe...

He thought of Dillon and his need to see him again, and he knew he would have to suffer more than pain; he would need to feel humility for the first time - today. He sighed and rolled his eyes, as Oleander stopped and turned his head to the side to watch David for a second, trying to understand the mysterious response to his question. He could have read David's mind like an open book, but that wasn't the way Oleander worked. He chose to live somewhat for life's little mysteries.

David stood up tall, but his gut hurt and his injured leg was throbbing at the knee. His lip was cut and bleeding slightly where he'd taken a kick to the face. His jaw ached and his head was spinning as he put his hands on his hips and looked down. "Yes, I finished." He spoke quietly but in broken English too, a slight hint of sarcasm could be detected as the crowd of onlookers began to stir and whisper. They all expected Oleander to whip some more ass at the supposed attempt to poke fun at his manner of speaking. He instead only smiled.

"Good because you distract me from my tea." He half bowed and waited. David returned the bow and, keying off the master, bowed again with him, the two of them locking eyes in a moment of intense silence. Oleander broke it by bouncing up and snapping his fingers. An elf standing near him, a servant probably, ran across the gym and grabbed his staff, returning it to him and bowing gracefully.

"Right, the fish and frogs are waiting. You do it, both of you - now." He waved his hand in an annoyed fashion at both David and Joel, like the true King of Siam David thought he was, then turned and left the dojo. In a split second, he was gone. David blinked and looked for him, registering only the open door way and Sarin standing near it. He was shaking his head in disagreement at David's choice of comment and behavior, like the typical big brother he was trying to be from the moment they first laid eyes on each other.

"What?!" David raised his voice. "I didn't see you out here fighting him—"

"That's because I'm not as stupid as you are." Sarin turned to leave, Leselle quickly following him.

The spectators all filed out as well, all but Evan and Joel who were both walking over,

Evan helping Joel walk with his injured knee.

“Don’t say a God damn word! I’m not interested in a ‘let’s go over what we did wrong’ session,” he pointed at Evan then turned to Joel. “And I’m NOT TALKING to you,” David turned and walked out the door, pushing two spectators out of the way as he did so.

In the process of looking for David, Joel quickly realized his instant popularity. Apparently, this Oleander dude must be something legends are made of, Joel thought as he checked their sleeping quarters again without luck. Exasperated at not having found David, and beginning to panic at the thought that maybe he’d left the compound altogether, Joel ran up to Sarin and inquired. Sarin rolled his eyes, and silently turned and began to walk towards the only part of the complex Joel hadn’t looked in - Oleander’s quarters.

Sure enough, David was sitting on a pillow cross-legged, on the floor across from Oleander who was sitting in similar fashion, and the two were indeed, having a cup of tea together while several elves and students of the elf master, sat in the background and listened, hoping to glean more information about the mysterious human sitting so calmly and stately with the master of all elves.

David looked over and glared at Joel and Sarin, who were both standing in the doorway. “Holy shit,” Joel whispered as he watched the scene. David took another drink of tea then gently placed his cup down on its saucer, stood up, and bowed at Oleander, who silently acknowledged it in return. He then turned and left the room to walk along a stone path in a small, ornate garden. Joel walked behind him a few paces.

He sat down on a wooden bench, grabbing his chest and breathing heavily. Joel ran over and sat next to him. “What’s the matter Dave? What’s wrong? This isn’t another cold spell, is it?” He looked at David’s throat and saw the mark dim, barely visible.

“No, I just, I can’t breathe,” David whispered, feeling his upper chest, then looking down and rubbing his left wrist, staring at his bracelet. He then felt something being placed in his coat pocket, except he wasn’t wearing a coat, only a gee, but he blinked then looked down.

“Oh geez, Dave! What just happened?” Joel shot up and took a step back, looking at David like he was indeed a ghost.

David slowly stood up and reached into his coat pocket, then pulled out the black and white picture of himself and his brother, the only picture he considered worth the paper it was on, and held it out before him, not blinking. He then looked at his wrist, then his forearm, then down

the front of his body. He wore all black, black button-down shirt - his personal favorite - his favorite black pants, and as he looked down at his bare feet, he wiggled his toes inside his black leather boots. He spread his arms out in disbelief and turned in a slow circle in front of Joel, his trench coat an array of colors, billowing nicely against his calves. He could feel the energy it created.

“Whoa! I saw that coat on your first day to The Disciples! You have your clothes! But why? And what’s this picture?” Joel couldn’t speak fast enough; he grabbed at the picture, his head was spinning as he tried to put it all together.

David pulled the picture away quicker than Joel’s eye could register. “Dillon - it’s Dillon. He’s looking down at me and talking to me, and he’s telling me stories about,” David stopped whispering and closed his eyes, turning his head to the side as if trying to hear better, “Daryl...at my funeral.” He sat down and silenced Joel with an opened hand as he listened to an invisible voice that was most definitely his brother’s.

They sat together in silence for a few minutes on the quaint little wooden bench amongst the beautiful arrangement of wild flowers, cactus, and green foliage. David sat still and listened to the voice of his brother in his head. Finally it stopped, and he looked up at the scenery around him, the noise of the waterfall in the background, the trickle of the stream nearby, a bird chirping in the Japanese maple over hanging their bench, its red leaves swaying in the fabricated wind. Suddenly, David jumped up and threw his arms up over his head and flinched. Joel watched him again, curious and worried.

“They’re closing the door! I feel closed in...” David sat back down and closed his eyes. “He’s gone. I don’t hear him anymore.” He felt himself spiraling downward into despair. He struggled with his breath, felt the world close down on him, and heaved as he allowed another tear to fall down his cheek. He felt only helplessness – a complete disconnection - knowing his brother was left behind and now, yet another door was closing on them, separating them again; his sense of loneliness choked him now. Joel reached out and touched his shoulder, gently waking him and bringing him back.

“What door? Could this be a coffin door you’re referring to?” Joel asked, then hesitated, watching David look down and fiddle with his bracelet. “Open your eyes and look around Dave. You’re not there anymore; you’re here – with me.” He wanted so desperately to reach out and grab David’s hand, but his inner voice told him not to and it was loud. He’ll come around in

time, he thought. *He doesn't need any confusion right now. Jesus, he's getting buried, so I'll cut him some slack.* Joel tried to smile, but David glanced over suspiciously.

“What?” David asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking I would cut you some slack, you know, since it's your funeral day and all, and you're probably being buried right now as we speak, hence the 'I feel closed in' and 'they're closing the door.'” Joel paused for a second, then continued as he noticed David's face not changing. “I just thought it was um... funny, you know - thought I'd never hold back from saying something if I thought a person was having a bad day AND was being buried. Now I can add that excuse to my list of times when I've made myself go easy on someone I cared about.” He cleared his throat nervously. “Anywho...” He paused then quickly stopped as he watched David continue his questioning, now disquieting look. “Sorry, I know you don't like that.”

David stood up and felt a strong surge of power. He breathed in and felt it shoot through him, warming his skin and making his eyes glow. He looked down at the black and white picture of him and his brother and smiled, then quickly tucked it into his coat pocket, near his heart; he patted it lightly as he stood there quietly. Joel looked concerned as he watched him.

“Uh, look Dave, it's okay that your funeral was today - I probably didn't even get one! I bet I was toe tagged and sent to a generic grave somewhere in the desert, knowing Pastor Sampson. He most likely benefited by my death somehow, got all the publicity he needed to better himself. I'm sure I was depicted as the psychotic, blue-haired freak they tried to save but couldn't because I didn't want to be. They probably snagged the ugliest mug shot of me to put on the television screens across Southern California to get public support for the demise of yet another 'menace to society' hoodlum, just to show how worthless and unsaved I chose to be – wait, that implies I actually got television play! No, I'm sure that didn't happen. Hell, I bet my grandparents don't even know I'm dead...I bet they're still paying my tuition...should I stop talking now? Am I rambling?” Joel's voice showed every sign of uncertain insecurity imaginable.

David smiled at Joel's sense of perfect timing and intuition of knowing just the right comedic things to say. “Come on, let's go fix Oleander's fake pond. The fish are waiting and that frog looked pretty pissed off.” He gave Joel a look that shot through him, making him hold his breath again at the vision before him. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't, so he

turned and followed David silently around, breathing him in, heart and head reeling.

Chapter Sixteen

A Meeting to Fuel More Meetings

He breezed into the Grand Hallway a changed man, or Arch Devil, depending on who was viewing him. He strolled over to his dining room and entered it, throwing the doors out as he entered. Esmeralda was in there, pacing and waiting.

“You’re here! And you’re alright!” She had to fight the urge to hug him.

“Of course I’m alright, why wouldn’t I be? I know how to handle that bug eyed, gray fool any day of the week.” Azmodeus scoffed at his witch’s worried expression.

“You used the portal I created, did you not my Lord?” She was breathless as she watched him approach, a smile on his face.

“Of course I did, and yes, it worked. I was enjoying my time with the little princess pea, but alas!” He sighed as he threw his arms up, “All good things must come to an end.” He danced around her playfully, one arm out and extended the other wrapped around an imaginary playmate, and spun a perfectly formed twirl then sat down at the end of the table, his usual spot, his smile unchanged, his eyes gleaming.

Esmeralda stood there and watched him, thinking to herself she’d last seen him look this way only once before, after the meeting at Fifth’s with David. He looked absolutely giddy, she thought, as she waited for him to allow her to sit next to him, to share his space.

It took several minutes of Azmodeus sitting there, twirling a blond strand of Dillon’s hair between his fingers and thinking, allowing his mind to race from one possible conclusion to another one, when he finally looked up at her and relented. “Sit.” The chair pulled out and Esmeralda sat down, all in black. She made a sexy mourner, as she took off her black velvet and lace trimmed hat, her red lips incredibly perky this night. She playfully placed her elbows on the table and rested her hands on her chin. “What happened with Sebastian? I hope you destroyed him, my Lord.” She batted her eyes and stared at his amazing profile. He, in turn, continued to stare at the perfect strand of hair, from the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen in his centuries of being. He couldn’t get the boy’s eyes out of his head; they pierced his soul, as they did at the cemetery this evening – so incredibly melancholic, it was beyond charming.

All that suffering in a pair of eyes! He is most definitely, a celestial being—

He then cringed as he replayed in his head the scene with the boy, clutching his chest and gasping in pain as the cold air hit him ruthlessly. He sat there in thought, reliving the cemetery

scene in his head to keep its flow of events fresh in his memory. *Those eyes, those eyes will haunt me...I might need to collect them and leave the rest of him behind...*

“My Lord?”

“What? Sebastian? He’s a fool on a long leash. I’ll set a trap for him, mind you. I will make him be his own undoing. He will lose favor with the Almighty Beast upstairs and when he does, I will be there to take him apart, piece by holy piece.”

Esmeralda giggled in glee as she watched him plot. He is so brilliant, she thought. “You are so brilliant, my Lord.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Sebastian must be guarding the boy.” She smiled as she continued, “His own personal heavenly bodyguard – how unique! Can the crows see Sebastian?” Esmeralda wanted to continue to discuss Sebastian, but the Dark Lord had other things on his mind.

“Yes, they can. I spoke with Lascivious and their newest addition, Alabaster, just this afternoon. They have their orders to watch Dillon and Daryl.” He continued to stare at the strand of hair and thinking of the dance.

“Oh! Right! Alabaster the thief! I’d heard of him, apparently he’s been able to steal from several of your Council Members—“

“No, just two, however I admire his lack of fear, and since I was at Dispatter’s lair when the theft occurred, I was able to get my hands on the poor sap, saving him from an unfortunate ending for sure. He will earn his body back for me, then when I’ve used him to my satisfaction, I’ve already notified Dispatter of my plans to set him free right where I found him. Far be it for me to interfere with a theft in progress.” He smiled as he continued to stare at the strand. Esmeralda finally took notice.

“A strand of his hair! May I—“

“No, of course you may not.”

“Well, what are you planning on doing with it, my Lord? A spell perhaps? Or a curse for the young one with the sad eyes—“

“You think his eyes sad, do you? Hmm...” Azmodeus leaned back in his chair and brushed the single strand of hair against the side of his cheek, thinking of the beautiful vision dancing with him, those eyes frightfully transfixed on his chest as they waltzed the graveyard together; his eyes piercing in their infinite sadness, a magnificently sullen crystal blue. “Yes, I

guess you would be correct in that observation. He is most definitely, without a doubt, a depressed little cherub, isn't he - a soon to be fallen angel of the dawn - God's next greatest disappointment."

"And his hair, my Lord? What plans have you for it?"

"I have none, my dear. I will simply enjoy it for the time being, soon he will be at my feet and I will have access to his entire head of hair, each strand waiting to be plucked at my discretion. After today, I can say without a shadow of a doubt, the boy is torn in his faith. He is almost ready to turn his back on his God and risk it all for his brother. He just needs to see his evil, older twin again, just once, and he'll be renouncing his faith to the Upper Worlds altogether." The Dark Lord paused, the hair placed on his lip as he thought of something possibly spectacular. He reached out with his tongue and embraced it, bringing it in and chewing on it until it was gone. His smile spread across his face as its wickedness shown itself. He glanced at his witch, his eyes playfully reaching out to her.

"Of course, my Lord, kill two souls with one stone...give the boy a bone."

"I always do..."

Chapter Seventeen

A Lonely Road Home

There is no fire and brimstone
No heat and burning flesh
But ice and cold so blue
A soul's now frozen heart in two
With eyes sealed open and a beautiful face
Tortured, chiseled frown
Not able to feel hearts beat or bat an eye
It's helpless look no longer speaking of love its sacrifice
Hell is never burning
Tis frozen shut and cold, cold, colder

The ride home from Zion Cemetery was a numbing exercise in silent torture for Dillon, and he accomplished it with flying colors because he was finally used to it.

Tragedy's my middle name now...

He chose to look out the limousine window the entire way home, only thinking of his picture he'd left behind with his idol. His mind tried to wander over to the darker side of his brain, where his curiosity waited for him to take notice. Azmodeus was there, of course, and Esmeralda, her jasmine scent lingering as it blew about him among the old and broken down gravestones. And there was Sebastian as well, for even though Dillon knew him to be an angel from up high, he somehow felt something wasn't quite right about that holy fighter he'd unwillingly aligned himself with. He also swore he'd seen Azmodeus in a flash of brilliant color walk by him at one point today, but he couldn't recall an image strong enough to even attempt to draw what his eyes may have, or may not have seen. I can't think about him, Dillon kept telling himself. *I cannot allow him to permeate my mind like I did back there. Was he dancing with me?*

"He was dancing with me back there, wasn't he?" Dillon whispered barely audible words to the door window, watching it fog up before him. Whatever it was, it was cold, no doubt about it. He'd felt that coldness before, up in his room that day not too long ago when he'd discovered his gift of light. Now, it or he, had returned today of all days, to possibly check on him. *Or check me out. His coldness once again is creeping in and now it wants to take hold, but I'll*

resist it. He will not take me like he took my brother.

But somehow, as he watched the scenery go by from the tinted, limousine window he leaned against, somehow he knew David wasn't bought and taken in – no - David was somewhere else on his own, and he was definitely unhappy.

I hope Joel is with you David and if Azmodeus is the Devil, then I guess I'm dancing with him, and God alone will have to help me now, because you are no longer here.

A single tear fell down his cheek as he breathed out his fear; his hands still bone cold from the dance as he tried to massage them alive again. Looking down at them, he gulped as he watched his fingernails remain a pretty, pale shade of blue.

As they traveled home, switching from limousine to their family van, Dillon once again stuck to the window and watched the night go by, for the sun had long gone down and darkness was around him. He watched the streetlights zoom past in one long stream of color, as if stretched out by God's paint brush.

The Smith van traveled north on Highway 101, then along Front Street, Father's favorite street, now made famous by the movie Top Gun. A 'long ass ride back to suburbia hell,' was how David would often refer to it when he was alive (Dillon gulped at the reference he had to use now to describe his brother).

At first, he chose not to engage the dance of lights coming at him from the front of the car, but after awhile he looked forward and decided to play the game. He began to notice as he watched the van approach the street lights, they grew intensely bright as he came near, then out completely. He shot behind him and looked out the back of the van only to watch them each light up again to normal intensity. He did this for a few minutes with them, then got bored and began to watch the forever looming, darkly lined horizon of ocean as they reached the end of Front Street and approached the infamous Oceanside Pier.

The ocean looked so peaceful in the dark, the occasional white surf barely visible as Dillon gazed at it, remembering how David would do the same whenever they'd drive by it. He looked so drawn to it, Dillon thought.

Why the draw out to the horizon? Was it the horizon he wanted or the ocean? Was he that unhappy with this place? Why was he gone? Why wasn't this life good enough for him? It never was!

He suddenly burned with anger as he sat there at the red light and waited for it to turn, his

thoughts continuing to churn in his genius mind.

David never was satisfied to be sitting on this side of the Pacific Ocean, or any ocean for that matter. He was always somewhere else and occasionally, only occasionally, he'd let me in. Why me? Why was I the only one privileged to know him? He never did give this world a chance. He shunned God's world, this creation wasn't good enough for him. He never did have any patience...

Dillon turned his attention from the pier and its amazing set of old fashioned lights adorning it in the dark, to the now foreboding background expanse of the ocean to the shore. Bored again for what felt like the tenth time today, he leaned his forehead against the back side window and saw it. Dillon couldn't believe his eyes, sitting there suddenly frozen, he watched the waves crash onto the shoreline to form shadows – *were they shadows?!*

He closed his eyes then opened them. He repeatedly stared and blinked twice as he kept his gaze on the same line of water and wave.

There! There...they are—

Sprays of dark fog and what appeared to be ocean water taking human form. And they all stood up slowly in perfect formation and looked at him; a single motion of heads turned upward and a line of bright eyes his direction. He gulped and tried to breathe.

...A line of shadows emerging from the shoreline to walk onto the beach and mingle with the living. An evil brigade as they form their eyes and caste them on me...

He forced himself to turn away from them only long enough to glance around the car, noticing Rachel sitting directly in front of him and looking out at the ocean scenery as well. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “Do you see them? Do you see them on the shore - all those shadows?”

She half turned and looked at him questionably then looked out to the same ocean and shore line. The van was still stopped at the light right across from Oceanside Pier, and the lighting was enough to see out to the shore easily. Father was mumbling under his breath at how long the light was here, then Mother chimed in something like “Well, then why do we take this route, dear?”

Rachel shook her head no then said it, in case he didn't understand her. “No, like, I see only the shore Dillon. What do you see?” Before he could answer her, the car shot forward twice then stalled as the light turned green. Everyone in the car lurched forward, or awakened it

seemed. He looked back at the shore expecting to see nothing but they were still there, all of them, and they were at least a hundred strong, more and more appearing as the waves crashed down and sprayed them forward – lines and lines of them forming one behind the other, like an army awaiting battle on a grassy field.

Lord help me...I shouldn't know this! I shouldn't be privy to this kind of thing...they come out from the water. It sprays them out, unleashes them forward to haunt the living at night...and now I know, but I really don't want to know anything—

Dillon began to panic again, wringing his hands as they still had His cold fingers wrapped around them tightly from before, then looked from the window to the chaos occurring in the car as Father yelled using acceptable expletives to describe how frustrated he was with the crappy family car, and Mother looking around and trying her best to calm him down, and of course Daniel, who was sitting next to Rachel and giving advice from the backseat. Luckily, no one was waiting behind them as Dillon checked quickly, then looked back out to the shore.

“Oh God!” He shouted as he leaped into Samantha’s side, causing her to yell out in pain as Dillon’s elbow hit her right in the chest, smashing her.

“Ow! Dillon!” Samantha whimpered in pain, grabbing her bosom as he got up from his seat and went to climb over their row to get out of the car. Daniel reached out and pushed him back down in his seat.

“Settle down Dil! Right now!” Daniel yelled, finger pointing behind him as he watched Dillon cower and appear to fall apart, rocking back and forth in his seat, closing his eyes and shaking his head from side to side. He opened his mouth to speak but his stutter stopped any words from forming.

My own silent Hell...my own silent Hell...I'm trapped in my silence and they are coming up the beach! Oh God!

He watched the black shadows come forward. Suddenly the car lost all power.

He opened his mouth and breathed in and out forcibly twice. Then, like a river of relief pouring out from his mouth, his thoughts took form. “They’re h-here, Sebastian, wh-where are you?” He spoke to his knees, his voice shaken and broken.

“Isn’t this the strangest sense of pure unluck?!” Father yelled sarcastically, smacking his hands into the steering wheel. “What else can happen today?!”

“Dillon? Honey what’s the matter? Who are you talking to?” Mother turned her head

back to try to see her son, but the car was dark inside and there was no traffic around them. She could barely see his form in the last row. Was he rocking back and forth, she thought? *Oh, my baby, he needs me there.* “Daniel? Check on Dillon please?”

The street became incredibly, eerily quiet as Mother finished her request and paused to notice it. All that could be heard in and out of the car was Dillon rocking back and forth and the ocean, rocking back and forth in its infinite space.

Daniel broke the silence. “He said Sebastian, mother. He asked where Sebastian was.”

“Okay, like this is really creeping me out Daddy! Do something, please! There are, like poor bums and such who live here!” Rachel began to panic and looked out the window again while Father mumbled under his breath as he got out of the car and asked Daniel to help him pop the hood.

As the men began to move in and out of the car, Samantha put her arm around Dillon to soothe him. “Honey it’s okay, the car just died – I mean, it stalled - that’s all. You’ve had a long, emotional day, Sweetheart. We all understand...who’s Sebastian darling? Is he a new friend from school?”

Rachel turned around to listen as well. “Yeah, like, I’ve never heard of a Sebastian at school and all. Who is he?”

“He mentioned this Sebastian character at the cemetery. I’m surprised to hear you don’t know him Rachel, considering you know just about every teenager in this town.” Mother added in, her voice, like before, somewhat concerned now with her daughter’s oversized social circle.

Dillon tried to block them out - all of them - but they kept asking him questions, their words distracting him and pulling him back as he tried to retreat further into his mind. He couldn’t stand it any longer. Quit staring at me, he whispered in his mind repeatedly as he felt a hundred pairs of eyes on him. He finally exploded.

“He’s an angel! Sebastian is an angel!” Dillon looked up and stared out the window as he finished yelling, “And he sucks at his job!” He barely finished his last word as he watched the hand prints, several of them, left on his window. Samantha saw them too, as well as Rachel, and the three of them sat there quietly, Samantha trying to think of something rational to say, Rachel just trying to accept what she was seeing. And the fingerprints weren’t human prints, rather, they were elongated, nails and deformities pressed against the glass, drawn to him and watching his glow from the ocean. They stared at him in his brilliant shine, like moths to a

flame.

Now, as if evaporating like water on a hot sidewalk, they were soon gone, and Samantha shook her head in disbelief while Rachel sighed in relief, convincing herself it wasn't what she saw after all, telling herself that if she blinked three times, it'd be nothing. It was just an illusion! She turned to her mother and smiled. "He's fine, Mother. We all just got a little spooked. So," Rachel turned back to Dillon as the car suddenly started up again, and the men returned to their seats. "So, is this Sebastian really an angel? Like is he gorgeous cute or like, perfect model cute, or that natural, stunningly jockish—"

"Rachel! That's enough!" Mother finally yelled as Father looked back and frowned.

"What in God's name is that girl talking about?" He asked, beads of sweat all over his forehead as he started the car.

"Nothing dear, it's nothing." Mother glanced back at Dillon and made eye contact. He returned her glance, piercing her with his gaze, his face frozen in detached indifference as he watched her slowly turn back in her seat and clear her throat. "Well, that wasn't too bad, now was it? Praise God!" She clapped as if in cheerleader mode, Rachel joined in, not wanting to miss the opportunity to squeal. "Now let's go home Smith Family!" Mother attempted to give a fake cheer not even she could believe and clapped again.

Daniel agreed with an "Amen to that Mother."

Dillon shook his head silently in disgust as he watched the scene unfold, such fake emotion mixed with fear – could he smell such an emotion? *Yeah, I think I can...*

The pretend cheer Dillon's mother was making only disgusted him more as he thought to himself, this must be where Rachel gets her school spirit from. He stuck his finger in his mouth and pretended to gag.

Samantha looked over at him disapprovingly, then quickly to the window to make sure it was, indeed, clear, and it was. She smiled weakly at her foolish, irrational fear and looked out her own window in peace.

They pulled up to the next light as they turned right off of Front Street (the only way to go unless one wanted to drive the pier) and traveled east towards Vista, leaving the scene of the crime. Dillon turned back and looked out the window to watch the pier get smaller and smaller. At the next light, they had to stop and wait. There were a group of people walking around, most of them in beautiful gowns and black suits. It appeared to be quite a gala nearby at the

Oceanside City Theatre. They were stopped at the expansive intersection that was Oceanside Boulevard, waiting for their turn to get through the busy street to the freeway entrance.

Oceanside Boulevard was the popular 'cruising' street for all the young people, teenagers and young adults to drive back and forth along, especially since the Marine Corp base at Camp Pendleton was just a few miles north of Oceanside, also right on the coast.

Not wanting to see all those crazy people screaming, honking and sticking their heads and other body parts out their windows as they cruised along before them, Dillon turned back around and stared out his side window, avoiding Samantha's worried looks repeatedly. He saw her glance down at his hands as they continued to tremble in his lap.

"You're trembling, Dillon, are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost or something," she whispered quietly as she leaned over. Dillon shook his head no, not looking at her. She then reached over and touched his hands, appearing more tremulous with her noticing them, as if by addressing his fear, she'd given it an unwanted dose of reality. She quickly pulled away. "Dillon, your hands are so, so incredibly cold," she whispered, then shuddered as she placed her hand under her arm to warm it again.

"Oh, look Dillon! It's that lovely woman who came to our door the other night! She's got herself a beautiful escort too, and oh, she looks just lovely!" Mother was beaming as she pointed and waved, lowering her car window to wave at the vampire and her escort. Dillon lurched forward in his seat again, but Daniel turned and pushed him back down, not liking his hovering over his head.

"Don't call her Mother! Just-just-don't—"

"Hello dear! Remember me? I hope you have a wonderful time!" Turning to John she exclaimed, "Honey that's the young lady I was telling you about. But my, she appears to know where all the parties are, doesn't she?" Mother had a hint of jealousy in her voice as she unknowingly touched up her hair and glanced in her side mirror.

Dillon sank into his seat holding his head in his hands as the trembling took over again. This time his whole body shook in that back seat. Samantha went to put her arm around him, but he pushed her away. "D-d-don't t-touch me," he whispered harshly.

As the light turned green and the car began to pull forward, Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief, thinking maybe she didn't hear his Mother screaming like a maniac at her. He tried to not look behind him, tried not to turn around and see what he knew was there, watching his back as

the rear window exposed him sitting there, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't remain looking forward.

As their van pulled away he turned and saw her. Esmeralda stood there in the middle of the street, her date trying to encourage her to keep moving but he was just one course of her dinner tonight, Dillon thought. She watched Dillon, engaging his eyes again longingly – was that the word he would use to describe her? Then slowly, while several cars stood around waiting, not one of them honking a horn at her (they're all hypnotized by her and she knows it, he thought), she turned and strolled across the remainder of Oceanside Boulevard, strutting her stuff confidently and swinging her black beaded purse, her escort visibly smiling and thinking he'd gotten her to come with him - like all the other women he'd played and were currently stringing along. And that's why I chose him, Esmeralda thought as she read his mind and smiled, placing her hand in his as he walked her the rest of the way to the curb like she was his to show off to the world of men around him.

Esmeralda forced herself to not engage the boy wonder, for tonight, he wasn't her mission. She had made great time in getting to the Material Plane and needed to feed more than ever before. She smiled as she allowed herself to sniff the air behind her shoulder where the van once was, giddy to smell that old familiar fear that emanated from the boy like perfume.

Leave him alone and he'll come home, wagging his tail behind him...oh, he does have such a lovely smell, doesn't he?

She gave her escort a side glance as they walked along together now, watching his carotids pulsate along his lovely neck. He in turn, smiled down at her without fear, thinking to himself what lovely arm candy he had with him tonight and how his friends will never believe him when he describes her like she was a perfect piece of meat to them tomorrow.

Once home, Dillon went straight to his room and shut the door, leaning against it and breathing out a sigh of relief. He looked down at his still trembling hands and brought them to his mouth to blow heat on them. "They're still s-so c-cold," he whispered to the room as he scanned it. David's side of the bedroom was left untouched, his clothes still in the dresser they shared, as well as the closet – all there and not moved. Twice his mother and sister had attempted to come in with boxes to remove them. Both times, thank goodness, he was there to stop and turn them away.

Since then, he had kept vigilant watch over his room. “Nothing will change. It needs to be this way...always.” He pushed himself off the door and walked over to the closet, pausing at the handle before opening it. He sniffed the air first as he leaned in to within inches of the wood, paused again, then decided without the scent of jasmine or the coldness in the air, he was okay to open it.

He had wanted to get out of his black suit and tie from the moment he put them on. With some of the money they’d received for David’s funeral, everyone in the family was allotted an outfit for the occasion, like it was some gala event. He had scoffed at the idea of needing to get dressed up to watch his brother get placed in the ground. *This is ridiculous! Buy an expensive black suit to wear on a day you hope to forget about, so that it’ll sit in your closet until your mother finally decides it needs to go. I should be in my comfortable, everyday clothes so that he can remember me that way, not in some stiff black business suit and fifties retro tie.*

“Geez,” he whispered as he looked at himself in the full length mirror on the back side of the closet - a mirror the boys rarely used, preferring instead the mirror by the window off the dresser. “I look like the fifth member of Duran Duran without the sex appeal.”

Dillon quickly disrobed with much difficulty since his hands were still ice cold and trembling. He couldn’t get the images out of his mind; the demons that had surrounded him at the car earlier were invading him again, this time dancing around his memory in an onslaught of hellish deformities and drooling insanity. “And those eyes,” he whispered to the mirror as he stood there, shirt off and undoing his belt while he kicked off his uncomfortable black leather shoes, watching them hit the back of his closet wall with loud thuds. “They were beyond evil, they were a mixture of, of.” He paused to think of a description worthy of the horror he looked at earlier. “Of terror, pain, and, and...revenge.” He stopped and pulled off his belt, wrapping it around his hand clumsily as he thought of the dozens of pairs of eyes, each deep set and liquefying as he looked at them. He shuddered, then leaned forward to support himself on the closet door frame. The belt fell out of his hand and untwined itself until it straightened out on the wood floor. He watched it, not moving and barely breathing, waiting for it to get up and dance for him, or maybe turn into a snake and slither around his feet? He blinked a few times as he stared down at it but nothing happened. *I’m losing my mind...I’m expecting things to happen when maybe it’s all in my head? My psychotic, dopey head...*

He suddenly realized he hadn’t peed since first thing this morning. He wandered into the

bathroom and closed the door behind him as he staggered over to the toilet, lifting the lid with his toes - he had an almost germ phobic quality about him, incessantly clean, and always thinking about the cleanliness or lack thereof in every inanimate object. He unzipped his black, pleated dress pants and began to urinate, sighing in relief as he relaxed and leaned forward, his hand on the wall above the toilet to support his weight.

“So, think I suck at my job huh?” Sebastian was leaning against the corner of the bathroom wall, apparently hiding behind the now closed door, and lit a cigarette. He was all dressed in a white suit and black skinny tie and of course, barefoot.

Dillon staggered to the side in his shock and fear, still jumpy from the trip home, and sprayed urine across the wall above the toilet, hitting all his mother’s little figurines, his dress pants and the family photo of them at the beach. He then lost his balance from the shock of an intruder and fell sideways into the bathtub. The shower curtain fell on top of him as he quickly zipped up his pants and slipped around a few times before regaining his balance enough to pull himself up in the tub. Infuriated and breathing heavily from shock and fear, turning now into embarrassment and anger, Dillon gawked at the intruder.

That’s not a good combination, Sebastian thought as he smiled at the sight. He took a long drag from his cigarette then blew smoke at Dillon, leaning back into the corner and raising his eyebrows twice as he grinned.

“What are you—“

“Nice!” The angelic bounty hunter glanced around the room purposefully then shot his gaze at the wall above the toilet. “I like the improvements you’ve just made to the place - a nice, *warm*, personal touch to the décor! God never did mention you were an *ass-piring* interior decorator! Uh-oh, knock, knock.” Sebastian pointed to the door—

Knock, knock

“Dillon, Honey, are you okay in there? I heard a loud noise. May I enter?”

Dillon tried to get out of the tub but slid on the bath curtain again and fell backward, panicking at the thought of no locks on any of the doors in the house. “Uh, n-n-no, no I’m fine. Don’t-do-that—“

Sebastian smiled and winked once at Dillon, then waved the smoke around and shook his head disapprovingly as he took another drag.

“Honey? Why is the door jammed? Open up now, I need to see you.” Mrs. Smith’s

voice sounded concerned and Dillon could hear Father yelling up the stairs from below.

He looked at Sebastian with relief then whispered, “H-how’d you do that? Ever hear of privacy? N-never mind, just get out. I will h-have to open the d-door, you know.”

Sebastian smiled wickedly at Dillon’s panicked face. *He is so pretty - this is fun.* He took another drag. “She can’t hear me sport, but she can hear you.”

“What’s that smell? Dillon, are you smoking in there?” Mother’s voice was a whisper to keep Father at bay while she jiggled the door knob. Sebastian laughed and whispered, “Opps! So sorry! I forgot about the smell factor - you humans are so impressive!” He crumpled up the cigarette in the palm of his hand like he was performing a magic trick for Dillon, then opened it to reveal that the cigarette was indeed gone then bowed in gallivant fashion.

“P-please?” Dillon whispered as he tried to silently get out of the tub, pleading for cooperation.

Sebastian sighed and waved the smoke away as he walked over and extended his hand to help Dillon up. “I suggest you say something—“

“I’m f-fine M-mother, I just lost my balance and f-fell into the bathtub, while I was, y-y-you know.” Dillon got to his feet and pulled his hand away from the angel angrily, avoiding his eyes as they teased him while he straightened out his pants and walked over to the door to open it just slightly more than a crack, but his mother came through like a breeze and inspected the room.

Dillon turned around to grab her as he let out a “Wait! Oh – God!” He pulled his arm back after he’d missed her and leaned against the sink expecting Sebastian to be there in her view, but he was gone. He breathed out a sigh of relief as he steadied himself, beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead and upper lip. He looked a lovely shade of eggshell white.

Mother was standing in front of the toilet with her hands on her hips, smelling the air suspiciously and looking in the bathtub, then shaking her head, a look of pure worry only a mother could own on her rapidly aging face. “Dillon, Honey, what happened? You look absolutely pale, and you’ve been acting strangely.” She turned to him to emphasize the next point, “And you never, ever close your door child! What is it?” Mother turned and lowered the toilet seat to sit down as she flushed the toilet. Dillon shot off the side of the sink and went to instinctively grab her off the toilet, but he paused instead.

“I-I told you Mother,” he turned in a full circle to inspect the room thinking Sebastian

could still be there hiding from view. “I-I was tired and fell into the shower curtain. I-I’m sorry for the, the,” Dillon pointed at the wall above the toilet. His mother turned and noticed the streak of pee staining the wall, still dripping off the family picture as she stood up.

“Oh, Dillon!” She sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead.

Dillon felt sick to his stomach at the sight of his pee dripping down the wall. He tried to keep himself from dry heaving as he stood there, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t have anything in his stomach worthy of coming up.

Mother looked over at him and ushered him off to his room to lie down, enjoying her embrace of the youngest as she walked him over to his bed, her voice suddenly cheerful and somewhat relieved to be touching and helping him again. She craved being in his personal space. For some strange, unknown reason, she craved his presence near her, if not touching her skin. He calmed her soul. “I will clean the mess, Honey. You just lie down and go to sleep. It’ll just take me a minute.” She reached down and went to kiss him on the cheek as he laid his head on his pillow, but he turned away and she paused awkwardly, then kissed his hair instead. “Okay...goodnight.” Her voice cracking as she tried not to cry over the sudden rejection. She stood up tall and straightened out her black dress and went to the bathroom, heels and all, and went to work cleaning Dillon’s mess.

As she closed his door behind her and went to work in the bathroom, Dillon sighed in relief at being alone. Normally, he hated being by himself, but not now. Now, it comforted him. He felt closer to David when he was completely alone.

“Ouch, saw that little move from up here. She didn’t see it coming, did she? Pow! Bam! Shot up in flames! A mother scorned and rejected while she was swooping down for—“

“Shut up!” Dillon shot up in bed and jumped back as he looked up and became startled at the image of Sebastian lying on the ceiling directly above him, arms behind his head as he sprawled out, wings trying to stretch but limited on one side by the opposing wall. He had an interested, probing look to his eyes, as if they were inspecting the young human up and down and through and through.

“Well, well, well, looks like someone’s got a touch of the grumpies. You really need to quit this brooding, ‘turn your back on God because your brother’s gone,’ and the ever so tiring, ‘I hate the world’ act and return to normality because frankly, the world isn’t going to notice enough to truly get you or understand your pain. God is listening, but honestly Dillon, as a

chosen soldier and future warrior for Christ, you've really managed to piss the Guy off and you've smarted me a few times too I might add. I suck at my job? Please..."

Sebastian's English accent was heavy at times, and his way of talking sped up to supernatural levels of verbiage when he became only slightly heated. He finished his speech by shaking his head disapprovingly. Dillon started to fume as he watched the angel begin to smugly attempt to judge him.

"Dddd-don'tttt—"

"Okay, okay, just stop and relax," Sebastian interjected loudly, stopping Dillon in mid-stutter. "Open your mouth please."

"W-w-whatt?"

"Just do it! Open your mouth so that you can talk, Sunshine," Sebastian smiled, his words now encouraging and soothing. Dillon frowned for a second, then complied and opened his mouth ever so slightly.

The angel quickly breathed out a stream of air down at Dillon, enough to make it work anyway, he thought as he watched the boy breathe it in. "Now speak your mind please, an inquiring angel awaits your words." He rolled his eyes as the sarcasm dripped from his mouth.

Without thinking, Dillon began to talk. "Don't you have a stray kitty to save in a tree somewhere or an old lady to help cross the street?" He paused as he heard his voice, biting and David-like, and continued, suddenly empowered. "I'm just not in the mood tonight for another speech, especially a 'pick me up' one. I'm libel to puke at the slightest suggestion of a 'turn that frown upside down' and if you go into verse about the 'sun coming out tomorrow,' I know I'll throw something heavy at you—"

"It'll only fall back down and hit you." Sebastian teased as he stuck out his tongue. *Note to self, do not, repeat, DO NOT, allow the boy to lose his stutter...*

Dillon shot out of bed and began to pace the room, quickly realizing he'd made himself look foolish with the 'throw something heavy' straight up to the angel directly above him comment. He paused at one point and looked down, realizing he was still only in his pants. He walked over to his dresser and pulled out a black tee shirt with an anarchy symbol across the front and turned around to see Sebastian standing in between the two twin beds, his wings fully stretched out behind him touching each wall, and him, leaning forward on a long, shiny gold sword with a ruby the size of a golf ball at the tip of the handle. It had different precious

gemstones of various coin sizes five along the length of the handle, with the sixth, a noticeable empty hole the largest size right under the ruby ball. It was the only empty hole along its length. There also appeared to be various colors splashed along the length of the sword, and as the rainbow ran down the blade and gathered at the ground, it fizzed and evaporated as it made contact with the wood flooring. Mother will be pissed at that, Dillon thought as he gazed at the chemical reaction taking place with the wood. Sebastian's loud voice made him flinch and look up.

“Hey there, Sport! Welcome back - that's not your shirt, now is it? Hmm, let me see, just who are you trying to be? Are we playing Charades?! Is it Halloween yet - the night when the dead walk the Earth? Well, it is my personal favorite night on Earth - great for hunting season.”

Dillon rolled his eyes and frowned as he was forced to watch the angel make fun of him, yet again.

Sebastian shot his hand out in playful make-believe as he continued his jab at Dillon's choice of wardrobe. “No, no, don't tell me! *Don't* tell me! I'm good at this game - arguably the best player in the Heavens!” He closed his eyes for a second and brought his fists to them in pseudo thought, then opened them with an audible pop, purposefully startling Dillon and making him flinch. “You are...David Smith!” He grinned wickedly as he thought of yet another dark soul to hunt down and destroy.

The angel's voice was still playful, but as he leaned on the massive, impressive sword, the image caught Dillon off guard and he finally saw him in a new, more foreboding light. He was no longer the odd teenager ghost with the grey eyes, bald head, and exceptional taste in semi-formal, almost casual, Miami Vice attire. Dillon had a new image of Sebastian as the warrior chosen to wield a sword for God's cause, whatever that might be and apparently, he'd just used it to whoop some demon ass.

“S-so, I'm wearing hisss ssh-shirt...are y-you the fashion police now or wh-what?” Dillon tried to keep his voice confident and sarcastic sounding, but it came out all wrong – scared, suddenly intimidated, and unsure of its rudeness, not at all the brother he secretly emulated. Of course the chronic, yet occasional stuttering went along hand in hand as soon as he began to question his own importance in any situation. I hate my voice, Dillon thought as he rolled his eyes in defeat and looked down at his bare feet, then Sebastian's feet. They were almost the same size, Sebastian may be two inches taller, but they had the same body build

minus the gargantuan wings.

“Uh-oh, sounds like your stutter has returned, given you away, yet again. Have a seat Dillon-in-David’s-shirt, and I can discuss with you why I’m here and what my purpose entails, as well as yours.” Dillon looked up and they made eye contact, Sebastian smiled wickedly, shaking his head, “And yes, you do have a purpose, Dillon.”

“M-my purpose is gone.” Dillon mumbled as he walked over to David’s bed and sat on the edge, glancing up at Sebastian wearily. “Just l-leave m-me alone.”

“Right, anyhoo, I wanted to come here tonight to enlighten your sorry little ass about a few important issues,” he glanced down at Dillon and paused, admiring the boy’s powerful pouting skills, then continued, avoiding the frown on the boy’s face at the mention of a curse word. “As your guardian angel, if you mention my name aloud, it will summon me to you, wherever you are, so tonight when you mentioned me and my piss-poor job proficiency in your family car—“

“It’s a van.”

“Whatever – it brought me there. Of course you were gone and didn’t see me perform to the best of my abilities. Needless to say, although I shouldn’t have to justify my skills, I will say at least half of those bad guys,” he paused then corrected himself to be politically correct, “And gals, met my sword and my Seeker. The others ran their scrawny asses back into the ocean where they belong. Unfortunately for them, I was in a terrible mood so naturally I followed them down deep enough to snag a few more. The light show from below the ocean’s surface must have been impressive from the Heavens as I dove in. I must say though, I was stunned to see so many rise tonight. It isn’t a New Moon, nor is it anywhere near Halloween yet, so I am puzzled. Either it was a decoy, or something must be abrewing below, below, below...”

Sebastian stopped to ponder and think silently his thoughts.

Dillon looked up and noticed his grey eyes shone brightly as he concentrated on the dresser on the far wall in front of him. The light display he emitted was breath taking.

“Why do they come from the ocean?” Dillon whispered, after having calmed down enough to regain his voice.

“It’s a large body of water that is constantly moving, shooting forward and bringing back. They travel through it like a medium, easily. One of my purposes as of late, is to watch over you as much as I can, to be readily available should the need arise. You can consider me your

protector and guardian—“

“Or my babysitter...” Dillon mumbled.

“Well, no, partially because I don’t get paid or reimbursed in any way imaginable to compensate me for my time and misery and lastly, I wouldn’t have volunteered if it was just babying and sitting – I need adventure and excitement – I’m your basic ‘git yur job done’ sort of fellow, you know?” He paused to breathe himself in, which annoyed Dillon as he watched him gloat, then Sebastian continued. He took a deep, obnoxious breath in and smiled. “Look Dillon, you are wanted by someone below who is unfortunately, powerful enough to seriously hamper your safety, i.e., destroy you. He hardly ventures up here because of me, of course, however, he was able to snag your brother – not good. And I’m now convinced after today’s appearance at the cemetery, he wants you too. As a matter of fact, he probably used your brother to get to you. Although once again, I am puzzled as to how he was able to see you, let alone touch you—“

“So he was there! I knew I saw him! And, and we d-danced, but, but why me? Why D-David? And why are my hands so c-cold?” Dillon began to cry again, silently bringing his not quite thawed hands up to his face to wipe away newly fallen tears. He was still in shock and he knew it.

Sebastian pulled in his wings and turned to sit across from Dillon on his bed, leaning in to listen closely as the boy continued to mumble; the angel’s ears actually moving forward slightly to register all the human was saying and not saying.

“He...he was never happy here, always staring at the ocean and wanting to leave...he had dreams too - dreams of the Underworld and this Devil person, Azmodeus, was always on his mind...I couldn’t get him to talk about the stranger though, hard as I tried...why didn’t he trust me? I knew he wasn’t right, this Azmodeus character. He is the Devil, isn’t he?” Dillon continued as he looked up and saw Sebastian shrug his shoulders and nod yes as he tried not to smile, not really caring about humankind’s version of good and evil, but accepting the fact that humans were, for the most part, self-programmed to only handle the concept of one Devil. *He’ll find out soon enough...*

“Why target David and me? I-I can’t live without my brother, and I j-just d-don’t care anymore.” Dillon looked up at Sebastian, who was now studying his face intently, and finished with, “I no longer have a purpose.”

“But you do have a purpose, Dillon. God has a magnificent plan in place for you. As a

chosen human, your soul will allow you to champion and in your young lifetime, accomplish many great, charitable and worthy humanitarian causes. Your soul marks you for greatness here in the Living World, and afterward, in the Upper World. You are destined for angelic knighthood – if you keep on the righteous path. As far as Azmodeus is concerned, he’s the reason my Sword is one stone away from completion. He is a powerful - the most powerful - Arch Devil in existence, and I hunt him ruthlessly. He has targeted you and your soul, that much is true, but not to bring you to your brother, not to reunite you two, but to take you from God out of spite, for he knows you are marked for greatness. He can see it as well as I, however, to get back to our discussion earlier, I am concerned to hear you speak of ‘seeing him.’ As an Arch Devil, he should not be seen by your kind, only his kind, those marked by him for darkness and evil intent, only those dark human souls can look upon him and even then, it is nearly impossible and not a common mortal human occurrence,” he paused then corrected himself while Dillon watched and waited for him to continue, now totally enthralled with the angel’s words.

“Although I feel your brother did have that capability, putting him in the ‘very few humans allowed’ category - and the odds of being added to that category are one in a century perhaps?” Sebastian paused for a second in thought again, then shook his head and continued. “Like can see like, if allowed, and that is why I allow you to look upon me, because we are alike and I have granted you access.”

“What did you mean when you said he cannot be seen by my kind? What is ‘my kind?’” His eyes filled with tears as they turned melancholic again, the lightest blue as they gazed at the angel.

Sebastian held his breath, the two of them both leaning forward on the edges of the twin beds, their faces inches apart. “You are pure of heart and soul, Dillon. You are pure, good-natured; he is pure and dark-natured - understand? You shouldn’t be able to see him, whether he wants you to or not, and he most definitely is not allowed to touch you, but he did. And tonight, when you were in the car, did you see them or did you feel them?”

“I saw them. I saw them all.” Dillon’s voice was a whisper as he felt fear begin to creep up his spine as he watched Sebastian’s eyes turn to worry.

“Then we have much to do, my dear, for your soul is in jeopardy.”

That night, after Sebastian left, ascending into the clouds and Heaven and allowing him

to watch, Dillon stood at his window and looked first upward, then around his neighborhood. He rested his head on the window pane and allowed the tears to come down again. They were relief tears, for the day had finally ended, and he was going to be able to sleep and check out from the world for the night. That's how he viewed sleep now. It was a getaway and all he needed to do was close his eyes.

He heaved a long sigh of relief and cried to the window, his hands raised up and resting on it, as if he were trapped in a glass box and wanted desperately to be set free. He understood more than Sebastian gave him credit for; he knew his soul was tainted since his brother's death. He knew he was walking around with a large gaping hole where his brother used to be. He also knew that by allowing himself to embrace his brother's darker side in his mind, he had allowed himself open for viewing by Azmodeus and any other dark creatures walking the Earth in disguise. He needed to get right with God and refocus on why he was on Earth and fulfill his purpose here, but he could only think of his loss. He was stubbornly, purposefully blind and he knew it. Could he change and did he even want to? He shook his head in frustration, not wanting to think about anything anymore, his mind full. He pushed himself off the window and crawled into his bed. He pulled the blanket up over his head as he laid there in the dark, not wanting anyone to see him, not caring if the world fell apart, because he felt everything was made to be broken anyway. It was only a matter of time. He wanted to bleed himself dry just to convince himself he was once alive.

He reached under his head for the cross and brought it out, holding it to his chest and watching it light the room. He closed his burning eyes and drifted off into another nightmare dreamscape.

Chapter Eighteen

Back to School

The remainder of the week went by quietly for the Smith family. They received countless visitors, arrangements of flowers, cards and letters. The many visits came mostly in swarms, or waves of groups, most from their church, bringing food and Christian company.

Several small and informal church gatherings at the house occurred with Dillon upstairs in his room, sulking. He had been asked several times to play the family piano during the visits, but he refused. As far as he was concerned, the only person who truly embraced and appreciated his piano music was David. Of course this wasn't the case, for Dillon was praised and placed on a delicate pedestal by every family member, as well as all the members of his parents' church, but he didn't see that now, and probably never would.

Bound and determined to stay in his room for as long as possible, Dillon began to enjoy being alone. He had finally grown with his room, embraced its four walls and window like a favorite playground; he remained there on many a day, cocooned at times in his isolation and refusing visitors. He had even placed the cross back up on the wall so that everything could be back where it was before his world had turned upside down. What was the world like now, he thought, unable to stop the trembling under the weight of his revelations. Thoughts like these made the perfect introduction for the tears to follow.

Six thirty-two am Monday morning and the alarm sounded. Dillon reached over and shut it off, having repositioned it to his side of the table. He sat up dazed and confused as he looked over to call out to David to get up and get going, but the bed was nicely made and predictably empty. He sighed and slowly rose to his feet, feeling unnaturally heavy and cumbersome as he went to his dresser.

While getting dressed, he couldn't help but glance over to the window to inspect the Eucalyptus tree, for it was now a part of his morning routine. He still expected to see a crow or two on its branches but instead, this morning he found none. It unnerved him greatly to not be spied by those crows anymore. "Where are they? Am I not spy-worthy?" He frowned, unnerved at the thought that he was originally unnerved at the previous thought.

What's wrong with me?!

Shaking his head to force the insanity out of it, like it could actually take the form of lice

in his hair, Dillon allowed himself to turn back to his drawer, pulling out a black long sleeve shirt and blue jeans. He wanted to feel resolution. He wanted to end the nightmare, but he knew it was too early in the day for that wish to come true.

After he was dressed and ready to go downstairs, he paused at the door and looked up at the cross, torn as to whether or not to kiss it. “My God, what is my problem?” He whispered, then lightly banged his forehead into the door frame three times. When he was done punishing himself, he kissed his two left fingers, then placed them on the statue of Jesus and descended the stairs.

Tommy pulled up to get Daniel for their daily ride to school and, although he didn’t venture inside, he stood at the front door and made painful small talk with Mrs. Smith. Dillon purposefully stayed in the kitchen and slowly nibbled on his toast listening but not interested in seeing Tommy. It was just too soon. Had he truly forgiven Tommy? He felt burdened with guilt. *I am truly, without a doubt, marked for heretic hypocrisy because I can’t even forgive.*

“Yeah, school’s been really, really...uh, fun and - I mean - fulfilling.” Tommy glanced around the living room as he searched for signs of Dillon, knowing he shouldn’t be, while avoiding the massive larger than life oil painting of Jesus on the clouds above the seventies style couch.

“And how’s football been treating you? I’m sorry, but we probably won’t be going to the game tonight, you understand?” Mrs. Smith turned away for a second and cleared her throat. Tommy lowered his head for a minute to pay his respects again.

Daniel came flying down the stairs at that point, looking happier than he’d looked in the week’s absence from school. He was finally able to return to his old stomping grounds. He now had a kick in his step and was almost giddy at leaving this morning. Dillon stayed in the kitchen, feeling Daniel’s glee, but not wanting or ready to actually see it.

“I’m ready, Tommy, let’s go dude.” Daniel kissed his mother on the cheek and whispered something in her ear.

“I’m fine, dear, I’ve already told you that, so please don’t worry. Go and embrace school, that’s what you need to focus on now, not all this death and sorrow. David wouldn’t want us all to stop living to mourn his death like this. He’s in a better place, with God in Heaven—“

CRASH!

“Dillon?!” Mother ran to the kitchen to find Dillon standing there in the middle of the

room holding a half-eaten piece of toast in one hand, the other opened and trembling, and the once full glass of orange juice in shattered fragments on the floor around his feet.

“Are you okay honey?” Mother looked worried, for she saw her youngest standing in a puddle of orange juice and near an electric outlet. He wouldn’t do that, she hoped as she tried to appear calm, walking towards him slowly.

“He’s not there, Mother, and you know it. Why are you pretending?” Dillon whispered, his voice accusing.

Tommy ran in and stood behind Mrs. Smith, then walked over and pulled out the electric cord from the wall and laid it up on the counter next to the radio. Mother gave out a sigh and smiled at him, giving a look of silent thank you. After waiting in the living room longer than he should, Daniel reluctantly came in and stood in the background behind his mother.

“Honey? I don’t understand what you’re saying—“

“HE’S IN HELL MOTHER! HE’S LIVING UNDER OUR FEET! SHUNNED BY GOD AND RUNNING FROM THE DEVIL HIMSELF AND HE’S NOT IN A BETTER PLACE!”

Dillon stood there breathing heavily and wanting to hit someone, to hit them hard so that he could see someone else in pain. It’s the little things that will kill me now, he thought as he watched their stunned expressions, no one knowing what to say. Mother did what most mothers do in times of stress and she began to cry.

“Nice, Dil. Way to go! Make Mother cry! Is that your new mantra now? Your new identity now that he’s gone is to take his place? How original,” Daniel spoke with sarcasm as he glared at him, frustrated and trying to induce the usual expected guilt and shame, but this time, it didn’t work. He paused as he registered Dillon’s look of controlled rage, then turned to Tommy. “Let’s go. Mother, you okay?”

“I’m fine, dear. Go on the two of you. I’ve got this under control.” She wiped a tear with the back of her hand as she smiled nervously up at the two young men, shocked to see how they looked suddenly grown.

Dillon took a step backward, turned away from them and leaned against the counter. He felt weak and wanted at that moment to be anywhere else. *Be invisible, be invisible, be invisible*, he chanted in his head. *I want to disappear.*

Tommy looked completely torn as he watched the angel suffer in the corner of the

kitchen. He'd made a pact with himself he would stay away from Dillon so that he could have time to heal and grieve for David, thinking maybe in a few months they could rekindle their friendship or at least that's what he told and reassured himself repeatedly since that fateful day. The truth for Tommy was simple. He was secretly afraid and didn't trust himself around Daniel's youngest brother and that bothered him more than anything else; it made Tommy sick to his stomach to think he wasn't trustworthy. So, he forced himself to stay at a distance, but now, now here he was standing there in the same room and not able to turn away. He felt himself drawn in quickly and he embraced it again without resisting, merely hesitating. *That was easy, swear to stay away from that which draws you in, then turn on a dime to jump back in the first chance you get—*

“Mrs. Smith? I can take Dillon to school—“

“Are you kidding? He's two blocks away from crazy town and you want him with us?” Daniel whispered as he grabbed Tommy's sleeve and pulled him close.

“Daniel!” Mother shrieked, trying to control her shock at his behavior. It worked, he looked guilty at least. She sighed, finally realizing how her middle son could hate his older brother all these years. Her voice began to crack but she kept it together as she spoke, “That's very sweet of you Tommy. Dillon, would you like to go with the boys?” She had changed her voice in an instant, forcing it to sound unnaturally sweet and comforting, but the sound made Dillon want to vomit.

He looked up at her, a mixture of disgust and shock over her denial. He had to bite his lower lip to keep from laughing out loud. He felt warm salty fluid seep into his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his cold hand and avoided the red streaks he'd produced. “No, thanks. I just love to take the bus - really I do – and can't wait for the post-funeral reception I'm sure is waiting for me.” Dillon's words rolled off his tongue so easily, the sarcasm biting as he fluently spoke his discontent without a single stutter. The scene shocked his mother and the boys.

She put her hands back on her hips and slowly walked towards Dillon. “Listen to my words darling. You are going with Tommy and Daniel to school – NOW. Understand?” She shook her head yes for him, the last word spoken soft, but the command before was bordering on hysteria. She kept her hands stuck to her sides to keep the trembling hidden. She wanted to shake him awake and make him open his eyes to the rest of his life and the rest of them - the survivors around him who loved him unconditionally - but he was resisting her. She smiled at

him with all the strength left in her but her eyes began to water again.

Dillon glanced up at her then quickly looked down. “W-why c-can’t I t-take the bus, M-mother?” His voice and his demeanor had suddenly changed.

She gave out an audible sigh of relief at recognizing, for the first time since that dreadful night, her youngest, her angel. She walked over and reached out to place her hands on both sides of his face. He quickly pulled back and stepped away as if she were a stranger, then walked by her to get his backpack. Like a mother on a mission, she whirled around and followed him. Tommy and Daniel followed her like the media to a tabloid event.

“Dillon, he is taking you to school. Do you understand me child?! Don’t you walk away from me when I’m talking to you Dillon!” She stopped halfway across the living room and fumed. Dillon stopped at the same time, as if sensing her lack of movement in the room, and turned to see her.

“Fine, can I g-go now?” He was exasperated and felt defeated easily.

On the way to school, Dillon sat in the backseat and tried to keep his eyes staring out the window, but he caught Tommy adjusting his mirror repeatedly, trying to get a better view while Daniel talked his ear off.

He sat there steaming, thinking how much he suddenly loathed Daniel, couldn’t believe he ever saw him as a pillar of strength and wisdom. The only wisdom you have is in your mouth with all that useless hot air, Dillon thought as he leaned his forehead as far into the window pane as possible, trying to meditate and ignore his brother’s excitement at returning to his beloved Vista High School.

As soon as they got there, Dillon shot out of the car and took off, running half the distance of the parking lot, then walking the rest of the way, David’s old, recycled jacket flowing behind him.

During the course of the school day, he kept his head down, avoiding the stares and the kids continuing to part like the red sea every time he walked the halls. The whispers were haunting him, from the moment he stepped foot in the main hall, he was surrounded by them. The other kids’ thoughts were bumping into him like soft, light balloons at first, but by lunch time, the entourage of voices hit him so hard, he stopped at first and stood there, head bowed and eyes closed, trying to separate each whisper so that he could at least begin to register the words, there were so many.

At least a hundred individual, whispered voices could be heard in his head and the overwhelming sense of people all focusing on him made Dillon almost pass out. *Why am I hearing everything?! What in God's name is happening to me?!!*

After pausing for a few seconds to recover from the onslaught of psychic energy around him, he began to slowly adapt to it, although he felt like he was stumbling along in a drunken state. *Any second now Mr. Seal is gonna grab and go...*

And that's how Dillon's first day back to school unraveled. Being bombarded by the multiple voices of students floating around in his head, he began to distance himself from the mayhem that was brewing constantly around him even more. The students parted ways whenever he was near, as if he had The Plague; they avoided him directly, then spoke about him as soon as he was less than a foot away. Unfortunately for Dillon, he could hear everything around him. It was as if his sense of awareness, vision, hearing, and his sixth sense, was all heightened since the funeral.

By the time lunch came around, he felt even more the freak he knew he was before. If he stood out with David around, now he stood alone and even more out there. It was as if they could all see his turmoil. Trying not to talk out loud to the voices flying through his mind at a fast clip, Dillon was sure he looked the part of an insane patient lost and out of his padded room to wander the halls. He felt exposed as he left his locker and headed to the library at lunch time - his least favorite time of the day. He didn't even bother to sit and eat lunch anymore.

The occasional taunts from some of the meaner crowds as he made his way to the library were the most difficult to bear with his return to school. References to how David was doing in his new home underground were almost too much. *I wish I could fight like my brother can - I mean - could.* He grimaced at the wrong choice of verb tense, sickened by the need to use the past to explain his brother. He made his way across the quad to the library safely anyway, not bothering to look up or around him as he did so. The only relief he had was the fact that Daryl hadn't shown himself yet today.

As he walked into the library, he had to force himself to look up and engage the room. He quickly scanned the large, expansive and open library the size of maybe six regular sized classrooms combined, thanks to several lucrative community donations, and noticed not one table was empty. In fact, they were all full. "What the...?" He whispered to himself as he unknowingly walked by the librarian.

“Shhh! Be quiet, uh...young man!” The librarian hesitated as she looked Dillon up and down, unsure as to how to refer to him. He felt his ears turn red as he too, glanced down his front along with her.

Mrs. Bartel looked the part of librarian to a tee; drab navy blue 1940’s school uniform dress with matching pull over cardigan sweater, hair pulled back so tightly in a bun, her eyebrows were in constant raised position, and tiny spectacle glasses probably super glued to fit securely on the edge of her nose. It was a sad, mediocre image of a woman who probably didn’t get out much.

Dillon looked down at his shoes instinctively as everyone in the library glanced over at him and once again, the whispers bombarded his mind and he heard every one of them from up close to the back of the room. God is punishing me, he decided as he tried not to listen, but the voices, some whispers, others, just thoughts, were screaming loud in his brain; some of the words spoken were more than disturbing to his already fragile spirit and sense of self worth.

“Uh-oh, here comes trouble with a capital D...There he is...That’s Dillon, David’s brother, isn’t he? You know, the dead boy...oh God here he comes! He’s so cute and scary at the same time...Hey look, it’s the freak without his protector. When you gonna join him, freak...Uh-oh, here comes pretty boy psycho...Hey guys! Check out the hottest ticket in town...Yeah, dude, except is that a boy or a girl? Go ask and find out...if the psycho Carrie had a little brother, that one right there would be it. Hey, I saw that movie just the other day and he isn’t nothing like her – she was wicked...Hey it’s that angel boy! Look at him! That kind of beauty is so unnatural...I bet I could teach him a thing or two...Yeah, he makes me nervous, like he’s supernatural or something...That boy over there makes me feel so ugly, like I couldn’t have him hang around me! Guys wouldn’t ask me out, you know? He’s so sad looking. He probably just needs a hug...Is it just me or does he look more and more like his dead brother? Hey, look guys! Did you know the Anti-Christ had a twin brother? There he is—“

“Shut up,” he whispered as he shook his head and made his way around the two dozen or so tables towards the back of the library.

“I need everyone quiet in here!” Mrs. Bartel squeaked again like the little mouse she was. The library hushed to a respectable silence again as Dillon, head down, made a bee line for the back table.

As he approached the square table that could sit six easily, he laid his books down just in

time to watch the four students already sitting there get up and quietly leave. He flopped into his chair and chose not to turn around to see the entire library watching him as he was once again, alone. He didn't have to turn around of course, for he could hear them gawking and saying or thinking more horrible things about him.

That was fast, he thought hopelessly, his head supported by his arm. *I sure know how to clear a table, don't I?* He wanted to say something sarcastic and purely David-esque as he watched the students get up and leave, but his stutter kept him quiet. His face turned red instead and he opened a book to start in on homework.

Within a few minutes, the voices returned with a vengeance, louder than he could stand to hear. The barely audible whispers across the room were too much for him when it was an entire room filled with students, and there was still all their thoughts not spoken bombarding his mind as well. *At least their thoughts are softer and less obnoxious to my ears.*

He glanced up and saw Mrs. Bartel at the main desk on the far side of the room helping a student check out books and therefore not patrolling the noise level. Great he thought as he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

After listening to the quiet chaos all morning, Dillon was feeling the energy build within him. His eyes began to burn. The larger than life World Civilizations book he had opened in front of him begged for a trip across the room. He sat there for another minute trying to calm himself with deeper, meditative breathing, but it wasn't working. He opened his eyes and slammed the book shut, his head in his trembling hands as he leaned forward at the table. He wanted revenge for the terrible words being spoken behind him, and although he knew it was morally wrong to wish harm on those who trespass against you, he couldn't resist the urge to do it anyway. *I'm losing it slowly, piece by painful puzzle piece...*

He glanced over his left shoulder to the far corner of the room, purposely choosing to listen in on the conversation the farthest from him as he heard a boy his age telling the three other boys at the table about how David had the mark of the Devil on his left hand. "Dude, I'm not kidding! He was in my English class and I saw it...three sixes on the inside of his hand...dude, if you're right, that's freaky insane...yeah, and now we have his psycho twin sister following in his footsteps...dude, Dillon is his brother, not his sister, moron...yeah, well whatever, I'd date her anyway, I mean, look around you, see anything prettier?"

A book began to quiver with excitement as it waited on a shelf behind and above the boy

saying the last comment. It fell off with what sounded like glee to Dillon, and hit him square on top of his head. He let out an “Ow - what the fuck?!”

The other boys all jumped back in their seats and snickered at their injured friend.

Mrs. Bartel came bustling over in her droll outfit while the rest of the library began to stir and stare, thankfully away from Dillon, and to the boy rubbing his head and looking behind him at the book shelves, yelling out “Who did that?!”

Dillon quickly turned back in his seat and looked down. He couldn’t help but smile gleefully as he reopened his history book and began his work, while Mrs. Bartel escorted the boy out of the library, his friends in tow, while she called security on her large, walkie-talkie looking portable phone.

His eyes still burned from concentrating on the book, but he couldn’t help it. He could hear the book tell him it wanted to take a dive forward.

It had freely volunteered so why not? I can’t believe I just had a conversation with a library book, but considering just last week I danced hand in hand with the Devil himself in a graveyard during my brother’s funeral, granting books permission to take dives off shelves and then pushing them out with my eyes isn’t that far of a stretch, now is it? Besides, he thought as he flipped through the pages of his history book, trying to justify his actions to his superego, the book hadn’t been touched or pulled out all year long.

The surprisingly heavy book was titled, “Quilting for Teens: How to begin the Art of Quilting and Sewing Made Easy.” *That jerk needed to get in touch with his feminine side. I just gave him a little shove, that’s all.*

Somehow, amidst all the excuses he gave himself, Dillon could feel divine eyes staring at him disapprovingly from above, and he had to fight the urge not to look around the room for the angel. He was hoping his babysitter was preoccupied at the moment. And of course, he wasn’t even thinking about the more obvious watcher – God Himself. Dillon wasn’t thinking at all.

Chapter Nineteen

A Report for the Master

“Enter, fools.”

Azmodeus paced the dining room while his hell hounds sat by the fire; Syrianna with a worried look on her face, for she could sense her master’s frustration, and she, unlike her male counterparts, had paid attention to every conversation her Love had ever had.

He wants this human, David, and now his brother, and he thinks these idiot crows have a clue? I wonder if he’ll toss the two humans my way once he’s finished with them like he does all the others? She smiled, purposefully showing her large canines as the two crows approached. Come to Mama, she thought as they ruffled their feathers, both of them trying not to notice her.

Syrianna was still angry, having not forgotten that night several days back when she’d seen her Master through the fire, with that horrid vampire witch. He had ripped her apart and that was exciting, she decided, but he spared her in the end. Considering she’d fought off her two male partners just to have first dibs on the witch when he was finished had only deepened the wound. The Master always discards his lovers like garbage when he’s finished ripping them apart, she thought as she watched him instead shake his finger at the fire to keep her at bay, while turning his back on her and the vampire to make small talk with those crows.

She was meant to be between my teeth that night, but there’ll be another moment, and soon, this David creature will be too, for the Master will definitely discard that spiteful little idiot carcass once he’s finished with him. It honestly shouldn’t take long, she thought, although she wasn’t completely convinced, for she watched from the embers of the fire that night the Master engaged the human in conversation. She saw his laugh, his flirtatious smile not seen in centuries, and those eyes stayed yellow. She cringed as she thought about it. That last piece of evidence upset her the most. Having been with Azmodeus for as long as she had, Syrianna could tell when he’s most at home with his spirit, and those eyes gave him away.

She sighed and rested her head on her two front paws, delicately crossing them over each other in a show of feminine posture. She looked on with her white eyes and long eye lashes batting sweetly as she watched him stop pacing to stand there with his back to the crows, his poise and body outline so appealing. How heart stopping, she thought, smiling and taking in the view. *The day will come Syrianna, so just be patient. And when that day comes, I’ll feast on that ungrateful human slowly, starting with that pretty mouth of his.*

“Speak, whilst I allow it, for I have been enjoying the silence much as of late.” The Dark Lord paused, head down as he tried not to show his frustration over not having David in his possession. He could feel the young man’s power growing, his confidence gaining strength, even though he’d made sure the little shit didn’t sleep or get more than an hour’s rest before experiencing his cold grip. There were times when he’d get carried away in other politics and forget to perform the spell, but lately he’d been more diligent in that regard. He was more and more impressed and irritated at the resilience this soul was presenting. David’s absence was beginning to work its toll on Azmodeus, and he hated to have to admit personal defeat. I may have to request Esmeralda’s assistance, he grimaced as he listened to the crows bumble along. *Ah yes, Dillon. Focus on my little sweetheart dancer for the moment, for he is beginning to hold more and more value.*

“My Lord,” Lascivious bowed then hopped forward. “Alibaster and I have both been on watch with the human, Dillon, and we can report he is in a depression not even Sebastian can assist with—“

Azmodeus turned around quickly and glared down at the crow, who bowed his head reflexively. “So, it’s true. Sebastian has taken to personally stand watch over the soon to be fallen angel boy. How many times have you seen him?”

“Several times, my Lord, however he has only come to see Dillon twice, the other times he just quickly descends and looks directly into the boy’s room, peering in through the walls. It’s downright creepy the way he watches and stares at the boy.”

“Most definitely, I would agree with you Lascivious,” Alibaster piped in, shaking his head. “The angel is positively smitten by the boy, my Lord. We see it!”

Azmodeus sighed then paused for a second or two to think on every angle, his dilemma. He caught a glimpse of Esmeralda, who had snuck in during the crows’ speak and was listening, leaning against the back door dressed all in a purple ensemble, dark purple jacket that draped down to the floor, shorts that were alluringly short, thigh high boots that tapped the wall she leaned against, and her lips, normally ruby red, now black and shiny. She beamed at him from across the room, as if she knew what he should do, but out of respect was holding back. He looked away in thought for a minute, then slowly turned around to meet eyes with everyone in the room, a wicked smile on his face.

“Yes, yes, yes. That will do nicely. What else have you to tell me? About Dillon, my

little ballerina, that is?”

Esmeralda rolled her eyes and looked away. Alibaster stepped up and spoke. “My Lord, I have personally been paying attention to the change in the boy since the funeral. I followed his family home that night, and I swear the boy was able to see the darkness descend from the ocean waves. He was fearful and shaking as they were all drawn to his car window. They stared in wonder at his brilliance for he was a beacon of light in the nightscape and even I...,” Alibaster stopped as he glanced up to see the Dark Lord’s eyes turn an alarming yellow and squint as he leaned down to listen intently. The crow glanced a quick look towards Lascivious who was trying to motion him to continue. Syrianna chuckled in the background and shook her head. “He - he called out Sebastian’s name in his fear, then the car left the scene and I followed them home, but not before the angel descended down almost immediately and, well—“

“Go on about the boy you fool! I care not about that idiot angel warrior and I feel I’ve heard enough about his wretched ass to last me a human’s lifetime.” Azmodeus stood back up and began to pace around the dining room table again, touching each chair lightly as he walked by with his hand, his smile slowly returning as he thought of his future collection. *He is developing as planned, his soul spiraling down to my open hands. He can see the wretched? Nice, that will do nicely, for then he can see evil - I am now visible...how love-ly.*

“Of course, my Lord, my apologies to you – yes, the boy is quite astute, although fearful and so fragile. It’s sad really, to watch him cower so easily—“

“Go on with your crows’ speak! You are not being sent there to stare at my prize, mind you Alibaster, for he is not a treasure you can steal, master thief.” The Dark Lord came around the table and pointed a finger at the crow, who quickly bowed and began to tremble. Lascivious took over, having heard enough damaging news from his new partner. He rolled his eyes and cleared his throat to begin.

“My Lord, if I may?”

“Yes, do speak about what I will find useful, Lascivious.”

“Yes, well, Dillon has managed to isolate himself from his family the past week, preferring to stay in his bedroom chamber whilst the family congregates below. He has remained alone by choice, sullen and desperate in his gloom. I can report his yelling at his mother, the strongest and closest member to him in the family and making her cry easily. He has shunned her for not allowing him to view his brother’s burial. After you had left that day, he stormed over

to the ground, his brother's casket already buried, and yelled to the sky, shunning his mother from that moment on. He can be quite stubborn and unruly that way, not unlike his sibling." Lascivious ruffled his feathers while Azmodeus rolled his eyes and glanced up to the ceiling in utter frustration.

"Great."

"Yes, well, as I was saying my Lord, he has also shown some of his newly found skill as well. Did you know, my Lord, of the boy's power of telekinesis?"

"Yes, of course I am aware, fool. Do not assume you know more than I, for you are only an extra pair of eyes. I can see quite well myself." The Dark Lord paused in new thought, relishing the news, then turned to Esmeralda still leaning against the door. "Summon Drake now; I might as well deal with him too, make this evening even more unpleasant. Is he still waiting?" Azmodeus reached out his hand towards the side of the table and Sandor was there quickly, handing an almost full goblet of red wine in the open hand, perfectly timed.

"I'm sure he still waits, my Lord. I will send for him as you wish." Esmeralda bowed slightly, curtsying as she turned, her jacket flying behind her long, lean and muscular thighs poking through from the tops of her boots. His eyes lingered there momentarily while she gracefully carried out his orders, her form a shadow down the full length of the Grand Hallway.

"So, what did the little witch move today, hmm?" Azmodeus almost appeared animated as he sauntered over to the table, spinning in a waltz again, this time dancing with his goblet of wine, making sure not to spill a drop as the remaining subjects in the room watched with transfixed eyes.

Lascivious paused then continued. "Uh, my Lord, the uh, the boy—"

"Witch - he's a witch, mind you, Lascivious. We all must embrace his witchy ways, otherwise how is the boy to grow in the art of darkness?" Azmodeus was almost giddy in his voice and his smile, wicked and playful. It caught Lascivious off guard and the crow was dumbfounded. He'd never seen the Dark One so lively before. "What is it, you? Have you forgotten my soul purpose in this world," Azmodeus smiled quickly at his newly made pun, "Is to collect souls, for I am The Collector. Remember our purpose here? The witch is my catch and he must embrace his craft, use it often, and become what he is meant to be. You are to report on that little tid-bit of information should it present itself every time, for that makes me very happy. Understood? Right, now continue." Azmodeus waved his hand casually in the air at the crow as

he sat down at the head of the table and took a sip of wine and relished the thought Dillon was indeed powerful, yet slipping and possibly using his powers for selfish purposes. He smiled. *I couldn't have planned that one better! The boy has supernatural powers after all! I should have known it was no mistake I was drawn to the older one, when it was the younger one I was meant to meet all along...*

“He was in the library at school and he, well, I could tell he was acting strange throughout that first day back to school, my Lord. He - he kept grabbing his head and shaking it, talking to himself and telling others around him to quiet themselves, but no one was near enough to him to actually speak with him—“

“Brilliant! So it worked! I have bestowed upon him a little auditory gift – something to push him to the edge of reality, but not enough to make him fall, at least not yet anyway. Go on.” Azmodeus leaned back in his chair and took another sip of wine. He needed to numb himself before his meeting with Drake. That idiot obviously cannot find his own shadow as of late and his spy, worthless. He sighed and glanced over at Lascivious, who was transfixed on him again and without words temporarily. “Speak!”

“I’m sorry my Lord. He, the boy – I mean the witch! The witch was disturbed in the library at school, and although my vision was partially blocked from the only window I could see in, I was able to view some of the activity. It was difficult to do because of those bastard teenagers standing outside the door, blocking the view and making a mockery of my presence! They kept throwing their food at me when I was obviously not hungry and had to dodge first fries, then milk cartons,” he paused to see the Dark Lord drumming his fingers on the edge of the table. That’s not good, the crow thought. *Okay, just stick to the facts Lascivious! You know the drill, for fuck’s sake!* “So, I saw him stare at a group of boys in the back of the library and a book fell on the leader, hitting him in the head.”

Azmodeus let out a wicked chuckle.

“Right, as did I, my Lord! Well, the boys were escorted out and Dillon resumed his homework and he was smiling briefly, I made sure to see that. He then became nervous and glanced around him as if waiting for retribution. He has been quiet and subdued since that day, however, and I haven’t seen anything else to report. His bully at school is gone, which I find strange, but that is all, my Lord.” Lascivious and Alibaster both bowed and waited.

“Yes, well that person is a young hot headed boy named Daryl, and he is marked by me

for a future collection, so mind you keep an eye on him too. He is not allowed back to school at the moment, for arson activity. The boy has a weakness for fire.” Azmodeus traced his goblet with a finger and thought again, his eyes somewhere else. “I may have to manipulate Daryl’s unfortunate circumstances. It would be a shame if he were to miss out on Dillon’s witchy ways. They can entertain each other whilst I hunt my little canine below. That is all. Leave.”

The crows left and he sat there and finished his wine. Sandor was there in a second to pour more wine into his goblet while he waited quietly. *So, Dillon has more than I’ve given him. Interesting indeed, he thought as he took another drink, resting the goblet on his lips for a few seconds. The boy has psychic powers, that I already knew, but now he can see the dead, he can view the angelic and the demonic as easily as he can feel them, myself included - the only human allowed to lay eyes upon me alive and I am most definitely intrigued beyond control. He is the collection I’ve been waiting centuries for, a rare find indeed, and a perfect gesture of pure revenge for the One above. He can see the divine, move objects with his eyes and I sense his incredible, sweet charm...from the dance, of course.*

Azmodeus put his goblet back down and smiled, trying to make sense out of what was just handed to him. A human soul meant for sainthood, yet so powerful and young – too young to handle what his gifts are – it was almost as if God himself was playing a game with the boy, setting him up to see if he would rise or most definitely fall, for the odds were against him. “He will stumble and fall, rest assured.” He sat there and leaned back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table again and waiting for that insolate ass to walk through the doors.

“And those eyes,” he whispered, “Those melancholy eyes are his power. His brother has his hands, now the younger uses his eyes and they work, for I haven’t stopped gazing at them as of yet.”

Esmeralda sauntered over to the Gate of Nine and opened it, watching Drake leaning against the door frame smoking a cigarette, disheveled as usual in his appearance, a five o’ clock shadow across his lower jaw, his goat tee recently shaved off. He turned and looked her up and down as she stood in the entrance to Nine, her body a temple of sex appeal and she worked it perfectly. He smiled as he took another drag, relishing the moment and getting a full unobstructed view.

“He will see you now,” Esmeralda backed up and started to walk inside. Drake smirked

as he checked out her thighs.

“Of course, I’ve been enjoying the view of nothingness for the past hour, but I’m sure he was busy with other more pressing hellish matters? And you can refer to me as Drake, my dear, for I have worked hard for it and at least *own* that title.” He threw his cigarette down and smashed it with his sliver tipped black boot, then breezed in after her, watching her return a look of smug indifference, bordering on disgust, at his presence behind her.

Useless bitch, go cook me a meal. He smirked.

Followed her inside, Drake noticed two crows flying across the Grand Hallway. He glanced over at them and frowned, his anger at having to wait for crows to visit the Dark Lord made his black eye twitch violently. He smacked it and rubbed, choosing not to look at the crows anymore. Instead, he watched Esmeralda walk ahead of him with his blue eye, transfixed on her lower backside and smelling the perfumed scent of her long, cascading chocolate brown locks of hair as they bounced in front of him.

He cleared his throat to speak as he followed along. “So...I can see clearly now why he keeps you around. I know that if my bitch - I mean my witch - made as many mistakes as you have, he’d be split in two and hung in a basement somewhere, aging meat for a future feast.”

Esmeralda stopped and turned around quickly to face Drake, catching him off guard, since he’d obviously thought she’d cower at his harsh words and walk faster. “I am well versed in the art of witchcraft, Sir, and although I didn’t think I had to enlighten you, for of all people, you and your slippery ways should already know.”

“You watch your tongue little girl, I may have to reach in and clip it off.”

“You’d be wiser not to, for my incisors would have their way with your arrogant fingers.” As Esmeralda spoke, her teeth sharpened and rested on her lower lip. It was quite seductive. Hmm, Drake thought as he began to smile, *I may need to pitch my male vampire witch and get myself a female but then again, this is why I hate females and have a male witch.*

“Well, like I said before, there may be those who view my actions as mistakes, but I would say to them, it is only a mistake if you view it as one.” She smiled wickedly and turned, her jacket flowing behind her as she continued to walk ahead of him like a runway model.

Drake watched her for a second as she walked away, then slowly followed her. Oh, how he hated female trickery and manipulation. He fought the urge to spit as he watched her leave, instead swallowing the saliva and smirking at her snobbish walk. “Well, that may be so, my

dear, but I'd suggest your fuck-ups be less frequent, for I can't imagine those thighs and your face would be able to comfort and entertain him repeatedly! You know how we males get - we bore easily!" Drake let out a taunting laugh as he watched her body language ahead of him tense quickly. She stormed into the dining room, then breathed out a sigh of relief as she met eyes with a very bored, slightly agitated looking Azmodeus.

"Well, look who's come to dinner! I was beginning to think the two of you ran away together." The Dark Lord took another sip of wine as Drake sauntered in after Esmeralda, a wicked, triumphant grin on his face. Esmeralda looked troubled.

"Never, my Lord," she whispered then walked over and stood behind him, avoiding the glare from Syrianna as she quickly walked by the canine. Drake let out another laugh, having overheard their conversation a second ago.

You only wish I took you with me, bitch. Drake cleared his throat and directed his attention to Azmodeus as he tried to keep his anger in check after realizing the crows held more weight than he in the eyes of his Lord. "My Lord, I am here to report to you as you requested—"

"I did not request a single report from you, Drake, however I still await the arrival of what I have requested and I can deduce from my own observations as you come through my dining room door without my human property that my request has yet to arrive." Azmodeus glanced over at Drake to make quick eye contact, to throw him a small bone, then glanced back at his goblet of wine, Esmeralda standing behind him, her hand resting on the back of his chair.

"May I, my Lord?" Drake pointed to a dining room chair two chairs back from the head of the table.

Azmodeus sighed loudly then spoke with disdain. "Please do...have a seat." The chair pulled out with a wave of the Dark Lord's hand, and Drake came over and sat down, choosing to sit quietly and semi-gracefully, instead of his usual flop and urban cowboy pose, one leg dangling, the other stretched out. He placed his gloves gently on the table and sat perfectly up right in the high back cherry wood ornate chair.

Azmodeus noticed the painful attempt at civility and tried to hide his smirk by taking another sip of wine. Nice try, he thought. "So, why is he not here?" He spoke quickly and impatiently, then added, "I just hate small talk, so let's just get to the point, shall we?" He took another drink of his wine and noticed Drake was watching him do so longingly. He laid his goblet down and smiled. "How rude of me! Would you like a drink? I mean, from an actual

glass, for I'm sure you probably haven't sat at a table or used utensils for quite some time, what with your living on the go?" Azmodeus leaned back in his chair and motioned Sandor, who quickly came over to Drake's side and placed a goblet down near him, hand trembling, and poured some wine. Drake put out a hand when the goblet was only half full. Sandor stepped back. Esmeralda chuckled as she leaned forward on Azmodeus' chair and watched intently as Drake tried to contain his anger and sudden humiliation. *How does it feel, asshole?* She smiled, her incisors poking through.

"Thank you, my Lord, but I only drink when I am not working, and lately, it seems like I've been working constantly." Drake's voice husky and tired as he reached out and grabbed the goblet and took a quick sip, "Besides my Lord, alcohol affects my judgment, and that is something I choose not to alter at any time. Now on to the discussion at hand, for I too believe in getting to the point," he turned to look at Azmodeus, but the Dark Lord was looking straight ahead and unless Drake climbed onto the table and sat cross legged in front of him, he was not going to receive eye contact.

"I have personally searched every Plane from First to Seventh without so much as a trace of him, my Lord. I have stopped and interrogated every creature within my reach and nobody has seen him. The only Plane not searched was Eighth, but I cannot imagine the little guy being able, with only elves at his side, to survive the intense heat and fire of that Plane unless he was a fire creature." He glanced at Azmodeus who quickly shook his head 'no' and continued. "I have all of my men looking for this mystery human you requested, but we have yet to uncover or even locate briefly, his whereabouts—"

"He didn't just disappear and I doubt you're hinting he was terminated could possibly be an option. No one and I do mean no one, would be so bold as to terminate my property, whether he is in my possession or not – the human is mine and a walking advertisement, so once again I ask you: WHY HAVE YOU NOT FOUND HIM YET?!" Azmodeus slammed his empty goblet on the table, covering it quickly with his open hand before Sandor could pour more wine.

Drake leaned back in his seat and took a sip of wine to try to keep his tongue civil. *Just think of your future title and go along.* "My Lord, I will find him, but I have my concerns. My little spy has lost contact with me, which I believe could mean two things—"

"You've lost contact with your spy? Since when?" Azmodeus finally looked over at Drake and kept his gaze.

“I lost contact with him from the first night you sent me out to find the human. Normally I have not had any lost communication with my spy, not once in the past month have I been without contact with him, until our search began that is.” Drake was beginning to get flustered; for the Dark Lord’s sudden eye contact and interest in his words were making him self conscious.

Azmodeus stood up and turned to engage Drake. “He is in hiding somewhere protected, hidden from plain view even from a ranger such as you. Your spy was involved in the little clean up war you waged that night on the plains of Sixth, was he not?”

“I’m not sure if he was however I assume he is with the human—“

“Of course he is. They are hiding together, and your communication is blocked not by your spy, but by a higher, much higher power. When you pulled your orc caravan off the hunt for the rest of the human brigade, did they report back to you?”

“Yes, they did, and they saw my spy with the Elvin brigade but they did not engage, as you requested, my Lord.” Drake was sitting straight up in his chair and turning to Azmodeus, his voice getting irritated as he thought along the same lines as the Dark Lord, however frustrated he didn’t think it first.

“Where were the humans and Elvin brigade headed?” Azmodeus began to pace the dining room again.

“They were on the outskirts of Fifth Plane, but that was over a week ago, they could be anywhere now!”

Azmodeus stopped and thought for a second, then turned to face Esmeralda again. “This secret hide out is in Fourth or Fifth Plane. We’ll focus on Fourth Plane first. Even a small brigade of fifty warriors would be seen by someone along the way to wherever they were going. No, they all stopped quickly, their destination was nearby, and it is camouflaged magically. I want you to find out for me which important, highly evolved creatures reside in those two Planes so that I and of course, my assistant, Drake, can pay each of them a visit, because I doubt a hideout as large as this one is able to hold fifty warriors, would be unknown to the inhabitants around. Someone will know. Besides, that many warriors hiding out in one place would eventually break up, or they’ll feel confident enough the search is ended and leave. If I know David and I am sure I do, he is probably salivating and chomping at the chance to get to know my kingdom right under my nose and without a leash.” He paused again and looked up at Drake,

who was staring at him in secret awe, then over to Esmeralda. As he watched her face light up at the proposal of getting involved in David again, he continued. “Don’t get too excited, my dear, for if I involve you again as I am now, there will be no more room for any mistakes – not one, do I make myself clear?”

“Of course my Lord, I will not disappoint you, for I wish as you do, for the human’s capture. I’ve seen firsthand the way he has insulted you and—“

“That will be all.” He turned away from her and began to pace again, avoiding the perked up face of Syrianna as she smiled and wagged her tail in anticipation of a most certain future witch meal. He raised his eyebrow at her and secretly smiled. She, in turn, lay back down and winked at him as he walked by.

“He is not terminated, Drake, for I would know immediately if it were to happen. He is tricky, that one, and will charm and manipulate any and everyone around him if he so chooses and apparently he is doing just that and doing quite well.” The Dark Lord’s voice sounded disdainful as he hissed the last few words while approaching the table again, his eyes brilliant yellow. “Do you have a strong enough resistance to powerful charm?” Azmodeus sat back down in his seat, smiling smugly as he leaned forward to watch Drake’s face and body squirm in his seat looking reproachful with the question asked.

“If you are implying that I will become smitten by the mere human, allowing him to escape once I get him captured, then the answer is a strong, unwavering ‘no.’ I have not gotten to where I am now by allowing pretty faces to manipulate me, my Lord. I indeed, have a very, very strong resistance to charm spell.” Drake burned an invisible hole in the wall he was glaring at, trying not to turn his angered eyes at the one creature he needed something from, although he could feel the Dark Lord inspecting every inch of his side profile. His black eye twitched again at the Dark Lord’s insult.

“Well, well, well, that’s good, very good.” Azmodeus clapped his hands together sarcastically as if implying Drake was only acting a role in a play. “I wouldn’t want to worry about that potential major mishap, for this human is unlike any creature you’ve ever seen, and he now knows it. He will test your patience with his sharp witty tongue, and he will try to manipulate and seduce you and your men. I would want you to know clearly my intentions should he succeed in doing any of what I’ve just mentioned and either disappears again, or worse, you decide to touch him in any way shape or form. If you were to do anything dreadful

and unsportsmanlike, I would find you myself and slaughter you slowly over a millennium.” Azmodeus traced the edge of his goblet with a yellow tipped fingernail, his words calm and soothing as they spilled from his mouth. “I want David unharmed, untouched, and you and only you are to deliver him to me simply by summoning me – no travel will be necessary, you see?”

“But I will have to touch him to capture him, my Lord! Surely that will require my laying my hands on him—“

Azmodeus shot up out of his chair and walked towards the door, motioning for Drake to follow him, having had enough of their conversation for the evening. “My witch will give you bondage links for the two humans to keep them tied up sufficiently and bound for capture. Esmeralda, bring the chains.” His witch bowed and left the room quickly, ignoring Drake’s look of frustration as she walked by him.

“But my Lord, I can deliver them here to you untouched and unharmed! I know the lands and can travel quickly and efficiently. I am more than capable of bringing two humans to you unscathed. You wouldn’t need to be summoned for I can deliver as promised.” Drake slowly rose from his chair, his voice with a hint of defeat and hesitation to it.

“Yes, of course you can, however the less time you spend with this little demon seed of mine, the better. It’s simply personal, you understand? Right! Now I will contact you once I gather information regarding this secretive place, for it bothers me greatly that I am not aware of its existence in my kingdom. Consequently, I need to be alone so that I can fully digest this new piece of news, what with my finding out about this treachery right under my nose. It has shaken me greatly.” Azmodeus smiled, his voice sarcastic yet contained as he stood at the doorway and waited for Drake to come to him. He watched the ranger begin to approach him with contempt and suspicion; his look a mixture of distrust and detachment. In turn, Drake walked towards him stunned and confused.

“My Lord, he is only human, is he not? For all intents and purposes, a ‘play thing’ as you put it, so why all the fuss?” *He is obviously more than you’re showing me*, Drake thought.

“He is not a subject open for discussion with you or anyone else, Drake. Watch your words and your inquiries. I haven’t the patience for any of it. Now leave and wait by the Gate. I will send a servant to give you what you need. I suspect you will work hard for your title, for I promise you it will not be granted any other way.” He turned and walked by Drake, his demeanor quickly changed to seriously detached and bordering on a violent outburst. He

returned to his chair by the fire to sit by his hell hounds and relax. Drake bowed and left.

“As you wish, my Lord, rest assured, I will find him for you. He will be no match for me.”

Once he left and the room was quiet, Azmodeus sighed loudly twice, the second sigh froze the fire near him in the fireplace as the block of wood disintegrated into a million little fragmented icicles. Syrianna looked up and smiled as she watched the pile of ice glitter sliver and white. She waited for him to nod his head, then quickly turned her head and shot a blue flame at the fireplace, the white glow temporarily blinding Sandor as he was not quick enough to shield his eyes from the view. The fire began to roar again and Syrianna smiled, lying down next to her master and enjoying the gentle tapping of his boot near her.

Azmodeus leaned into his chair and closed his eyes. What a hellish ordeal. The longer his property was out there unleashed and uncontrolled, the harder it would be to reel him in when he gets caught. “It’s only a matter of time, but I hate time,” the Dark Lord whispered to Syrianna sorely as he rubbed his forehead and seethed in complete frustration, his tapping boot keeping tune with her panting fire breath.

Chapter Twenty

A New World Order

David and Joel fixed the bridge together that afternoon, much to Oleander's delight. And as the days went by in Sanctuary, David and Joel spent most of their time together, not choosing to leave each other for more than brief periods of time and word had spread among the inhabitants of Sanctuary that they were indeed a couple. It was a relief for Joel to hear the rumors about his love for David. He felt he had nothing to lose by exclaiming it loudly for everyone to hear, but he kept it hidden instead, knowing he needed to buy time. He couldn't help feeling relieved knowing the inhabitants of Sanctuary really didn't care either way. His outward love for David wasn't a social taboo. There was no judgment either – religious or otherwise – and he couldn't help but feel accepted because of that, at least in Sanctuary.

Nights were hard on David and Joel both. Having realized he couldn't sleep knowing David was damned to have to stay awake, he had resigned himself to stay awake as well. They eventually found their own room, away from the others but close enough to feel within the group's reach and spent night after night entertaining each other with stories and jokes, sometimes sneaking into the dojo and practicing their newly found skills in the art of warfare. They'd experiment with several of the weapons there for hours on end, play fighting, sometimes going hard at each other, suffering injuries and cursing at each other as they would eventually wrestle and push each other around in frustration, mostly from lack of sleep.

It amazed David to think he wasn't sleeping. He felt the effects of it occasionally, but not as he would if he were alive. His body didn't crave sleep so much as his mind did. He compared it to craving a cigarette or a warm bath after a long trip. He tried not to think about it, but every night he was reminded by watching and listening to the lull of sleep near him. He cursed Louis frequently for taking away his sleep, and relented to having to think about him several times a day, for Louis haunted him incessantly. Mostly at night he would think of the Dark Lord, remembering their friendlier exchanges when he was only coming down to visit. He made himself forget the intimate exchange and the dream discussion he had with the devil earlier in the week, for none of it was palatable for him and he couldn't imagine Louis was serious in the way he had looked at him, longingly and wickedly as he had done. *No, it was an act, an act of anger over my continued absence in hiding away from his destiny for acquired greatness. Would he, in fact, give me his kingdom to share as he had promised? Why would I run from that?* These

thoughts would haunt David at night when he felt most weak, tired and lonely. During these times he found himself daydreaming about the Ruler of the Underworld. It gave David a secret thrill and he thrived on it, admired it silently and knew someday he would get to meet his newest nemesis face to face. He was only hoping he would be on equal footing when the time would come. He wanted to see Louis as an equal, to sit with him like he did at Fifth's and listen to him tell stories of his personal life and how he had seen David fitting perfectly with his vision of Underworld domination.

Once he was able to have his own room with Joel, it was more tolerable to stay awake. They each had their own cots but daily he found himself dragging his cot further away from Joel's, and each night, they somehow got closer together. He was grateful for Joel, but unlike his best friend, he wasn't pleased to hear the rumors about them and had personally seen to halting some of the loose talk around him with harsh words, stares, and fights on more than one occasion. After awhile, the inhabitants of Sanctuary learned to quickly silence themselves when he was near. He was quite formidable as of late, with his earthly clothes he wore, his confidence skyrocketed and his skill depicted a warrior unmatched in Sanctuary.

Oleander took to David immediately after their first duel. They had several after that fateful day, but they were friendly matches meant to teach and train a human the Elvin Master had never seen before. David was beyond the normal limitations of the human race, for he had risen above it all and was poetic in his ability to defend himself. When posed for attack, Oleander would find himself holding his breath at the image of mastery in someone so young. "You have embraced and accepted your potential my young human. I will teach you our ways, for you are above all others I have taught and are capable of learning the art of the Shadows. We start now." Oleander bowed and received David's bow, transfixed by the human's eyes as they pierced his ancient soul. *He is my greatest challenge, he is my purpose. His power I will harness and use to serve Sanctuary as I see fit. He will serve my vision of a Sanctuary protected by more than my continued shield of magic.*

As they began their training, it required all of David's time and energy to devote to Oleander. In the beginning, Joel stood by and watched in the corner, not wanting to separate from his idol, his best friend. After the first week of training, Oleander decided to change a few things. It was late afternoon and he and David had been training for hours. He was mostly watching, David was exhausted and sweating profusely. Joel was sitting against the wall quietly

admiring the view.

“Stop! Come here and kneel.” Oleander shot up off the floor and held his tea as he took a sip and looked over at Joel. David stopped attacking the straw dummy and staggered backward, hands on his knees and breathing heavily. After a brief few seconds of breathing, he stumbled over and knelt in front of Oleander.

Turning away from David, the master elf addressed Joel. “You can no longer watch. Not good for you. Rise, I will teach you too.”

Joel sat against the wall and held his breath. A part of him became excited and flattered at the invitation, for Oleander chose discreetly and discerningly, all his students and had just turned down several since Sanctuary filled with the mixed brigade. There was however, another part of Joel that screamed insecurity and hid behind the shadow of David’s cover and protection. He felt weaker, and noticed that with their public fight that fateful day, he found his relationship with David more strained and unnatural. As he watched himself set up for a more passive role in the friendship, everything had calmed down, and David was more inclined to embrace their closeness. By taking the back seat in the relationship, Joel had hoped the intimacy would soon follow – a reward for all his passive, emotional support—

“I said, you! Blue hair boy! Come over and assume your place. No longer will you hide behind. Embrace your future - come.” Oleander motioned with his tea cup over to him.

“Uh, uh, I just...I actually learn by watching. I’m a-a visual learner...Master...sir.” Joel stumbled along with his words, not one sounding convincing. Oleander played along.

“Really? Hmmm, well we can certainly accommodate.” He gently placed his tea cup down on the ground, motioned for David to remain seated, then walked over to Joel. “Rise.”

“Don’t you think I could just—“

“NO!” Oleander forced the word out loudly with force, then bowed to Joel, watching him intently, eyes fixed. He pointed to his eyes as he bowed then pointed to Joel, who first glanced at David’s back, then bowed and locked eyes with the Master trainer.

While David finished practicing the art of target practice, using silver stars, mini daggers, and sharp hand-held blade discs, all neatly fitting in his tunic arm sleeves, Joel watched from a top a block of wood the diameter of a baseball bat and three feet tall, balancing on one foot, the other leg out to the side and wobbling, arms extended, sweat pouring off his face as he tried not to think of the several developing bruises up and down his shins from repeated attempts. He was

ordered to watch David from a higher plane as Oleander put it, “Watch from above and gain new perspective – to open your mind.”

By the end of that day, Joel was exhausted. Word had spread that Oleander had, indeed, chosen two disciples, making all of Sanctuary, a quiet uproar. Even Sarin was shocked to hear Joel was chosen and later on that night, as Joel fell onto his cot and laid still, moaning and staring at the ceiling, Sarin entered the room and walked over. He nudged Joel in the knee. David was watching from his cot after recovering from another vicious cold spell.

“Ouch! Geez Sarin, can’t you just say hello like everyone else?” Joel moaned as he pulled in his knee and rubbed it. Sarin smirked and glanced at David.

“So...glad to see you two are getting a taste of pure torture, however, I wanted to come tell you that you are not making friends this way, and everyone is talking about you charming Oleander into taking you on Joel, just like someone else I know.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. I’d warn you not to say that too loudly Sarin, you’d be insulting the Master with that simple assumption. Truth be told, he approached me for the training, felt I needed the fine tuning, and just today, he forced Joel into training as well - go figure. And just for the record, I don’t want any friends - period. They just get in the way.” David sounded frustrated although he tried not to show it as he purposefully avoided Joel’s look.

“I don’t know how to charm! I-I didn’t think I could - could I?” Joel turned to David, who was shaking his head ‘no.’ “Besides, that’s David’s department—“

“Shut the hell up, Joel. It’s not like I’m charming you anyway.” David sat back on his cot and closed his eyes. They burned and he wanted desperately to drift off to sleep.

“So you admit to charming the Master after all then?” Sarin sat on the edge of David’s bed and intently watched the beautiful human breathe in and out controllably, his eyes remaining closed. Sarin then glanced over at Joel and thought how unworthy the blue haired human was to have been selected. *How could Master have chosen him? What a waste...*

“What do you care Sarin? I am a master at getting what I want and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that, besides, it’s obvious the Master is reaping his own rewards for teaching me and now taking on my blue-haired side kick as well—“

“You do too charm me David, so whatever. I’m walking proof of your charms.” Joel piped in quickly, but Sarin was transfixed on David and David still had his eyes closed, detached and sleepy.

“Be that as it may, I just wanted you to know he trained me and, and I guess we have that in common—“

David opened his eyes and spied Sarin sitting there smiling at him, a look of new found interest on his face.

“I don’t really care what you say, Dave, you are a master charmer, no doubt—“

“Shut up Joel!” David and Sarin shouted together, then looked back at each other and laughed. Joel turned red and rolled over, his back to his friends.

David and Sarin spent most of the rest of the evening together, walking around the compound and sitting on the bridge talking after everyone disappeared for the night. Joel crashed almost immediately after they hurt his feelings. He was exhausted after nights awake with his idol.

David and Sarin left him snoring and went outside. Sitting there on the bridge together side by side, was a first for the two of them and David was slightly nervous – a first since his meetings with Louis. He was intrigued by Sarin and enjoyed his company that night; their conversations smooth and effortless as they spoke on everything imaginable. They spent the entire night conversing on a variety of topics. David found himself drawn to Sarin’s experience and straightforward demeanor. Sarin was hopelessly charmed and smitten with David, although he tried hard to block it. In the end though, he played into David’s hand easily and told him everything he needed to know about the Nine Planes and who to watch for in each. He started with the First Plane, referred to most as The Entrance.

The Entrance was a gated pen of human souls, constantly refilling by the second, as newly descended humans not meant for Heaven found themselves catapulted down to stand and wait along with all the other damned human souls for hopeful recognition by a higher power. Sarin spoke briefly about First Plane, for he, like most inhabitants of the Underworld, never bothered to travel there. It was simply a wasteland of human souls trapped in a bin open for selection by those who were powerful enough to command them.

The Gatekeepers were a species of tall, grotesque and burly beasts, almost human looking in stature from afar, but the similarities stopped there. When observed up close, The Gatekeepers were large, muscular beings standing eight feet tall; their most dominate feature were their mouths; large and grotesque looking, packed overly full with rows of teeth jagged and wicked looking when they chose to either smile, talk, or worse of all, eat. They were each without eyes,

but that didn't matter, for they were able to see with their noses what humans were below them in the cage that was also known as Purgatory and they could sense the one thing Azmodeus required of them. As Keepers of the Gates, these beasts were able to see the angels who would occasionally attempt access down. Picking up human souls for redemption was never allowed from the pen that served the devils below but it happened anyway.

Each Gate Keeper had distinguishable marks on their upper arms depicting which Arch Devil or high demon they represented. They were in charge of The Entrance, and they regulated its opening and closing, as well as who were selected for servitude, by the powers that be. Those who were unfortunate to bypass selection, were left there to either rot and wait, fight amongst the remaining souls there, or worse find themselves victims of cannibalism. Sarin paused as he waited for his new friend to jump in, but David chose not to look over at him. Instead, he looked across at the beautiful, peaceful pond before him and thought how strange it was to discuss Purgatory and Eternal Damnation of the human species in such a calm, tranquil setting. Hearing the Gate Keepers woke him from his semi-tranquil state.

“I know who you're talking about! I saw two Gatekeepers the night I came to visit A—“

Sarin quickly shot his hand across David's mouth and leaned in close. They were sitting on the edge of the bridge, their feet dangling in the pond below. “Don't say it! What are you thinking?! Do you want him to take you?!” He pulled his hand away slowly and gawked at David.

“Sorry, I guess I lost my head for a second.” David looked down at the water glistening in the artificial moonlight and sighed. He was fooling Sarin, but not himself. A stronger part of him was yearning to see his newest nemesis. He found himself thinking for the hundredth time, about their hand exchange, and the longing he tried to hide as he watched the Dark Lord smoke a cigarette and sit casually, pants undone and beckoning him. And those yellow eyes, they drew him in. He couldn't help himself. *He's just too powerful - I can't escape him, can I?! Why am I drawn to him anyway?!* He looked down at his hand, saw the scab of the letter L and sighed, feeling suddenly defeated and weak.

“David? Hello? Look, I just don't want to get demolished simply because you voiced his name - that's all. I may have a death wish by choosing to travel with you, but I'm not stupid enough to allow you to perform instant homicide simply by opening your mouth.”

“Could he do that? Could he kill you that quickly?” David looked over at Sarin's side

profile and thought it exotic, his ears, his small, feminine face, his slightly turned up nose, and his hair, all strongly hinted of fantasy. He was living in a fantasy world and talking to an elf, but this one was no ordinary elf, he was powerful and confident, not an easy target to slay.

“Yes, unfortunately before you could say his name a second time, he’d have everyone here myself included, minus Oleander – maybe - disintegrated. He has that much power David. And worse, he isn’t a nice guy. Do not do what most do and judge him solely by his appearance? His beauty is his death charm.”

David tried not to appear as though he could relate and pretended to look shocked at the revelation he would even consider judging Azmodeus by his appearance.

“Trust me, I’ve seen what he can do, and I’ve watched him systematically destroy entire Planes of creatures just because he was bored. He’s been known to travel to First Plane just to wipe out the pen of souls, thousands deep and wide, because he thought they weren’t good enough to enter his kingdom. The man, if you want to call him one, is a beastly Devil with a charm that kills. Rumors about him are alive and living well here and he is feared overwhelmingly so. To say his name means instant death, mind you, for he hasn’t an interest in anything or anyone for say, more than maybe a minute’s time.” Sarin’s voice sounded hesitant and fearful, as if by only talking about the Dark Lord made him uneasy. David picked up on it immediately, but instead of feeling the fear and the intimidation, he found himself even more amused and interested. *He does have massive charm, I’ll give him that, David thought, but I only fear what he might do to Dillon. I can handle him though and I know I wouldn’t bore him—*

“But he wants me! If he is bored by the caliber of souls to enter his kingdom and yet wants me, could it be that bad for me if he were to find me? Could he maybe want me around to train me and bring me into his inner circle?” David tried to sound indifferent in his voice, but it didn’t work. He knew he sounded hopeful and possibly, to Sarin, pathetic.

Sarin sighed and shook his head sadly. “Oh, David, please don’t think for a second he’d keep you around once he found you. Your existence would be short-lived and wasted! He’d use you for whatever purposes he had in mind, and I doubt none of them would be charitable, then he’d discard you because he is known for tossing aside everything in his reach. He wouldn’t want anything more to do with you, because he is in fact, a single entity without an entourage. His only company is his vampire-turned-witch, Esmeralda, and from what I’ve been told he barely stands her around. He’s not interested in company of any sort! He is unhappy where he is

and wishes he were above, but luckily for the humans in the Living World, there are Arch Angels God has appointed to stand watch over it. They hunt the demons and devils that sneak up there to haunt the living and this Arch Devil we speak of is notorious for doing just that.”

“I know, he visited me twice, I think, when I was alive. And I’ve been told by my little brother that he’s visited him once too.”

“And your brother, he’s still alive?” Sarin shook his head in worry as he watched David nod his head yes. “They don’t call him The Collector for nothing. Sounds like he wants your brother too, at least until he gets bored with him.”

“But if he can go up there and other demons and devils can too, then can I?” David turned and stared intently at Sarin, who chose to look forward. He didn’t like the excitement in David’s voice. “Sarin?”

“Yes, I suppose you could if you were powerful enough—“

“What do I have to do?! Say it and I’ll do it!” David breathed in quickly as he fidgeted with his hands. “I have to visit Dillon and make sure he’s okay.”

“But you are forgetting one thing - the Arch Angels. If they find you, you are as good as gone, for I’ve heard they are ruthless, especially one by the name of Sebastian. He is a young, hot-headed bounty hunter who has earned a reputation for ruthless pursuits of unwelcome visitors there, and has a thing for hunting Arch Devils. He wouldn’t care why you were there. He’d only want to put your annihilated soul on his sword’s handle, another mark on his belt, so to speak. Besides David, a creature would have to be powerful enough to make the journey there and then there’s the journey itself. Crossing over has taken and destroyed dark souls before they even get on land.”

“On land?” David asked, curious and excited to have a goal in mind.

“One travels through the oceans, for the large body of water is a perfect medium, shooting onto land by the strength of the moon and the tides. I have not heard of anyone I know who’s tried it. The only ones who choose to do so are a few of the Arch Devils, to mark souls I would assume.”

“Great, sound like a blast.” David sighed and tried to refocus. “Okay, let’s continue with our talk about the Underworld. I want to know every detail of every Plane, since this is my new world now. There are nine, you say?”

Sarin breathed out a sigh of relief. He was not comfortable discussing Azmodeus

anymore and was glad to hear the conversation was shifting. I can talk all night about the Underworld, he thought as he glanced over at David again and paused to admire his side profile in the moonlight, feeling himself getting drawn in again and thinking the Dark Lord would probably keep him around.

...but he doesn't need to know that. He'd only be decoration anyway and he's meant for so much more—

“Yes, nine, except the Ninth Plane is his Plane and it is a vast level of nothingness, blackness some say, although I’ve never been and it’s infinitely colder than cold could be to either you or me. Most do not make it even to Eighth Plane, let alone Ninth, which is basically his home, reserved for his servants and the Arch Devils and Counsel who serve him, they are all allowed there upon permission only.”

David squirmed in his seat, thinking of his visit to Nine and deciding after watching the disgusted frown on Sarin’s face as he discussed the Ninth and Eighth Planes, he’d keep it a secret.

“Eighth Plane is a fire level, one you’d be able to stand easily, but most of us choose not to go there, not that there is much to see or do in Eighth Plane, for is it red and black, hot in places and burning fire in others. There are three Arch Devils that reside in Eighth that I know of - all fire creatures - and all of them powerful, of course. There are also lesser demons that live there too in the flames and lava. It is a molted, destructive Plane, and I’ve never been.”

David smiled as he listened; something drew him to Eighth Plane immediately. He felt energized just listening to the world around him told by someone worldly and knowledgeable. How perfect, he thought as he plotted.

Sarin continued to narrate the rest of the Planes for David, giving him details about some of the inhabitants in each level and how to travel through each. “It’s a systematic way to travel, really, for you can’t get to Seventh Plane from Fifth without first traveling to Sixth, and so on. Seventh Plane is an advanced playground, a wealthy, prestigious level of incredible magic and imagery. Most of the other Council Members and the other two Arch Devils live there, and their palaces are amazing fortresses not easily reachable, but I know friends who’ve actually managed to sneak in and steal a few priceless treasures.” Sarin glanced at David and smiled, and David smiled back. It was obvious Sarin was at one time, a thief, and a good one at that. “If you are good at what you do, you can earn your power by stealing from those who have too much of it,

that's what I say anyway. Since you are learning the ways of the Shadows, you and I will be in good company David."

"Of course we are good company. Who would question that?" David kicked the water's edge of the pond lightly with his bare foot. Sarin copied him.

"Yes, Seventh Plane is prime land with beautiful forests and mountains, lakes and rivers of different colors. It is light, then dark at set times, to mimic the world above so I've heard told, and all of it magically controlled by those who live there, one of them most noted but I won't name him for obvious reasons. He is in constant allegiance with the Dark Lord, being the most advanced in his use of magic and sorcery in Seventh Plane, he basically owns it. He is a wicked little creature however and is known for his combination of features. He is an odd physical presence, appearing human in every sense of the word minus of course his height, which would leave one to believe him Elvin, but there's more to him than that. He has a devilish presence in the traditional sense of the word, with two horns, one on each side of his forehead, small to stay in proportion to his overall size, and eyes as black as coal and never blinking, never closing. He also has goat features - hooves for feet and a long tail. His features however tiny are not the shocking quality of this very powerful Arch Devil. Rumor has it he is covered, minus his face of course, in coarse, thick goat hair. He is incredibly moody and sullen most of the time and although these are rumors, I've actually seen him and watched him from a far, so I can say these rumors I tell you are true. He controls most of Seventh, the rest of the land is fought for and taken by those who can afford to be there also, and as you can imagine, they all have His blessing of course. He chooses and allows who he wants closest to His home - so predictable." Sarin kicked at the water more violently, then continued. "In Sixth Plane, you and I were there together, but we did not see it all. Ulleren is there, and so is another popular and secluded fortress - Madera."

Sarin cleared his throat then continued, feeling a rush of energy knowing David was listening and taking in every word spoken. "Madera is a compound tucked high in the Mountain region of Trail End, right on the edge of Sixth and Seventh Planes. It is beautiful - so I've heard - and a powerful coven of witches and warlocks reside there, to train and assist the living souls above to perform the dark arts - a blessing the Ninth Ruler enforces and requires, for he enjoys wrecking havoc in the Living World and provides support to those who choose to do so. He protects Madera from all who might want its massive walls and beautifully decorated

passageways, and of course, the incredibly beautiful creatures that reside inside its protected gates, most of them human.”

David didn't miss a beat and glanced at Sarin with a questionable frown on his face.

“I know, I know, humans aren't supposed to be allowed past Third, I'm sure you've heard that not just from me, but the others who have stared at you and wondered, but I just mentioned two key elements to the Dark Lord's allowing humans in Sixth and that is: witchcraft and beauty – they're all beautiful and therefore, allowable. He's a fucking contradiction, but he's unfortunately, the ruler.

“Is that where he got his current witch?”

“Yes, Esmeralda came from Madera, and most Arch Devils and Council Members have a witch or aura of some sort to assist them in their endeavors. One of the Council Members, herself, is a Grand Witch from Madera.”

“Who wants Madera? And who would try to obtain it knowing the Dark Lord protects it?” David asked.

Sarin laughed softly. “There are a few who have dreams of grandeur when it comes to taking over Madera. One of the Council Members - Drake is his name - has risen to power quickly and wants Madera for himself.”

David flinched then paused, looking confused again. Sarin read his mind easily and explained.

“Drake is not an Arch Devil, so we can say his name into oblivion, although I've heard several say he is trying to exterminate anyone in his way to claim that title. He also hates humans but he used to be human, living above like you once did. He's another walking contradiction.”

“I remember Evan talking about this Drake character. So what is he, some kind of Hitler?”

“What's a 'Hitler?'” Sarin looked confused.

“Never mind. Evan was saying Drake was trying to take over Fifth and Sixth Plane, ordering the extermination of all half-breeds, so he must be powerful.”

“He is, and he's built up quite a reputation. He controls and has alliances with the Trolls and the Nagul; they all respect and admire him. He also holds control of a large body of human warriors, ruthless trash not meant for living, for I've heard what they can do in large groups.

Humans with weapons are at times, under the leadership of someone like Drake, monsters unleashed. They are worse than any Troll or Nagul Orc.” Sarin shook his head in disgust, then continued. “Drake is the only pure human on the Council, and from what I’ve been told, he is volatile and aggressive, picking fights and overthrowing superpowers in place already. He is a power hungry heathen and not liked by the Dark Lord. Leave it to a human to try to wreck havoc on the system.” Sarin smirked as he glanced over.

David sighed. “Whatever, sounds like someone needs to take Drake down a notch.”

“Yeah, well, not me, I choose to leave them to each other. It’s quite entertaining to hear the rumors and the gossip around the Planes. The latest word is that Drake is trying to attain Arch Devil status. He feels he’s killed enough creatures that matter to achieve such recognition, but right now there are only six, and the Dark Lord doesn’t like Drake, so I doubt he’ll get his title.”

“So only the Dark Lord can give out such an honor?” David became intrigued again, wanting to know more and talk about his favorite subject - Louis.

“Yes, of course, but that’s no surprise right? Anyway, moving along to Fifth Plane and the Nagul, for they own a large portion of this area we traveled through. They are puppets under Drake’s control and probably the toughest, strongest warriors in the Underworld.”

“I didn’t think them all that impressive.” David sounded indifferent.

Sarin laughed again. “They were stunned by you - didn’t you see it? I couldn’t help but watch whilst I fought them off. They are cannibals and weak for the flesh and the beautiful. You threw them off guard completely. It was rather comical to watch.”

David smiled, feeling suddenly powerful and enjoying his reflection in the pond water.

“But don’t let that little piece of information secure you as Nagul impervious, for the next time they see you, they will have already built up resistance to your look and your smell, and they are probably hunting you right now, for they are vengeful and not easily defeated – too much pride. That’s why I was so upset back there when we met this brigade and you decided to join them. We should branch off and disappear on our own for these warriors we keep company with are all wanted and sought out. And now, our little victory back there in Sixth Plane made us instant wanted fugitives by the Nagul also, and their sense of smell is unmatched. You would be best to keep your guard up if we should meet them again, for then, you will know the meaning of fierce competition.”

“You fear them?” David felt nervous as he thought of the many faces of the Nagul he sliced threw that night and didn’t kill.

“No, but I respect them as warriors. And that kind of respect keeps me grounded. I know my limitations and I am here today because my pride is always in check. Remember that David.” Sarin looked over and watched David’s face show no visible sign of fear or intimidation

Sarin decided to change the subject. He cleared his throat to get David’s attention again. “The Cavern in Fifth Plane is neutral ground, supported by the Dark Lord and patrolled by his influences. He is a nobleman apparently, and supports civilized towns and organized businesses. Therefore, Fifth’s Cavern, as well as others, have his approval and they stay in existence, mostly unharmed and used by many who wish to pay for a hot meal at a table and music playing in the background—“

“Music? There’s music down here?” David became animated again, thinking how nice it would be to hear a melody. He felt suddenly homesick and missed his guitar...and Dillon’s piano.

“Yes, of course, for a price. It costs to attend these caverns; most of the gold goes to the Dark Lord as payment for his protection, however.”

David laughed. “Oh, so he’s like the Underworld’s version of a mafia warlord? How funny!”

“What’s a mafia warlord?” Sarin turned and stared intently.

“Uh...well, they are the human version of the Dark Lord up above, without supernatural powers, or magical influences of any sort – just weapons and money...sorry, I’ll shut up now. Go on.”

“Well, I was going to tell you, there are also places people go for music and drinks He doesn’t yet know about. Underground establishments for mostly the humans and they call them ‘clubs.’ I can’t imagine why they would call these caverns ‘clubs’ - I mean - that’s a rudimentary weapon used by Trolls, and insulting to those of us with brains, but whatever. You humans are strange in your ways.”

David laughed again, a look of utter shock on his face. “Clubs? There are clubs down here? No fucking way! How cool is that?!”

“Right, like I said, you humans are strange—“

“Can we go there—“

“No. Can I continue?” Sarin looked away, his side profile annoyed. It made David smile to watch. He’s so predictable and entertaining.

Sarin turned back to look at David. “As I was saying, Fifth and Sixth Planes are volatile, but it is controlled violence - if that makes sense. What is uncontrolled chaos, I have yet to mention.” He shuddered and David perked up interest. “Going back to First Plane for a minute, now those who make it through the gates, for sometimes they are allowed when the pens get too full, they all descend into Second Plane. The Second and Third Planes are chaotic lands specifically set up for the humans to traverse and quickly destroy each other – like chaotic mazes. The Dark Lord has set it up this way for two centuries now, since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, which from what I’ve been told, occurred because of the creation of these ‘machines’ and the spread of super sized cities and stone streets,” his voice was animated and his face grotesque to imply the urbanization of the Living World was a horrible time, like the Dark Ages in history. David smiled as he watched someone not from his world describe modernization. Sarin continued with his hands out over the pond to illustrate his next point. “No land anywhere to see, just buildings and stone ground and black air rising from these, these tubes that shoot high up in the air. Is this true? Is the Living World this way? For if it is, I can see why you chose to leave it repeatedly when you slept.”

David frowned now in reflection, thinking to himself it wasn’t that bad, but his family lived in the suburbs and in San Diego no less, with beautiful ocean views and rolling hills. Still, he thought, they were rolling hills of housing developments. He smiled. *Remember ‘Suburbia’ Dave? The Pet Shop Boys knew how to define suburban living like nobody’s business.* (“Suburbia,” Song and lyrics by Pet Shop Boys, Please, 1986.)

After a few seconds of listening to the song in his head, David snapped out of his daze. “You must be referring to major cities like New York City? Have you heard or seen in these two Planes you speak of, a large statue of a woman holding a, a torch?” David asked, putting his arm out like he was Lady Liberty, his other hand pretending to hold her book.

“Females holding torches? No, there aren’t any women anywhere, for they all usually perish in Second Plane. Even as an elf, Leselle is rare, for females do not last long in His kingdom. He despises them, so I’ve heard. So does this Drake character.”

“No, this is a statue of a woman holding a torch. Does that sound familiar?”

“No, it doesn’t, and although I choose not to spend my time in Second or Third Plane, I

know them well. They are both torn down cities, massive buildings ripped apart but still standing, and the humans, most of whom are familiar with this sort of background apparently, run and hide there, taking up refuge and then fighting each other. Gangs of humans join and start out in Second, then move to Third, which is more chaos but the city is different, less destroyed on the outside, and the buildings look nicer – older and more decorated with arched pointed stones and there’s this large building I’ve been told is a clock – A large one, but the name escapes me—“

“London! That’s London,” David became excited thinking he knew something Sarin didn’t. “And Second Plane is New York City – I knew it!”

“Yeah, well, be that as it may, it doesn’t matter what their names are,” he looked at David frustrated and not sure why he would get excited about knowing the cities when he wouldn’t need to go through them now. He was safely beyond their chaotic hell.

“But the gangs that have taken residence there are even more ruthless. Drake spends some of his time in Third, organizing and recruiting gang leaders to join his clan. He owns quite a few blocks of city in Third.” Sarin sat quietly and thought deeply. David could tell he despised Drake, feared him even, by his body language.

“Well, sounds like Drake is busy - busy making his mark here. I’m sure it’s only going to be a matter of time before he forces the Dark Lord to grant him his title.”

“I doubt it. They will probably duel instead. Wouldn’t that be nice? Not to care who wins, for they both deserve each other’s wrath? How fitting that would be?” Sarin chuckled and looked down at his delicate hands lying in his lap. David watched them too, marveled even at how pretty they were, so petite and fragile looking, yet to see Sarin fight and wield a weapon would make anyone hold his or her breath in awe.

“So, that leaves only Fourth Plane. What would a weary traveler find should he choose to visit there?” David inquired his voice comical as if asking a travel agent for advice before embarking on a trip.

“Well, Fourth is neutral ground really, a level of scattered towns, trading, and less humans, for starters, since they aren’t really allowed to run freely in Fourth or any of the remaining Planes, like you’ve already heard. It’s against His rules to allow humans past Third Plane, for truth be told, He has specifically created the first three planes to contain all humans and keep them under lock and key, to perish in as much misery as can possibly be delivered their

way. He has zombies that only reside in Second and Third, placed there to eat any and all humans. He has programmed them to want only human flesh, and they are brutal, nasty, vile creatures that swarm on you like bees to honey. Humans can only find access to Fourth if they are brought in—“

“Like human cargo? You know - weapons, drugs and slavery?” David smiled sheepishly, then stopped as he saw Sarin’s disapproving, questionable look he now knew as ‘what the hell are you talking about?’

Sarin cleared his throat and David smiled again. “Therefore, Fourth Plane is the introduction to the Underworld as far as I’m concerned. There is no peace in the Underworld, only Sanctuary. And those of us who know it’s boundaries, we guard it sacredly. Oleander has kept this small little piece of Underworld Heaven for those of us he considers worthy enough to stay. Most of the warriors here, when they leave here eventually, will have their memories erased so that Sanctuary never existed to them. Only a few of us are lucky enough to keep its memory alive in order to return. Oleander decides who knows it and who doesn’t. You are more than safe here, for as long as you wish to be, but something tells me after our long discussion of what awaits you outside these protected walls, you will want to depart as soon as possible. Am I correct?”

David smiled, daydreaming already of his version of Underworld domination.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Welcome to the Underworld David.”

Chapter Twenty One

Fine Tuning

Joel chose not to speak to David or Sarin for the next few days, which was pure torture for his stubborn, incredibly hurt ego and his pride. He continued to train with Oleander, for since that night and his quick shut down by his idol, Joel chose to settle down and listen to his new Master. He trained harder than ever before and learned quickly, surprising even himself. He was a natural after all, just didn't know it, having lived in David's shadow for so long.

“You are balanced, Blue - balanced and focused in your core. We will teach you the art of defying gravity. There is a discipline I choose to teach only those centered enough to extend upward and use air to propel themselves forward - you understand? You will use walls, beams, other creatures, and anything able to withstand your weight, to move gracefully and quickly. We will continue to work on balance, speed, agility, and most importantly, your hands.” Oleander bowed in front of Joel, his own hands held together in prayer.

Joel couldn't believe his ears. He suddenly felt an injection of hope circulate his veins. He bowed in return, his form perfect. They were alone in the dojo, for Oleander found it too distracting to have both Joel and David together during sessions. They bickered frequently like an odd married couple. Oleander had them nicknamed 'Mr. and Mr.' David didn't take it well; Joel just shook his head in frustration, thinking to himself, someday there won't be any discussion about it at all, it will just be.

Oleander worked with Joel in the mornings for hours at a time. He would then have lunch and drink his tea with all of them, Joel, David, Sarin, Ulred and Leselle. Afternoons he dedicated to his newest and most challenging pupil. He enjoyed their intimate group, but at first he was not pleased to have so many to tea. After the first week of just David and Joel, Sarin showed up and that was perfectly acceptable, Oleander decided, for he genuinely guarded Sarin as sacred - his most prized pupil ever - at least until Joel. Within two days, he'd noticed Leselle and Ulred standing outside his door, hiding nearby and watching. After a few more days of allowing them to sit in his garden and watch from afar, he gave up and allowed them in.

“It is rude to linger near those you wish company with. You must present yourselves confidently. With confidence will you make a statement. Understand?” Oleander had walked over to the two shocked and nervous elves sitting on the same bench David and Joel had sat at earlier to experience David's burial and extended his hand.

Joel, David and Sarin stood at the doorway and watched. David looked pissed at the interruption and the intrusion.

“Of course Master, please accept our apologies. May we, uh, join you?” Ulmed stood up and half bowed awkwardly to Oleander. The Master Elf looked annoyed and sighed.

“I am not your Master. I am Sanctuary. You may come have tea now, both of you.” Oleander turned and walked back to his personal quarters, tapping his bamboo staff in time as he held it behind his back, walking in tune. Leselle and Ulmed followed him, a few steps back.

As the weeks unfolded and built upon them, David and Joel trained harder than ever before. They were in competition, or at least it felt that way. At night, David chose not to spend his time keeping Joel awake, instead, he went to the dojo and continued his training; teaching himself balance and agility as he secretly watched Joel perform similar moves in the mornings while he stayed in the shadows and looked on.

Training with Oleander was overwhelmingly time consuming, for they each desired improvement beyond the expectations of their shared Master. Joel had a drive to excel to prove to David his worth, for he was determined to overcome his handicap and utilize his other senses. David’s motives were purely to dominate the Underworld and all who would choose to get in his way. He was driven to become the dark puritan he knew he was and with Joel working as hard as he was, it drove David even further.

As the weeks turned into months, David and Joel perfected their art. They were breathtaking to watch, causing quite a scene every time they practiced with Oleander. Others would gather and sit as if watching movies whenever friendly duels were announced to Sanctuary’s inhabitants. The day finally came when he and Joel would meet with Oleander to duel – a duel to decide if they were worthy to depart from their Master and stand alone.

The crowd gathered as before, and with Sarin standing by the door to watch and help judge, the two students knelt in the center of the dojo opposite a standing, overly intimidating, Oleander.

“Okay, you two. This is your time to shine. Attack me.” Oleander tapped his bamboo cane as he held it behind his back casually. David and Joel looked at each other, both confused.

“Master...our weapons?” Joel inquired, a puzzled look on his face. “We’ve been training for months now with...our...weapons, Master.” He looked down at his knees, respect for his master coursing through his veins. The crowd lining the walls of the dojo suddenly

became a quiet roar. Oleander hushed them all with one hand held up as he continued to look at his students on their knees. He smiled as he looked down at his matured disciples, both of them fully grown men now in stature and manner; their physical growth matching their insight and maturity equally. They were men now, and it was evident by watching them now in their pose and physical builds – and they could have easily been twins in height and build, if not for Joel's blue hair.

“You will first dodge my staff. If you can do this without a hit, you will have earned status. Weapons are for war. The art of fighting is to not-get-hit. You may use your bodies offensively, but nothing more. David, you first, stand and face your opponent.” Oleander stood and turned so that his back faced them. David looked startled.

“Did you expect I'd let you pair up? Forget it, tough guys.” Oleander laughed softly. David smiled slightly, his face turning red as the dojo stirred with whispers and some laughter. Joel scowled and whimpered, looking first at David, then over at Evan in panic as he felt his stomach begin to churn. He rose and walked off the mat and stood next to Sarin, who in turn, chose not to look at him. Joel frowned. *Asshole*, he thought. *You're just jealous I have history and you - you're just David's Underworld guide to the stars.* He stood there and waited, trying not to think of his now tightly wound stomach. Sarin sighed loudly and stepped away from him, not wanting to be too near the undeserving human he despised.

David rose and bowed, but quickly reacted to avoid Oleander turning and whipping his staff around. David barely had time to throw his upper body backward, his feet still planted on the ground, as he watched the staff go by his nose at supersonic speed. The wind it created made his eyes blink repeatedly.

He finished his back bend quickly, throwing his legs up and over, dodging another swing of the bamboo staff as he did so. He could hear the crowd ah and ooh as he dodged his Master, fueling his drive, giving him energy and breathing power into his being. He landed on his feet then ducked to miss the staff, sweeping his leg around and causing Oleander to jump and smack his staff down. As the master elf swept it under the student, all he could do was watch as David, in turn, jumped and repeatedly dodged yet another blow.

They moved along the dojo this way, in perfect choreography, with an audience in awe as David traversed the full length of the floor, running up and around the side walls, and doing back flips off the beams and changing direction frequently as he acrobatically maneuvered everything

Oleander had to give him, all with a smile on his face.

The most impressive move, the one to cause the most stir in the audience, minus the flying off the side walls, which momentarily shocked Oleander since that move, among others, was exclusively taught to only Joel, was a move that shocked even David.

As Oleander came at him again with the bamboo staff swinging at the human's side from his left, David shot his right leg out and blocked it with his foot, stopping it for a second in mid-air, then jumping up on it and balancing there, his weight easily held by Oleander, but his powerful energy, having built up during the duel, was too much. The staff snapped into two pieces. David's supernatural strength had finally made itself known to all as he broke through the magical bond of the extraordinary staff as well.

The explosion shot both of them backward several feet in opposite directions, the crowd aghast as David dropped to his knees in shock, unable to say a word and trembling as he looked down at his shaking hands; the energy coursing through them like electricity. He watched his black nails elongate at that moment, lengthening out two inches, to become pin point extensions of his hands. *Could this power surge be from the staff? I just wanted to jump off it, that's all! I swear it!* He looked up and saw Oleander for the first time looking distressed and shocked as well, not saying a word and frozen. The crowd became silent.

David opened his mouth and began to stammer, "Master, I-I am sorry for that. I didn't know what I was thinking. Please excuse me and accept my apology? I will leave this place at once out of respect for you and for Sanctuary." He got up and walked over to the broken staff lying between them and stuck his hand out. The two pieces shot up to him and he grabbed them. The crowd murmured in unison then quieted down again as he turned and looked around the room, sending out an ice cold stare, until he made eye contact with Oleander, who still hadn't registered a single word. He walked over and placed the staff in front of his master's feet then bowed. Oleander returned his bow. They locked eyes but remained silent. The tension in the room was almost strangling to everyone watching.

When they were finished, David turned and walked out of the dojo quickly, without looking back. Sarin, Joel, Leselle and Ulred followed single file after him.

As they left Sanctuary, they chose not to look back or say good bye. With Sarin in the lead, they all shot out through the wall as the magic propelled them forward. They found themselves in a forest at mid day, for the sky was a lovely shade of violet.

Once they got far enough away from Sanctuary, Sarin turned to David and spoke, the first to do so since David confessed his wrong-doing to Oleander earlier.

“So, where do you wish to go? I’m open for suggestions.”

Leselle piped in before David could answer. “We should go back—“

“Leselle, I was talking to David.” Sarin sounded annoyed. He was beginning to see why Emen felt so frustrated with her; her mouth was fast and her words, quick and outspoken.

David felt relieved not having to hear a lecture he was sure would have come from Sarin no less, but there wasn’t any paternal looks coming from the usually, very scrutinizing elf, and his voice was cordial and pleasant enough not to hold any trace of judgment. “Let’s start from the beginning for I wish to see it all as you’ve described it, Sarin.” David shot him a look of determination as he felt the picture in his jacket against his chest. He patted it lightly and looked up to the sky, new determination on his face, his fear all but gone.

Chapter Twenty Two

Holidays without You

Halloween night came as an early disappointment for Dillon. He was sitting in his room on David's bed so that he could be at the right angle to stare out the bedroom window. It was indeed October 31st at 7pm and with knees curled up, he watched the window intently, waiting for her or anyone else to show. He knew Halloween, like all those scary movies, wouldn't go by his house without a scream or a howl, so he might as well be ready.

Sitting there in suspense was a posture he maintained for the next several hours, waiting for the tapping to occur and at times, thinking he heard it, closing his eyes he could see the long, wickedly twisted, gnarly fingers touching the glass. He had gone back to school with agony, for no day was better than any other and he was a targeted victim. He knew it, breathed it, lived it, and finally accepted it for the monumental thing it was.

And tonight was a night to wait for, he thought as he leaned against the wall. The eucalyptus tree branches were gently rapping on the glass, lightly touching it like fingers on his face. He focused intently, excluding everything else in his world. He therefore didn't hear his mother walk up the stairs and enter his room. She was surprised to see him once again sitting on his brother's permanently made bed.

"Dillon Honey, Tommy is downstairs to join the family for game night. And you are missing out on all the cute little kids' costumes and candy giving! I know how much you love to do that, so please come down?" She stood in front of him to block his view of the window. He glanced up at her as if just now realizing she was there, not hearing a word she had enthusiastically rambled on about.

"Uh, no, no thank you. I want to be up here tonight. It's just too painful Mother. You're forgetting David isn't there. Who do I have stand behind me at the door staring the kids down and making at least a few run away screaming? And, and who will throw the candy out on the lawn when the kids come to the door and scream out sarcastically, "Go and get it – like it's dinner? And who will slip the older kids money to trick our house later tonight? Right - no one - no one comes close and that's the end of this story. C-can I just be alone now please?" Dillon stared at her midsection, where the window would be if she wasn't standing there in the way.

Mother sighed and watched him for a few minutes, neither of them speaking. He's not blinking she thought as she watched his beautiful face appear aged beyond its years. He's seen

more than his share of tragedy already, she worried as she stood there and tried to think about whether or not she should force him to submit and join. Lately she had found herself allowing Dillon his space and interfering with Father whenever the two of them would clash. It was wrecking havoc on her already fragile marriage.

“Really? He paid the neighborhood kids to destroy our house? Hmm, that explains a lot. Well, fine, although I’m sure Daniel would be rude to the now unemployed trick or treaters if you’d just ask. You know, he has been trying hard to get your attention and be a good big brother to you?”

“He will never fill those shoes Mother,” Dillon’s voice monotonous as he continued to not blink, staring at her June Cleaver belt and matching dress ensemble.

“Dillon, please don’t interrupt me when I’m talking to you. If you wish to stay up here then that’s fine, for now, however, I may be calling you downstairs in a little while though. Tommy would like to see you, you know?” She paused for a second, as if summoning the courage to ask the next question, for that was her biggest worry with Dillon – the lack of any friends whatsoever. “Shall I send him up here to keep—“

“No.”

Mother glanced around her youngest son’s bedroom inspecting it as if for the first time, her face filled with worry as she noticed how very little the room had changed. It had only been a few weeks, but still, she thought, even David’s shirts still poke out of his dresser drawers the way he used to put them away, like he just did yesterday. She blinked away a tear.

Dillon watched her midsection as she turned herself around in a circle. She looked over at his shelf above his bed and noticed the picture frame she had gotten him two years ago for his favorite black and white photo was empty. “Dillon, where’s the picture of you and David?” She forced herself to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat and tried to smile, turning around and noticing he was still staring at her midsection. She glanced down and smoothed out her dress with her hands, trying to get rid of the wrinkles there and straightening up her belt. She looked at him again. “Dillon, did you hear me?”

“It’s gone Mother. It now resides six feet underground, its new home away from home. Any more questions? Shall I dig it up for you?” Dillon remained monotone and unnerved, which made his mother begin to chill.

“You, you gave it to David then?” Mother began to choke up again as she watched him

nod his head slowly, with very little effort and absolutely no emotion.

She sobbed for a minute, then cleared her throat, trying to collect herself as she stood there. “Fine, you can have space, for now that is. I hope you change your mind though and come downstairs.” She wiped away a tear, her voice sounding hopeful as she checked his face for emotion.

“I doubt it, Mother.”

Still no blink – strange. Mother turned and left the room, glancing over her shoulder at his side profile as she walked out, closing the door then opening it again slightly. She didn’t want it closed, although from downstairs she wouldn’t know anything whether it was opened a crack or closed.

Dillon shook his head in disgust and slowly got up and walked over to the door. He stood there watching it as it hovered above the hard wood floor, three inches opened and unsure of itself as to what it should do. “Just close yourself and lock me in.” He whispered persuasively as he concentrated on the door knob. Within a few minutes it started to vibrate, then it closed itself, a wind shutting it from behind him, blowing his hair forward and over his eyes.

The rest of the evening went by quietly in his room with only the occasional gust of wind and scraping he had grown accustomed to, now giving him comfort and solace.

The doorbell rang well into the night, and each time it did so, Dillon couldn’t help but jump up and listen, expecting to smell jasmine in the air at any moment. It didn’t happen of course, and he finally called it a night, feeling incredibly sorry for himself. He crawled into his bed and pulled the covers over his head.

Even Sebastian didn’t visit. He must have been busy, Dillon thought, as he laid there in the dark and fumed. He couldn’t help but feel almost disappointed he didn’t get either a heavenly or a demonic visit. He had grown accustomed to the supernatural influences in his life, and it was now just too boring and ordinary without the superpower struggle occurring around him.

As he lay there pouting under the covers, wishing he could get sucked into the bowels of his bed and ripped apart, never to be found or seen again, Sebastian flew by and stopped in a heartbeat, hovering near his window, a flash of psychedelic air. He stuck his head into the wall and looked down as he hovered three feet above Dillon’s motionless body.

Sebastian could feel the boy’s disappointment and smiled briefly. *Not yet, my dear,* he

thought as he watched Dillon's leg kick out in frustration and heard the boy sigh loudly. *You will have your time to shine and fill wings similar to mine. Be patient and sleep away your youth unharmed.*

With that thought in mind, Sebastian took off for his marathon night of hunting. He was going to keep a close eye on Dillon's house though, for although he knew Azmodeus wouldn't dare pay the boy another visit especially on All Hallows Eve, he wasn't completely convinced.

The rest of the year finished without a single hesitation. Christmas Eve came in a flash and the family braced themselves for another holiday without David. Of course all of the siblings except Dillon were silently grateful David wasn't around to make jokes about Santa Claus and his circus side show of perverted, vertically challenged elves.

Dillon sat at the breakfast table on December 24th and smiled thinking about all the gross, disgusting stories David would whisper in his ear during church mass and family get-togethers. His defiance with every caroling event the family hosted was made extremely comical after he was forced to attend the sing-a-longs. Dillon reminisced all day, thinking about David and all he would do at Christmas time; he'd grab him and walk towards the end of the group every time, singing his own version of the innocent Christmas carols. Dillon openly displayed his disapproval, but secretly, he looked forward to it, for his brother never disappointed. "He was always so funny, and never stepped over the line of pure comedy to sink into lewd and trashy." Dillon whispered down at the table, staring at it like it was his reflection in a pond, then thought, that wasn't his style to be trashy and nasty in a degrading way, he was just so intelligent and witty in the way he put down everything. He blinked and noticed his pathetic looking eggs, two of them sunny side up, staring back at him and slightly quivering like doll eyes. "And nobody knew that about him - just me."

He saw his hand begin to tremble as he held his fork in mid air. The family was sitting around him and talking, the noise almost deafening as he tried to block them all out. It was only escalating though, and the voices all talking in his ears was shaking him; he felt tiny daggers pierce his brain as his mother let in a dozen or so talkative church members into the kitchen to pay their respects and wish everyone a Merry Christmas.

Merry? Please...

Dillon closed his eyes. Make them all quiet, he whispered in his head as he clenched his fork and felt his knees begin to knock together. It had only gotten worse, the sensitive, psychic

hearing he had acquired since the funeral. He wanted to mention it to Sebastian, but felt nervous letting the angel in on any of his little secrets. “But I’m not a witch,” he whispered, his voice barely audible as he choked back tears. He kept his eyes closed and continued to feel his body shake from the outside inward as the noise level continued to escalate to a nice respectable level of chaos, and it was overly magnified in his ears. “I can’t take it anymore, I can’t take it anymore, I CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE!”

The glass pitcher almost full of water placed in the middle of the table exploded as Dillon let his voice be heard above the others. The Smith clan all jumped away from the table, chairs screeched as water soaked several sets of pajamas. Dillon was the only one remained sitting, his head in his hands, his elbows perched on the table, and cold ice water flooding his pajama bottoms as he clenched his teeth and shivered.

He slowly rose, the only noise in the room was the screeching of his chair legs on the floor, and walked out of the dining room and up to his room while everyone present remained silent, and nobody moved at all.

The scene was eerie, yet comforting to Dillon as he ascended the stairs to his room to await his fate, for he was sure his father would be joining him with his favorite belt in one hand and a ‘this is going to hurt me more than it does you’ look on his face. But the wrath that was his father never came. He sat on his bed in the corner and pulled his legs up to rest below his chin and waited for hours.

Mother called him down to eat lunch but he didn’t budge. Why bother? He thought as he sat in the same pose he’d been in all morning. *I’d only destroy yet another piece of her dinner ware collection.*

She finally came up and asked him to come down, but he refused. As she turned to leave, not bothering to argue with him he caught her off guard with a question.

“So, have you and Father called the Nut Farm to come take me away yet, Mother?” He remained staring at his bedspread in front of him as he hugged his knees.

Mother turned around quickly and looked with worry at her child. “No, Honey of course not. Why would we do that? You were simply overwhelmed with all the visitors we’ve been having over here at the house lately. It’s going to be a difficult holiday this year, but I promise it will get better.” She walked over and sat on the edge of Dillon’s bed, the closest she’d been to him in a month. She felt nervous.

“You don’t think it more than a coincidence that my yelling and the pitcher exploding happened almost simultaneously?” Dillon began to choke on his words but stopped himself from letting the tears flow. He’d yelled at himself just last week for allowing them to appear; no more crying Dillon, he warned himself. *The tears won’t bring him back and it makes your face puffy and slightly girlie, so knock it off.* Today he reminded himself and breathed out slowly and with new strength and determination. It worked, for the time being.

“No, dear, your Father and I are practical, down to Earth people with rational minds, and this little episode was exactly that - an accident and nothing more. Why, do you think you caused my glass pitcher to explode simply by yelling out like you did?” Mother had a way about making her voice sugary sweet at all the wrong times. Dillon felt nauseated as he tried not to listen.

“Okay, fine then. I guess I’m no stranger to mistakes and accidents then right?” He glanced up at her and made eye contact, his eyes beginning to water as he repeatedly screamed in his head that he wasn’t a witch damned to hell.

“That’s right Sweetheart. You just need to recover from all this activity with the holidays and all. I suggest you take it easy today and tonight we can celebrate...okay?”

More sugary sweet words came pouring out his mother’s mouth. He dry heaved as he forced himself to look at her again.

“Okay, but I don’t feel well.” He quickly looked away.

“Of course you don’t Sweetie, go to sleep and recover. Tommy said he would stop by today to see you okay? I think you’ve been avoiding him lately and he looked pretty hurt the other day when you wouldn’t come down.” Mother reached over to gently wipe away a loose strand of his light blond hair off his face, but he leaned back and pretended to stretch to keep her from touching him.

Once he was alone again, Dillon hopped out of bed and began to pace the room. He had avoided thinking about his new found powers since they first reared their ugly heads months ago, even before David’s passing, but now, he felt compelled to figure out why he was singled out to feel differently, to see things not meant to be seen, and to manipulate his environment so easily. He felt like a puppet master and he paused in his pacing to cringe at the thought of so much power in his young hands. He knew God would frown upon it and probably had already turned His back on him - why else would I feel so alone, he thought as he stomped his feet briefly after

two tears escaped down his face.

“That’s funny, watching you stomp your feet like that, care to stomp a tune, maybe?” Sebastian walked through the closet and closed the door behind him, leaning against it as he smiled at a very startled Dillon who turned around quickly and took a step back, wiping away his tears.

“Wh-wh-what are you d-doing here?” Dillon whispered, blinking repeatedly as he took in the image of the angel, since having convinced himself just last week, his encounters with the entity were entirely in his head. *Where has he been all this time? It’s not a dream after all...*

Dillon watched Sebastian stroll into the room wearing an all white suit with a silver tie.

He casually walked by Dillon and jumped on David’s bed in perfect dive formation, spinning around in mid air to land like a feather on his back, his hands behind his head as he smiled.

“Please, take a breath Dil. You know, you get worked up so easily...relax and have a seat. We have much to talk about, you and I.” Sebastian leaned forward and cupped his mouth, as if not wanting anyone immortal to hear him, “I escaped the party upstairs for a few minutes - you know - needed a break and it was getting rather boring - and of course I thought of you - so let’s chat, shall we?”

Dillon breathed out slowly then frowned as he thought about Sebastian’s absence over the past three months. “Wh-where h-have you been?” Dillon’s frown still present as he stood in between the two twin beds, both hands on his waist in perfect motherly form and stared at the angel.

Sebastian laughed softly as he lay stretched out on David’s bed, then motioned Dillon to come to him. Dillon walked over slowly and stood above Sebastian’s face and looked down at the smug angel. He leaned up in a millisecond’s time and blew sweet smelling air into Dillon’s face forcefully. Dillon breathed in then coughed several times and took two steps back, sitting on his bed.

“Why did you do that?” Dillon whispered as he sat down.

“So that we could talk, you know, catch up on old times, but at a quicker quip? I’ve been busy lately but I’ve managed to stop by quite frequently to check on you, really I have. Nice bed, by the way, comfy and it smells nice, musky and spiced up—“

“You need to get off David’s bed. It’s not to be laid in, you’ll ruin...his smell.” Dillon’s

voice drifted off with the last few words spoken as he noticed Sebastian turned to him and gave a curious grin.

“And if I don’t get off *his* bed?”

Sebastian played along like the child he was at times. It annoyed Dillon greatly to watch an entity with so much power act so silly and immature. God must have granted him this much status for entertainment purposes, he thought. Suddenly, Dillon felt another wave of nausea hit as he watched the mischievous angel move around side to side to get cozier, rubbing the side of his incredibly pale face into the pillow as he pretended to sleep, ignoring Dillon’s demands and his stare. Okay, Dillon thought, be like your mother, only smarter.

“Would you please remove your person from my deceased brother’s bed for I fear it would hamper my continued memory of him should you linger there? Wait, what’s with my voice? Sebastian please, just remove yourself from it, however you may sit on the edge of the bed instead, okay?” He had a pleading quality to his voice not even Sebastian could ignore.

“Fine, I was going to sleep for awhile, but whatever.” Sebastian rolled his metallic grey eyes and sat up, pretending to look annoyed as he rubbed the top of his head as if waking from a long winter’s nap, then yawned. “Look, I only have a few minutes, Sport, because of the festivities above, you understand? So let us just get to the point shall we? Okay, how have you been?” Sebastian continued before Dillon could answer, his voice fast and his hand motioning as if Dillon was driving a car his way. “Good, you know, you seemed more than annoyed when I entered your dwelling, and might I add just for the record, I’ve been very busy lately - but I’ve been watching you - it’s just He’s given me more territory to patrol lately with all my good work. I’ve also managed to earn some well deserved bonus points that I look forward to cashing in on —“

Dillon cleared his throat. “Get to the point.”

Sebastian paused and went to lie back down on the bed, obviously not happy with Dillon’s interruption and apparent indifference to his all important monologue.

“Please? Just, I mean, I’m sorry for interrupting, please continue – sitting up that is?” Dillon pleaded again, his arms stretched out as if to help Sebastian rise off his brother’s bed.

Can’t resist this soul, honestly I can’t. Sebastian smiled as he sat up and watched with much glee the relieved expression on Dillon’s face. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted – mind if I smoke?” Sebastian pulled out a box of cigarettes out of his jacket and

motioned them at Dillon.

“Yes, I do mind, please don’t - don’t you care about God minding?” He asked with slight hesitation. *Please don’t lie down*, he thought.

Sebastian paused, then lit a cigarette from the heat he generated on the bedside lamp, much to Dillon’s disapproval and continued sighing, and breathed out the first line of smoke to the ceiling. “God has other things to do besides watch me smoke. Besides, it’s not a sin, and I am impervious to sinning anyway. I choose to glorify God in my own distinctive way and He acknowledges and blesses me for my services. Let’s not discuss my relationship with God, but yours.” He pointed his cigarette at Dillon then continued. “Do you have one? A relationship with Him, I mean?” He took another drag and inspected Dillon’s face for flaws. There are none, he decided as he found himself admiring the mortal angel, forgetting again as to why he was there in the first place.

Dillon was caught off guard and he fell silent, looking down at his knees and trying to think of what to say. *He switched roles on me, how clever. I walked right into that one...*

“I can read your mind, so please be truthful so you don’t disappoint me.” Sebastian whispered sweetly, taking another drag and smiling at the angelic form not his.

“No you can’t.” Dillon looked up and met eyes with Sebastian, his look determined as he challenged the statement.

The angel replied by smiling and winking. *The boy is growing up, right before me.*

Dillon rolled his eyes and continued, avoiding the angel’s stare. “My relationship with God is a personal one, not open for discussion. I have my issues and they are mine to bear, however, I blame no one for my tragedy—“

“But you should blame!” Sebastian leaned forward with sudden enthusiasm and vigor. *Shouldn’t suggest this, but I can’t help it – it’s just too exciting!* “You should blame that blasphemous weasel who resides below our feet! He should be blamed for your loss, however I will add your brother was destined for a quick dismissal below if he had continued his mortal path without the influence of that devil anyway. You realize that, don’t you?” Sebastian finished his cigarette and looked around the room at the quaint, dull décor only a teenage boy’s room could emanate and looked for anything worthy.

Dillon sighed and choked on another tear. “It’s in the closet, the tennis shoe in there. That’s where David hid his cigarette butts.” He pointed towards the closet without looking at it.

He was deeply disturbed at the moment and for the first time ever, wanted to be completely alone, even from all of 'the others.'

Sebastian leaped up and shot Dillon a raised eyebrow of suspicion, then walked over and opened the closet, finding the shoe and depositing his trash deep inside. He laughed softly as he held the shoe and admired it. "He was quite smart, that one. I bet he never got caught, did he?"

"No, never, how could he? No one cared about him anyway because he didn't fit into our perfect Christian family picture. He smoked right in front of Mother all the time when he wasn't in the house, and she just looked away. He wasn't allowed to smoke inside, but David always found a way to do what he wanted and the bottom line was they didn't care anyway so why should he?" He lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling. "Could I be alone now, Sebastian, for I really don't feel like sharing anymore today."

The angel tossed the shoe in the closet and closed the door with his foot. In a second he was standing over Dillon, looking deeply into his eyes as he leaned down close enough to kiss him. Dillon opened his eyes wide and held his breath, waiting to see what would happen next. *Please don't do what Tommy did...please don't do what Tommy did—*

"Too bad, so sad - someone's feeling a wee bit sorry for his brother now isn't he, hmmm? Let me remind you that your supposedly poor, misguided and abused older brother also had a way of ripping innocent people apart with a simple stare, now didn't he?" Sebastian nodded his own head in smug agreement with himself. "He had a way about him alright, he was, hmmm, how can I describe him in the most accurate and non judgmental way?" He pulled up for a second to allow Dillon to breathe out and in, then shot back down so that their noses were touching. "He had a very distinct way of being absolutely, positively evil - and you knew it, closed your eyes to it too, and held onto the misguided belief he would come around eventually - am I correct?" Sebastian blew out his breath into Dillon's mouth quickly before he could answer then shot back up and began to pace the room, hands behind his back, in deep thought as he posed in perfect prosecuting lawyer form.

"And now, if it pleases Your Honor, I would like to address the jury as such: David Smith was indeed a troubled youth, a gifted one at that with charm, charisma, and a *Je ne sais quoi* kind of attitude that drew people from all walks of life to him. But what did he do to these people once they were near?" He paused in his pacing and addressed the wall, his hand out and waiting as if for an actual reply, his cigarette precariously placed between two fingers. Dillon

watched in a mixture of awe and disbelief. “He used them, manipulated them, crushed their fragile little egos and smashed their self confidence into little, tiny pieces. Why? Because he was bored ladies and gentlemen, and no one, except for the witness lying down over there, was privy to his thoughts, his feelings - what little he had of these - for expressing positive regard for anyone would make him human, and he was barely that—“

“I object!” Dillon shot up and sat on the edge of his bed.

Sebastian looked up at the ceiling, “Your Honor, can I get a ruling on this one?”

Dillon fumed as he watched Sebastian having way too much fun. He spoke up and interrupted the angel as he discussed the objection with the ceiling. “You cannot speak about him, because you didn’t know him like I did! People only see what they want to see anyway - what they can understand that is. David was different, and most people can’t handle that kind of shine. He was magnificent, and I was the only one in this world who bothered to get to know him! And yes, I knew he was troubled, but I accepted him for who he was anyway, and he-was-coming-around! He just needed more time, that’s all.” Dillon began to cry then stopped himself quickly as he sat back down, his hands trembling, his chest hurting.

Sebastian sighed as he stood there and watched Dillon sit in melancholy. “I object, your Honor - come on! Tears and emotions are not to be allowed in this courtroom.”

Dillon rolled his eyes and found his voice again. “Sebastian! God isn’t listening right now anyway, I’m sure He has better, more interesting items on his agenda tonight. Besides, as I was saying, David loved me, so that, in itself disputes without a shadow of a doubt your ‘he’s evil’ assumption because to be purely evil one does not have the capacity to love – and he did. He cared about me and protected me too, like a proper guardian angel I might add! And he would - he would still be here now trying to conform to our parents’ wishes and trying to stay out of trouble because once again, he loved me that much! But no one will ever see that, they’ll never see the sacrifice he made for me every day he lived here and when he was at that horrendous school too. He stayed in line as best he could, he fought his demons for a long time and now he’s gone...he’s been taken away by the very demons he resisted, hasn’t he?” Dillon’s voice pleading again as he slowly nodded his head in silent agreement with Sebastian’s. “So, now what do we do?” He choked on a tear and decided he was just too tired to stop them, so they flowed down. Sebastian turned his head to the side to admire the scene, lost there for a brief minute then snapping out of it and swooping over to sit next to Dillon on his bed.

“We can get the one responsible if you’d like a little pay back?” He whispered these words softly, tickling Dillon’s neck as he leaned in to smell the boy’s tears. “I could use your help to snag this vile beast before he takes another troubled, young human soul trying to conform? Interested?” Sebastian watched intently as Dillon, head bowed and leaning over on his knees, slowly nodded his head then paused.

“Are you sure Azmodeus did this? Are you sure he was the one personally responsible for David getting stuck down there because I’ve seen other creatures possibly responsible too, perhaps working with him like say, maybe of the female gender?” Dillon couldn’t believe he was questioning the culprit and he shook his head and frowned. *What am I doing - but then again, David wouldn’t have willingly been seduced by someone like that, only to turn his back on his little brother – not possible! No one had that kind of hold on him, no one could convince him to leave me.* No, Dillon decided, this Azmodeus character had help. As he sat there debating the thoughts in his head, he couldn’t bear to think David would volunteer to leave him like that, but the thought would haunt him for a long time. He sat there and watched his hands tremble in his lap. *Abandoned? No possible way...*

Sebastian looked shocked. “Of course, and now he wants you – go figure that coincidence out. Hello? Is he still dancing with you?! Are you in love with the beast? Oh, Dillon come back from Charm Land! Yes, he is the only one capable of taking and seducing your brother down to Hell! And from what I know of David Smith, it probably wasn’t very difficult to do—“

“Please don’t say that about him.” Dillon looked exasperated. “Fine then, yes, just tell me what I need to do and I’ll do it. Can I be alone now?” Dillon wiped a tear off his cheek and continued to look down, feeling defeated and avoiding Sebastian’s ever spreading grin.

“Sure, you’ve had a tough day. I’ll check on you later, okay? Great, now just relax and enjoy life for awhile, you haven’t done that in a long time. Have a good day.” Sebastian’s voice and his spoken words sounded like commands rather than hopeful encouragement as he reached out and touched the boy’s shoulder while he rose off the bed.

As Dillon looked up to say good bye, the angel was already gone. He rubbed his touched shoulder and relished the heat that warmed and spread down his body, making him smile unexpectedly as he sat there, his hands no longer trembling. The calm lasted for the rest of the Holy Night and well into Christmas Day.

Chapter Twenty Three

A New Year

The New Year came and went quietly too, and before Dillon knew it, school was starting again. He had relished the Christmas break from the city known as Vista High School. He enjoyed just staying home and lounging around the house, especially his room, having done nothing since school let out three weeks ago. His only visitor was Sebastian, for he had refused Tommy's calls. His self-induced, anti social spell, was broken by Julie, who had stopped by New Year's Day much to Mrs. Smith's shocked horror.

Dillon sat up in his room and cringed when he heard the doorbell ring and his mother scream out, "Hello my dear! Dillon! Come down and see, uh, your name again dear? Oh yes! Julie! Julie's here to see you! Come in my dear, goodness gracious what a pleasant surprise!"

He sat up and froze, feeling that same, unwelcoming sensation when you sleep in past your alarm on the day you had to give your big speech and had a precious two minutes to get presentable. "Holy Mother of God," he whispered as his stomach lurched forward in his gut. *Oh, crap! Not her!*

Without thinking, Dillon jumped out of bed but got tangled up in the sheets and fell to the ground in a loud 'thud.' He turned beat red as he shot up then looked down, picturing Julie standing below him and visually getting a picture of his clumsiness. He kicked off the sheets and stomped over to his long mirror and inspected himself. He was wearing his usual attire, boxer shorts and a tee shirt. He smoothed out his hair and looked at his teeth. "Why is she here?" He asked himself in the mirror, every ounce of self confidence he may have owned quickly floated out his window as he turned and walked slowly down the stairs, only to quickly run back up to his room to get pants on. He grabbed his jeans lying on his bed and put them on, one leg at a time, falling forward and catching himself on David's bed as his mother yelled out his name again.

Julie had tried to talk to Dillon numerous times at school, but her presence, her natural beauty and that radiant, confident smile she possessed made him completely paralyzed in fright whenever she was near, or in his case, in the same general fifty yard radius of his person. Most of the time he was able to hurry along, pretending not to see her; at other times, his stutter became unbearable - *why can't Sebastian breathe on me before the start of every school day?* He'd always just barely manage a smile and hurriedly walk away, not even bothering to answer

her questions.

And now here she was, sitting with her legs crossed on his family couch, her green corduroy mini skirt paired sweetly with a white cardigan sweater and matching white leather boots. She had her hair down her sides almost touching the small of her back, lying perfectly straight around her. She looked like the brunette version of Marsha Brady. She smiled as he walked into the living room awkwardly, his mother running around like the usual unprepared hostess she always claimed to be.

“My apologies, my dear, but my house is usually not this messy! Would you like some tea? Dillon, honey, be a dear and put some water on the stove for tea.” Mrs. Smith smiled down at Julie while she opened the curtains to let the sun shine in. It was another beautiful southern California day in January. *For once, could I possibly get some cold weather mixed with snow? Better yet, can I just be covered in snow until spring time?* He glanced up to the ceiling and sighed.

Mrs. Smith turned around to watch her son still standing there not paying any attention to her words; Julie laughed softly as she watched the exchange between Dillon and his mother.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Smith, I just had breakfast, so I’m fine really. I just wanted to see Dillon and maybe take him somewhere? I just got my driver’s license and my parents bought me a car for my birthday.” She smiled again and actually began to blush when Dillon finally looked over at her and registered all she had said. *A car? That’s not fair! How old is she? And what does she want with me? I still take the bus...*

“Dillon?” Mother turned from Julie and looked at her son impatiently. “I said to go put some water - oh, never mind! I’ll do it! Come sit down next to Julie.” Mother turned to Julie and smiled, “I think that’s wonderful for you my dear! Happy Birthday! How *old* has God made you, hmm?”

“I’m seventeen, Mrs. Smith – but I am very responsible! I work part time to pay for my car insurance and gas, I have all A’s at school and I do community work at the local homeless shelter whenever I can. I promise you, Dillon would be safe with me if I drove him anywhere. I’m a cautious driver, according to my mother...uh, would you like to call her maybe?” *My God, I’m rambling and now I sound like an idiot – call my mother?! What the hell did I just say?*

Mrs. Smith smiled sweetly however her worried look showed through, Dillon could tell

as he watched her not show any teeth – *Uh-oh, that's not good...*

Mrs. Smith let her thoughts go. *Well, so this older girl wants to drive my baby around? Shouldn't I be worried? Of course! This is my baby we're talking about here and he's never had a girl caller. Isn't that a bit aggressive anyway? Who ever heard of a girl calling on a boy?* She continued for another few seconds to smile at Julie without showing teeth, then hurried into the kitchen as she spoke, making her get away smooth. “I’m sure you’re fine, my dear. You must know Dillon’s older sister Rachel then? You do know Dillon is only fifteen? Hmm?” She was in the kitchen as she finished making her point.

The room was quiet with Mother departed, but within hearing distance, and you could cut the tension with an audible scream. Dillon wanted to vomit as he remained standing there, rocking back and forth with his bare feet sinking into the seventies shag carpet. *Why can't my parents embrace at least the eighties?* He tried to smile at Julie, who was staring at him in awe.

“Um, come over here and sit down, Dillon. I won’t bite,” she whispered so as not to alarm Mrs. Smith.

“What was that, Julie?” Mrs. Smith called out. Julie and Dillon made eye contact and smiled simultaneously.

“N-Nothing, M-Mother.” Dillon called out, then shrank into himself when his stutter took over. *Oh no! Where are you Sebastian when I need you?*

Julie patted the couch cushion next to her and smiled. Dillon couldn’t prolong the agony any longer. He walked over awkwardly and sat down on the other side of the couch, far from her and almost plastering himself to the side like it would fall off if he didn’t clutch it. Julie turned and watched him. “So, how are you? I’ve tried to talk to you at school, but you never notice me. Jason keeps telling me to leave it alone but I can’t. I feel like I need to know you. I-my God, you look so much like him. I miss him.” Julie wiped a tear off her cheek as she looked down at her knees, her hands visibly shaking. “Please, could you help me remember him? Could you tell me stories about him? I can’t stop thinking about him, Dillon, honestly, I can’t and I’ve tried. He haunts me.” She finished her last sentence in a whisper, her face serious and slightly scared.

After absorbing all she had said and breaking his gaze from her beautiful, slightly frightened face, Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief, realizing she wasn’t going to attack him like Tommy did that night. He wasn’t prepared to deal with girls and this one sitting in front of him could have been an exception, for she had a presence about her. He could see why David was

fond of her. Sitting there trying not to cry, her big brown eyes looking over at him, waiting for acceptance, was a powerful sight. He thought of David. *What would he want me to do? That's easy, he'd want her to know because he liked her, and he never liked anyone except me. She and I share that in common, we were both accepted by David, and now she is sitting next to me inviting me to spend her valuable time with her in a car away from adults. Am I stupid for remaining quiet?* He scoffed at his own stupidity.

"I w-would like that." Dillon breathed out slowly, as if he'd just finished answering the million dollar question.

Julie shot across the couch and gave Dillon an unexpected girlie hug. He cringed as she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed, smelling his neck while she did so. "O-Okay, this is different," he whispered, afraid his mother would come walking back in and scream. He lightly patted her back as she sniffed and laid her head on his shoulder. He felt completely helpless as they sat there together. Finally, after an awkward minute, Dillon moved away from her as he pretended to make himself more comfortable in the seat. Julie sat up and smiled. Perfect timing, he thought as his mother came waltzing back into the room with a tea pot and two little china cups on a server.

Dillon smiled weakly at his mother while she laid the tea service down on the coffee table. *For once, why can't we just have a couple of sodas?* He sighed, thinking of David. He would say that all the time just to piss Mother off whenever they had company. David would comment, "Tea is for civilized people and we don't qualify." It would make Dillon laugh every time, then correct himself after a look from his mother. Those were good times, he decided as he smiled and stared at the tea cup placed on a saucer in front of him.

"What are you thinking about? Care to share?" Julie whispered into Dillon's ear after his mother left the room again. She was getting way too cozy for his personal comfort and he pulled back from her slightly.

"Wh-what? Oh, nothing, it was n-nothing." He reached out quickly, grabbed his tea cup and took a sip.

"No, it was something! I haven't seen you smile since, well, it's been awhile - let's just leave it at that." Julie smiled awkwardly and quickly grabbed her tea and took a fast drink to cover her almost putting her foot in her mouth. The hot tea burned her tongue and it dribbled down her chin as she quickly wiped it off with the back of her hand, her face crimson red. "Oh-

my-God! That was unladylike, wasn't it?" She put the tea cup down quickly then covered her face with her hands while Dillon observed her quickly changing emotions.

Interesting, he thought.

"Uh, well, I was thinking earlier that David would always, uh," he paused as Julie shot up and intently stared at him, waiting for his words and glad he had changed the focus away from her. "He would t-tease M-mother about t-t-tea b-being f-f-f—"

Julie reached out and grabbed Dillon's face with her hands on both sides of his mouth and kissed him mid-stutter. It was a three second, closed-mouthed kiss, but it worked. She quickly released her hold on him and smiled at his shocked, angelic face.

"He would tease Mother every time she brought out tea to serve company by saying 'tea is for civilized people and I don't see any here.' He would want three sodas right now and he'd have his feet perched on the coffee table." Dillon blushed and looked down at his tea. He could still feel her lips on his mouth. It was a sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. He suddenly felt very grown up.

Julie smiled and sat back on the couch. Dillon copied her. They both in unison, raised their feet up and placed them on the edge of the coffee table and laughed.

They played the game of feet on and off the coffee table for the next hour, every time Mrs. Smith would come in and out of the room, because she had many excuses for interrupting them, the two teenagers played with their positions on the couch. They were finally able to leave the Smith residence, much to Mother's disapproval and repeated attempts to keep them there under her watchful eye. She even approached Father and asked him with a nod and a partially hidden scowl if he thought it wise for Dillon to go for a drive with a young girl who only received her license a week ago.

"Sure, the boy needs to get out. I was just getting ready to fumigate that bedroom of his. Go and be back before dinner," Father waved his hand like he was the Pope, shoing Dillon away, then turned to walk back into his study, Bible in hand and a relieved look on his face. Mother stood there appalled, fuming.

Julie was the proud owner of an older, refurbished and sparkling cherry red convertible two-seater MG. It had black interior leather seats and it smelled very English. Dillon climbed in and sat frozen, stunned and dazed over the revelation a beautiful seventeen year old babe was going to be driving his sorry ass around town in a sweet ride. *This can't be happening to me,*

where's the punch line? Where's the crowd of mean, popular kids hiding, ready to pounce on me and laugh?

Julie blasted the radio as soon as they got far enough away from the Smith residence to defy the city noise ordinance laws. Thompson Twins belted the popular hit “Lies, Lies, Lies,”ⁱⁱ (“Lies,” music by the Thompson Twins, Quick step and side kick, 1983) as she turned to Dillon. “I don’t like to talk in the car, but I love to blast the radio, any problems with that?” She smiled as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail while driving with her right knee. She wore cherry red sunglasses that matched perfectly with her sun kissed skin. It was a ‘boys’ of summer’ moment in January as Julie worked the stick shift like a pro. Dillon quickly darted his eyes away from the expanse of legs sitting next to him. The miniskirt was even tinier in the car, if that was at all possible, but he didn’t look once after the original glance. He smiled though at the comment she made. *Who would ever hear of a girl requesting not to talk? Now I know why David liked her – not your typical girl.*

He sat there and waited, still expecting the crowd to jump out at the stop sign, all of them pointing at him and yelling “Gotcha loser!” But it didn’t happen.

They found themselves at the beach in a record ten minutes. The sky was crystal blue, not a cloud in sight, but the wind was cold and it blew violently at times, only to quickly stand still. Dillon felt its presence and darted his eyes around as they pulled up near the Oceanside Pier and parked. He sat waiting and expecting to see something dark and sinister. He figured he’d never view the ocean, the shore or Oceanside Pier in quite the same light EVER again since David’s death and it saddened him; all those memories now smashed to pieces with a heaping dose of frightening super reality being force fed to his fragile being. He looked around nervously, focusing on the waves crashing in the near distance. *...But its daylight, Dillon.* “They don’t come out during the day.”

“Who?” Julie hopped out of the car and unzipped her boots, then touched the soft sand with her pretty little toes painted fuchsia pink. The sand was only slightly warmed by the bright sun. “Who are you referring to?”

He closed the car door and looked around him again, the wind hitting him square in the chest as soon as he finished his three hundred and sixty degree turn, pushing him away from the car. He looked over at Julie, who was still smiling at him, and noticed her hair laying nicely down her back, not moving at all. “What’s going on? D-don’t you feel the wind?” He walked

over to her as he repeatedly brushed the hair out of his face. He shivered, hunched down and grabbing his shoulders with his hands.

Julie laughed. “No! There isn’t any wind at all, silly! It’s beautiful here, not a cloud in the sky and the sun shining for a change. I swear, if I had to deal with another gray rainy day I’d scream and move to Seattle. At least there you get Puget Sound along with the rain.” She stretched her arms out and walked on the sand towards the steps up to the famous Pier. She turned after a few steps and posed like a run way model. “Aren’t you coming with?”

“It’s been gray? Hmm...haven’t noticed.” Dillon whispered as he kicked off his shoes and socks and walked after her towards the Pier.

Oceanside Pier was stately and a beautiful feature to see, walk along, fish, and just fall in love under its old fashioned lights and expansive view of the Pacific beyond. Rebuilt last year after a massive storm hit the coastline and ripped off at least half of its body, leaving it to gape there like an open wound; the ocean, a monster with an appetite for destruction, it took the community of Oceanside very little time to rebuild it. Dillon had thought it was more important for the citizens to fix and make better, improving its length by several feet and adding a restaurant at the end, then say, feeding the homeless along the beach and building a shelter for the growing number of families without roofs and food for their children. David had agreed, a first for him, and Dillon thought about it all now, reliving his shock at his brother’s sense of compassion – something he never, ever saw before. *He was changing...he was getting better... damn the world for their ignorance and lack of vision.*

They took a stroll along the full length of the pier, stopping as they got to the end. They leaned against the brand new wood railing for a few minutes, looking out over the Pacific Ocean. It looked metallic gray to Dillon, dark and almost sinister. Julie sighed and closed her eyes, leaning back while holding onto the railing. Dillon watched her for a second and thought about how different their experiences at the moment were; she was reveling in calm ocean scenery, listening to the seagulls overhead and hearing the soft, rhythmic sway of the ocean under them.

Dillon felt cold and empty, the ocean before him a vast landscape of the unknown. He glanced down and out to the expanse of sea before them and stared at it hard. He froze as he shot up tall and leaned forward on the railing to focus on it. There appeared to be a large black mass or area before them, maybe half a mile outward from the pier. He watched it sway back and forth, its lines blurring. Suddenly it was gone, dissipated into the metal gray of the backdrop.

He breathed out in relief and scanned the coastline. *Why did David like to come here?* It didn't suite him; never could Dillon understand why someone like David, harsh and volatile on a good day, would gravitate to the calm blue coastline. But after the night of the funeral, as the darkness shot out of the waves and onto the surf, and with what Sebastian had explained to him earlier, now it all seemed to fit. He was drawn here, especially to the deepest part of the coastline, because it was his doorway, and he wanted to pass through.

“He wanted to die out there so that he could become who he was meant to be, so that he could be near enough to enter their world. The closet was just a distraction - a trap door – used as a short cut.” Meditating on the deception, he paused, for it didn't seem possible, this supernatural deception. “It was indeed a trap alright, but out there - that's the entrance, the way down and he knew it instinctively. He knew...a lot.” Dillon whispered as another cold wind hit him hard enough he let go of the railing then quickly grabbed it again.

Julie hadn't heard him through the wind. She looked over and noticed he was mouthing something silently, his face in revelation.

Dillon paused, knowing she was soaking him in, and continued, changing the mood and feel of his monologue now that he had an audience. “He loved to come here. He'd smoke cigarettes on this pier all the time, right where we're standing too. I'd sit and watch him blow smoke at passersby. Nobody ever challenged him, not even the adults. People would simply look at him while they were scurrying away. Strange, but I never really noticed it until he was gone. Now I see their fear in my memory. They feared him alright. They knew he came from a dark greatness, they knew he represented the unknown, the deep below. I guess I knew too – sort of.”

He sat down and let his legs dangle over the edge. He leaned his forehead on one of the wood railings and closed his eyes. The sound of the ocean, the wind, the birds, and Julie's breathing all magnified in his ears. Julie copied him, not making a sound. She held her breath and waited for him to continue. As he did so she looked down at her arms and felt the goose bumps forming there. She thought of her nightmares and shivered.

“He had a connection with this body of water before us, you know. He swam out as far as he could go, then floated out beyond that even. Both times he was caught and dragged back in. There were other times too, but only twice this past summer did he try to disappear out there. He thought I didn't notice, but I did, and I informed the lifeguard every time. I was always

ahead of the game when it came to David's wanting to check out. I could easily predict his moves. I knew him that way, although it would have worried him had he known."

"Known what?" Julie whispered.

Not very bright is she? He opened his eyes and looked over at her.

"Oh, I see. He didn't want you to know that he didn't want to live anymore. Sorry..."

Julie smiled weakly as she reached out and touched Dillon's lower jaw with her hand lightly. The sunlight had made his hair white and his eyes the lightest, warmest shade of blue. She had to fight the strongest desire to touch him, not because she wanted to embrace him intimately, but because she almost couldn't believe he was real. He had a surreal, almost other worldly sense to him, his face, its outline and features almost hazy and out of focus at times, as if to directly gaze upon him would hurt her eyes. He was his brother and so much more, Julie decided. *But I want his brother; I want that badness and I don't care if it's not acceptable to wish for something or someone that dark. I just do.*

"Julie?" Dillon called out her name and another gust of wind took it away.

"CAW! CAW!"

Both teenagers shot back and looked up and off to Dillon's left. A single black crow balanced on the corner of the railing, its wings stretched out as it ruffled its feathers and turned its head to the side to get a closer look at Dillon first, then Julie. Suddenly, another crow landed off Julie's right side on the opposite railing and stared down at them as well. Julie grabbed Dillon's sleeve and scooted herself closer to his side.

"Dillon? What are they doing?" Her whispering was annoying him greatly.

"Why are you whispering? They're birds, Julie."

"But I've never seen crows so, so personal and up close, except, except when I was with David that night." Julie sounded worried and nervous. The crows sat silently watching them from above. Lascivious nodded his head up and down.

Dillon quickly turned and looked at Julie in shock. "Really? They were there that night with you?" He felt suddenly nauseated and almost dry heaved as he grabbed hold of the railing in front of him to balance himself up right, although he was already sitting down, not expecting to hear news from Julie. A minute of silence went by without words spoken. The crows didn't seem to mind as they appeared to be waiting anyway, keeping guard.

"He wouldn't leave them; he kept talking to them and kneeling down at one point to get

closer as he asked them if they were spying on him. It freaked me out to watch him so transfixed on the three crows like that, and, and ignoring me. You know I asked him to walk me up to your house and he wouldn't." Julie became more distressed as she remembered that fateful night. "Can you believe that?! My God, they *are* listening." Julie looked from Alibaster to Lascivious as if for the first time again and began to shiver.

Dillon took over. "Sshh! Don't say another word about David right now okay? They are watching us though - no - spying on us," Dillon glared at Lascivious closest to him. "G-go away! T-tell Him I have n-n-nothing more to say or do with Him except you can t-t...tell him it's rude to dance with a mortal without p-permission."

He breathed heavily as he continued to glare at Lascivious. The crow turned his head to the side and thought for a second, as if taking in everything the boy had said, then looked back at Dillon and cawed again loudly three times in response.

Julie jumped back and grabbed onto Dillon's arm, hiding behind him as they both remained sitting on the pier floor. Alibaster ruffled his feathers and bobbed his head up and down in response to Lascivious' words. Dillon glanced between them both. *They're laughing at us...unbelievable...*

"I know wh-what you're doing and I'm no longer int-terested. T-tell Azmodeus if he wants t-to check on me he can do his own spying in person n-next t-time." The crows remained perched there watching him, as if both were stunned at his challenging, almost threatening words.

Alibaster laughed as he cawed during Dillon's stutter-filled threat. *You have no idea who you're dealing with do you, lovely?* He shook his head then took flight as Dillon shot up and lunged for him, not showing any visible signs of fear for the first time ever. Lascivious became airborne as well. Dillon stood there and watched them both fly twenty feet behind him to land on the roof of the fish and tackle shack off the side of the pier.

The two crows hopped around on the roof as if dancing and taunting the boy to come get them. Dillon slowly turned and looked down at Julie who was shaking, rubbing her arms to keep warm.

He thought about sitting back down and putting his arm around her to help keep her warm, but instead he lowered his hand and motioned to help her up. She grabbed it and allowed him to lift her to him. She was average height for her age, and almost met him at eye level,

staring at her newest interest. She instinctively put her arms around his waist then up his back and snuggled in, the two of them standing there in awkward silence. Dillon didn't know what to do with his hands as he held them out behind her back. She knew exactly what to do with hers and let them travel up to his shoulders. She felt immediately safe as she held onto him and sighed, breathing in his scent as she looked at his neck and jaw line – a mirror image and smell all reminiscent of David. She smiled longingly. *Oh, if I could just have that kiss again, or something close to it...*

Dillon on the other hand, felt exposed and watched as he continued to eye the two crows while they looked on, oblivious to Julie's new feelings for him.

"Let's go," Dillon whispered into Julie's hair. They turned and walked by the crows quickly, not looking back until they reached the stairs down to the beach. Dillon kept his arm around Julie without thinking about it. Once they got to the stairs he pulled his arm away as it hit him how they were interacting. She just didn't seem available to him, probably never would be a selection to him, not after her lay down session with David that fateful night in their bedroom. He glanced back at the crows but they were both gone. He began to scan the area as Julie reached down and grabbed his hand in hers.

"Wh-what are you d-doing?" Dillon immediately pulled his hand away as they reached the bottom of the stairs, not realizing his words were so accusing, his face baffled.

Julie looked suddenly hurt, all her confidence earlier, now gone. *I can't believe he has that quality also! One more thing he and David share.* "I-I don't know, I just thought, I guess I was just, I don't know." She fumbled with her words. She noticed her hands were trembling. She was afraid and curious all at the same time. She had digested all Dillon had said about David's darkness and it drew her in like a moth to the flame. She couldn't help but feel David's continued connection with Dillon; she wanted desperately to feel it too, to be a part of their bond. "I just want to belong...I want to know you and David so that we become, you know, together again." She started to walk towards the car, while Dillon just stood there and watched her leave.

"Together again? Where was I the first time around?" He started to walk after her when she stopped and bowed her head, as if weighing his questions as insults instead of what they really were – a way of pointing out the obvious – they were never together to begin with.

"I'm sorry I mentioned it then." Julie walked over to her car and took out a blanket. She started to walk towards the shore.

Dillon silently followed her, catching up to her and walking along her side. They chose a place and sat on the sand, looking out at the ocean and listening to the waves crash onto the surf. The wind had died down and it was peaceful to sit there and take it all in; the only disruption being an occasional walker or jogger in the background.

Dillon broke the silence, as he looked over and watched her side profile look painfully dejected. “So, you said earlier at the house that David haunted you. What d-did you mean?”

Julie looked over at him cautiously, but it only lasted a second. She suddenly turned to face him, trying to contain her excitement. “I have nightmares about him and in them he’s reaching out for me and pulling me through some kind of door or mirror - it’s hard to tell - but I fall in and just fall and I have this same dream at least two to three times a week and when I’m falling down this dark tunnel, I always look over and there you are, falling with me.” She finished saying everything fast and in one long breath. She breathed out as she watched Dillon register everything. He suddenly looked very uncomfortable in his seat. “Did I say something bad?” She waited breathlessly again.

Dillon looked away, towards the surf. “No. It’s just that he—“

“He what?! Tell me!” Julie was shaking in excitement.

Dillon looked back at her in shock. *Were these nightmares she was describing, because she looks way too happy to be describing a bad dream.* “Uh, he...w-well, uh, he—“

Julie reached out and attempted to kiss Dillon again. She briefly touched his mouth as he pulled back, an annoyed look on his face. “Why?! You can’t just do that every time I stutter! And for the record, I w-wasn’t s-s-stut-tering.” He looked exasperated, his face glowing red.

Julie felt the second sting of rejection. For the first time, Dillon’s sharp rejection of her advances actually reminded her of David. *They are so similar in many ways. Sigh...* “Okay, okay, sorry. I just, I guess I couldn’t resist.”

“Well, j-just try...to.” Dillon breathed out and looked at the waves again. They were growing larger and louder with the incoming tide.

“I’m sorry, go ahead. What were you saying?” Julie motioned him to continue with her hands ushering around him. He stared at her for a few seconds, gawking and not sure if he should actually continue for she was, after all, a girl and he didn’t know how to relate to that particular gender, although he wanted to, badly, he thought. *She’s strange and way too excited right now.* He paused and debated who he would be inviting into his circle of one.

Julie pushed him lightly in the shoulder and bounced up and down as best she could while sitting cross-legged in front of him.

He thought of Tigger from the cartoon, Winnie The Pooh and blinked. “Uh, he dreamt about the Underworld and w-would go there in his dreams, through our closet d-door, that is.” He paused, deciding he could tell her everything since David was already down there, so he wouldn’t care anyway.

“Interesting - go on?” Julie pulled up her knees and turned away from the surf and faced Dillon, all her attention on him. He slowly told her with much effort at times given his occasional speech impediment, everything about his brother’s past and recent present. He spent time discussing the Underworld as David saw it and all the creatures David had met and befriended down there.

He spoke about his theory regarding David’s death, the trap he knew it was, and the players he felt were responsible. During their talk, Julie mentioned Azmodeus and the dance, since Dillon’s threat to the crows on the pier had startled her, so Dillon explained that too, after trying to avoid the Devil as much as he could, he realized it was no use. He saved it for last followed closely with the vampire story. He chose not to mention Sebastian or his own powers, mostly because he had a secret pact with the bounty hunter, and lastly, his powers were simply manifestations of his imagination he had quickly decided; not worthy of explanation, they were just crazy extensions of his warped teenage mind.

When Dillon finished two hours later, Julie was frozen in fear and uncertainty. He chewed on his lower lip as he watched her face register all he had given her. Hmm, he thought, she might not have needed all of this controlled madness in one sitting. He sat there and watched her blink repeatedly, not registering a sound. He could hear the air coming and going through her opened mouth. *Wow, in less than two hours time she went from excited prom queen to scared straight. Shoot, I think I overestimated her...*

Chapter Twenty Four

Bait

“So, he wants me to ‘do my own spying?’ Well, well, well, I think that’s the first real threat I’ve received in five hundred years – and who would have thought a mere human barely a decade and a half in age would be the one to pitch it?” The Dark Lord sat and thumped the top of one of the golden lion’s heads that served as his arm rest with his long black fingernail. With each contact, the color flashed black, then red, alternating while the few standing below him watched him silently. Lascivious bowed. They were all suddenly nervous; the Dark Lord’s nails hardly ever turned black and red.

“Yes, my Lord, he was quite obstinate in his threats—“

“So there’s more?” Azmodeus stood up from his throne in the Grand Hallway and shot down the steps to stand in front of the two crows, both flapping their wings as they retreated backward a few feet to give the Dark Lord his much needed room.

“Great, looks as though I’ve chosen the best soul power that demonic influence can buy in my two most challenging collections to date. Continue.” Azmodeus pointed at the crow while he began to pace back and forth in front of his altar and throne.

Sandor stood in the shadows to serve any need; Esmeralda leaned against one of the large pillars closest to the platform and altar, dressed in purple and black, her lips pouting as she filed her nails and listened intently, although her form and body language exuded indifference. It required all she could bring forth not to fall down at the Dark One’s feet and beg for his attention, however all she could do was stand by and watch him focus yet again on another Smith family member.

“Well, he did say that, uh, well...” Lascivious became nervous again. All this time watching the boy struggle and adjust poorly in the Living World without his older brother, while he spied and invaded the boy’s life day in and day out, created some unwanted sympathy. The crow felt divided; a growing part of him wanted to protect the boy and he gulped at the thought he could be humane after all. But he quickly snapped out of it as the Dark Lord glared at him, having paused in his pacing.

“Why do you hesitate, fool? Speak!”

Just blurt it out Lascivious! Just say it! “He said, my Lord, that you should ask permission the next time you choose to dance with a mortal, but he was specifically naming

himself.” Alibaster piped in as he hopped forward. Lascivious shot him a deadly look.

Azmodeus just stood there glaring at the two crows, not sure whether or not to believe them but knowing they wouldn't dare cover up or spin tales at his expense. The crows however, didn't realize they were being sized up and instead, eyed each other in a silent duel.

The Dark Lord glanced over at Esmeralda, who was looking back at him in surprise. “He knew I was dancing with him? How did he know that? He couldn't see me, could he?!”

“No, my Lord! I was there and I saw, as did you, his stupid – I mean, stunned – expression the whole time you were with him, especially during the dance. He was absolutely... stupefied.” Esmeralda just couldn't resist using the word whenever she could to get a jab in here and there, especially with this little ‘pain in her ass’ cherub he'd placed so much at stake for. Then she smiled as she thought about the little boy's threats, feeling suddenly in the game again, her chances with the Dark Lord once again becoming more of a possibility. *Competing with mere humans? Why sweat the small stuff?*

Azmodeus paused and thought about her comment, remembering the scene in the cemetery and the boy's face and actions. “Yes, well, there was that fool of a Bastard there and I'm almost positive they're sharing information about me. He would have told the boy, I'm sure. No, he couldn't have been an active participant in the dance...he did dance like he floated on air.”

He suddenly smiled as he whirled around to face Esmeralda again. She frowned and adjusted her bodice, her cleavage heaving upward in response. She felt he was teasing her with the memory of what he had referred to as the ‘Cemetery Dance.’ He's cruel, she thought as she let the frown remain, however softening it by turning it into her signature pout.

He casually walked over to her slowly, observing her mood and demeanor the nearer he became; his closing in on her made the room disappear as she held her breath to watch. He reached out and grabbed her arm aggressively, pulling her to him and waltzing around the room, making a wide circle around the two baffled crows.

Esmeralda laughed softly in shock while throwing her head back seductively as he spun around the room with her in perfect step. She was, after all, an expert in all forms of dance. It was her profession in the Living World and she always had a line of potential escorts and dancers all waiting their turn for her hand.

He finished doing a full circle around the crows before releasing her with one last twirl,

her body in perfect form as she finished facing him, bowing slightly then standing up gracefully again, her chest heaving from the thrill of the moment, it's spontaneity the first for her in several decades. It was a moment she would relive over and over again, she giggled as she longingly looked up at him.

He turned from her immediately as soon as he saw her worship – too predictable, yet at times like this, appreciated and expected. He walked over to the crows and ignored her again. She watched him intently, smiling and touching up her hair as she did so.

“So, what else did the little piss ant have to say, hmm?” Azmodeus walked up to his throne and sat down gracefully, all eyes on him as he looked on, bored as always, his head resting on his hand.

Lascivious gave Alibaster a warning glare of ‘shut the hell up’ then stepped forward. “He didn’t say much else, my Lord, only he seemed to get rather close to this girl, or she did to him at least, for she kissed him—“

“What is her *name*?” The Dark Lord appeared immediately interested.

“Julie Edmonds, my Lord. She was the one at their birthday party last year. She sat with Dillon on the beach for hours and talked, actually, he did all the talking whilst she listened. I do believe he told her things she shouldn’t have been privy to.”

“Yes, well, she’ll now see the world differently and we’ll all be better off!” He was immediately filled with disgust and loathing. *Humans, not worth the stains they leave when they die.* “She’ll need to be watched if she chooses to stay close to the boy. She was the one with David then, was she not?”

“Yes she was, my Lord.”

Esmeralda decided at that moment to jump in, the energy coursing through her having made her giddy and unable to stand still, let alone stay quiet. At the mention of another female, her interest in the conversation increased greatly. “So, the girl gets around. How very – what would be the word, my Lord?” She turned and glanced up at the Him, her eyes batting sweetly as she smiled, trying to get him to trash the girl with her, instead frowning as she heard his response given so casually, with a distinct air of boredom to his voice.

“Female. How very female of her, my dear. I do believe *that* is the word you were seeking.”

Lascivious piped in again, trying now to gain back favor with his master. “My Lord, the

boy stared out at the ocean as if viewing it for the first time. I do believe he knows more than he should.”

The Dark Lord perked up again. “Of course he does. It is his nature to be intuitive. My predictions are coming true and soon, he will embrace his craft and accept his calling. He already uses his powers when he’s frustrated - that much is obvious.” He then unexpectedly paused and thought of something sinister, smiling as the image danced in his mind, then continued, knowing everyone in the room was watching him intently. “Once he uses them to defend himself and possibly harm others - that’s when there’ll be no turning back, and he will fall from grace. Oh, the pity of it all – another fallen angel. How very predictable. That is all, you will leave now.”

Lascivious paused to consider asking for a portal, but decided against it as he glanced up and noticed the Dark Lord staring down at him, a look on his face that screamed, ‘don’t ask!’ “Thank you, my Lord.”

The crows left. Esmeralda approached the steps to the throne. “May I, my Lord?”

“No, for I will descend instead – tell me, any more business planned for me today that I have to sedate myself for, hmm?” He stood and floated down to her as she slowly backed up to watch him approach in his magnificence.

Oh, my! I actually danced with him!

“Hello? Are you in there?!”

Esmeralda snapped out of her daydream and blushed as she stammered. “P-please, my Lord? I think - you are not contemplating another visit? The boy is obviously goading you to appear.” She spoke softly, her eyes down cast and head bowed as he approached her.

“I contemplate many things, my dear, such as say, the weather, my Council, the worthiness of the millions who wait at The Entrance for permission to enter my domain, this year’s soul harvest and whether or not the collection will be bountiful. However, of course, I also contemplate the less important, more boring and mundane issues such as, say, for instance, your worthiness to serve my person, David’s innate ability to continue to frustrate and occupy my mind, while escaping the long reach of my hand and his angelic brother’s ability to receive a grand, albeit extremely personal, visit from Yours Truly. However, the point of this discussion isn’t whether or not I decide to visit the little virus, but rather *when* I decide to visit, for there will be probably, possibly, and potentially, many, many contemplated visits. Do I make myself

clear?” He leaned in to breathe at her as he finished his last few words. His breath hit her quickly, rejuvenating her tired, pre-feeding self and making her feel refreshed and renewed, as well as chilled and cold, very cold. *But I like the cold, it suites me when I am not feeding.* She smiled slyly. *Oh yes, we have so much in common.*

“Yes, I understand, my Lord, it’s just that, I remembered the discussion you had with me about Sebastian using the boy as bait...” She purred as she took in every inch of his face while thinking of Dillon punctured several times by an enormous hook and dangling between the worlds helplessly. The Dark Lord stared at her for a second, wondering whether or not it was worth reading her mind, then turned away and walked towards his study.

“Yes, well, lucky for me I never forget a conversation. Now, with your permission of course, I have much contemplating to do.” His sarcasm remained long after he left the room, but the vampire turned witch remained standing there long after Sandor had followed his master into the adjoining room, holding her chest with one hand while she relished the sweet dance.

Chapter Twenty Five

School is in Session

The next day, Dillon shot up out of bed and got ready for school well before the clock radio buzzed six thirty-two a.m. Being with Julie the day before had given him a much needed dose of self-confidence to face life at Vista High School again. She had driven him home in silence after he'd discussed his brother's place in time and the workings of the universe as he saw it, a much nicer version than David would have told for sure.

Still, he thought as she dropped him off and didn't turn off her car's engine, Julie seemed suddenly deeply disturbed. She'd asked him only two questions during his rendition of life after life: did this Azmodeus character want him too, and secondly, did he actually believe in vampires, or could the woman have been a figment of his wild and insane imagination. He answered her truthfully, and the conversation was over. He was sure she would recover from the onslaught of fantasy mixed with horror he'd just given her. After all, he decided, most people live their lives oblivious to the ripples in the water and the other worlds right under the surface, yet for Julie, he had simply pulled back the curtain, blown away the fog, and flipped on the light switch.

Now he woke up with a new determination – or resignation, depending on his mood - to make it through the school year as best he could. Having Julie and maybe even Jason around would make life easier for him. He didn't wait around for Tommy to come by that morning, instead, he ran out of the house earlier than usual to wait at the bus stop and patiently tune out the stares and loud whispers until the human cargo van as David would call it, showed up.

Even walking around campus wasn't too bad. Dillon found a way to calm the many thoughts smacking into his brain by humming a tune and concentrating on the music in his head. It worked sometimes and that was enough for him to feel hope that it would eventually go away, like the common cold virus.

He'd made it through to fourth period class without much in the way of problems except for the many stares, whispers and taunting he had grown accustomed to, looking for Julie but not finding her. He was on his way to his locker to shove his books in, turning quickly to look for her and instead, Dillon faced a twisted, sinister and serial killer-looking Daryl and his usual group of cronies, including the always present twins, Alvin and Allan.

“Oh—“

“Shit!” Daryl spat out, laughing like a sadistic clown as he finished the expletive with a wicked, ‘I just got out of prison’ look on his face. He was also soaking in Dillon’s presence like much needed sunshine after a winter’s gray landscape. Dillon took a step back and felt the metallic coldness of his locker press against his spine.

“Hey there Cupcake! Now, now, now,” shaking his head, “that’s not happiness to see me is it?” Daryl paused for a brief second, not giving Dillon a chance to respond as he absorbed him into his brain like a drug addict about to get his much needed fix. “My, my, my you sure are a sight for sore eyes! Hey guys! Look who I’ve just ran into!” Daryl pretended to talk behind him at the twins, while keeping his eyes focused on Dillon and a smirk on his face.

“Yeah, isn’t it wild?” Alvin spoke, his voice in semi-shock. Allan smacked him to make him shut up, while Daryl kept his eyes on Dillon, not even hearing the commotion behind him.

“You idiot! Daryl was joking!”

“Shut up Allan! Hit me again and see what happens!”

Daryl continued right on cue. “I had to leave school for awhile, was told by the President of America Mrs. Sands herself, that I was never to step foot on this campus again, yet here I am.” Daryl pointed his finger into Dillon’s chest as he enunciated the next few phrases, “and-here-you-are-too. Is it a coincidence? I think not! Someone downstairs must be looking out for me.” He leaned his hand on the locker, next to Dillon’s face to bring himself closer, at one point throwing his other hand out to keep Dillon from bolting, but Dillon knew it was useless to run away right now. Daryl would only follow him and cause more of a scene.

Daryl continued, enjoying himself and the sound of his own voice immensely. “You know, it’s funny but when they said I could never, EVER come back, on account of the unfortunate fire I supposedly started in biology lab after the funeral,” he leaned in to whisper into Dillon’s ear, his hand over his mouth so the twins couldn’t hear, “I didn’t believe them, felt somehow I’d get back in school, so I decided to show the sensitive side of Daryl, who - no foolin’ (hands up in pseudo Bible swearing pose) - was so grief stricken by your loss, he just couldn’t cope – and they bought it! Ha! Ha! And now I’m back! Can you fucking believe it?!” He nudged Dillon on his shoulder roughly as Dillon jumped back from the almost attack, hitting his locker again and grimacing at the close proximity of pure evil combined with the knob of his locker digging into his vertebrae. “I owe your brother’s corpse a fucking favor and you too, Sweets.” He smiled, winking at Dillon and waiting for a reply, but Dillon was paralyzed and

couldn't speak if he wanted to, for during times of severe stress such as this, he could tell before he spoke a single word whether or not he could actually pronounce anything coherently. And presently, all he could do was lock eyes with Daryl, his look expressing his complete disbelief at the apparent truth that he hoped would never materialize: Daryl the arsonist was finally allowed back to school.

Hmm, Dillon thought as he stood there trying not to hear Daryl continue on about missing him, this had to be a set up. *Who out there hated and despised me that much to do this? Either someone upstairs really didn't like me anymore and was omnipotent enough to know how to hurt and torture me deeply, or someone below was sadistic enough to enjoy watching me burn yet again and probably again and again and again if he gets his way...ah, yes, the crows. The crows must have informed Azmodeus and now here's my reply. First the funeral, now this; it can't get much worse...*

Daryl continued on, oblivious to the fact, or maybe just not caring, that Dillon wasn't conversing with him and that his face was a tortured look of disgust and repulsion. "Yeah, well, because I've missed so much school this year, they decided to give me the option to either finish this school year a junior then repeat junior year next year, or since my grades were poor to begin with last spring, letting me have the option to come back now as a sophomore and just start the year again with the current tenth grade class. Guess which one I chose? Guess!" Daryl smacked Dillon's arm again, making him jump backward into his locker one more time. The twins both laughed.

"Dude! You're like, scaring him!" Alvin laughed obnoxiously again.

Daryl answered him without taking his eyes off Dillon. "I'm more than a *dude*, but you're a complete idiot so shut the hell up and quit ruining my fucking *parade*!" He smiled quickly, his mood changed at the blink of an eye, and continued with a serious, thoughtful look.

Dillon noticed and could tell from their close proximity, that Daryl at least had really nice, straight and perfectly white teeth and his eyes, although pure evil with a slight hint of reptilian flare, were lizard green with small flecks of gold. The other obvious deduction Dillon could gather was that he spent way too much time watching Daryl up close and that implied that he preferred a six inch mandatory personal space invitation as opposed to David's five feet minimum boundary guidelines. *There's no way David was evil...now Daryl, he's purely satanic*

“I decided after much deliberation with my other selves, I’d just start the new semester right, by embracing the sophomore class. You’re a sophomore, aren’t ya? Actually,” he pulled out his schedule finally and stepped back so that Dillon could breathe. Turning to engage the twins like they were all touring a college campus, Daryl spoke excitedly. “I tried to pick some of the classes he’s taking too, like ‘Art for Faggots’ and ‘Cooking for bitches and their Pimps.’ How about that one for shits and grins boys?! I’ll be hitting the books this year!”

With Daryl moving away briefly, Dillon felt the air around him and breathed in much needed strength. *I’m not a witch, I’m not a witch, I’m not a witch...* he chanted in his head as he focused on Daryl’s class schedule held out in his hand...*but float away, take flight and dance with the wind, up and out of hand, floating high above his hands; going, going, gone—*

Daryl reached out to grab his paper as it shot out his hand, but it was too quick for him and he yelled out, “Hey!”

Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief, leaning against his locker as he watched Daryl run across the quad, the twins following at a much slower pace given their rotund bodies, running after his paper and pushing people down like it was Friday night, some of them on purpose just to cause a scene, as he chased his paper around campus.

Dillon made his getaway by bolting into the library, but not before seeing Julie walking by with Jason and two other girls he didn’t recognize. He quickly glanced over and noticed Daryl gone from sight before he approached the students walking his way. He heard the two girls whispering as they all approached. Julie made eye contact with him then looked down; Jason smiled and nodded his head at Dillon. The girls began to whisper from far away, but he heard them anyway.

“That’s him, that’s the one she was talking about.”

“Do you think he’s gone mad with his brother’s death, or do you think he believes all that stuff he told Julie?”

Dillon gazed at Julie in all his infinite sadness, realizing his mistake as he pushed the library door opened to go in.

“Hey Dillon! What’s up dude? Wait up!” Jason watched Dillon walk into the library without looking back. He turned to Julie with his hands out. “What the hell, Juls? You didn’t say a word – that’s cold. Do I need to remind you who his bro was, man?” He shook his head and walked away.

Julie and the two girls behind her stood there silent. She watched the library door while her friends continued their chatter, louder with Dillon gone. She then ran to the girl's bathroom and vomited twice in the toilet, shaking violently in guilt and shame after looking into those eyes.

Once inside the library, Dillon made a bee line for the farthest table in the back. The whispers loud in his head as he walked by the tables of kids; it was getting easier to tolerate the dozens of voices all at the same time because he'd noticed after awhile, they all ended up saying the same thing over and over again, like an obnoxious youth choir; the voices so predictable and memorized in his brain that it no longer disturbed him to decipher it all out. It occasionally still hurt though, because he inherently still hoped for the good in people's minds.

As he laid his books on the table, there was only one boy sitting there. He looked older, very overweight and tall, with his head down as he barely squeezed into his chair. He quickly glanced up to eye Dillon as he sat down across from him.

Dillon froze, suddenly able to hear the boy's thoughts louder than any others at the moment, almost making the mistake of answering him as if the boy was talking out loud. As much as it was a common occurrence to Dillon lately, each time the mind-speak involved one person it always gave him a jolt, like someone was playing a joke on him, or worse as in this case, when he would think the person was actually talking to him.

You're sitting here? Uh...okay...geez! I can't believe he's sitting near me! Just stay cool, James - don't look up! Damn! Why did I just do that?! Okay, okay, just continue reading and hopefully he won't leave...

Dillon cleared his throat and shook James' thoughts out of his head.

Looking up and noticing Dillon hadn't left, James decided to say something bold as he squirmed in his tiny seat. "Hey," he squeaked as he tried to smile then glanced around him at the dozen or so kids sitting near them at the other tables all watching the awkward exchange.

Dillon decided he had better do or say something. He quickly grabbed his book and opened it, forcing a quick smile at James, who was breathless and still waiting for some sort of confirmation. After a brief pause Dillon answered with "Hi," shooting James a half second glance then retreating into his book. He flinched then froze when he heard more words squeak at him.

"How, uh, how are you? Sorry to hear about your brother." James answered back

quickly, his voice now husky and strained like he'd just run a very long mile.

“He’s fine, thanks, and he’s brother’s dead, now shut the hell up and start reading your book before I force feed it to you.” Daryl hissed in a loud whisper as he sat down between them. Dillon tried to bolt up out of his chair but wasn’t quick enough. Daryl grabbed his arm and slammed him back down in his seat. In his shock, Dillon immediately pulled his arm away and fumed, opening his mouth to say something but not quick enough.

“You’ll get us kicked out, and then where will you hide?” Daryl whispered as he watched Dillon try to decide whether to get up and leave or remain seated. He slowly sank back into his seat and stared straight forward, avoiding Daryl’s eyes.

The library watched them in hushed whispers until Daryl turned around and shot everyone his signature stare. It was eerie to watch the entire library return to quiet calmness, not one student returning or questioning his look. He smiled in triumph as he turned and looked back at Dillon. “Wipe that look off your face, Cupcake. You and I both know I have powers too.” He leaned in to say something degrading but stopped and spoke to James instead, not taking his eyes off Dillon’s side profile. “Why don’t you go find another seat to cram your ass into, James? This table’s now taken - bye-bye now.”

James quickly gathered his things and left without saying a word, but Dillon could hear his thoughts and he felt a sudden surge of empathy from the sting of rejection harshly. “S-sorry,” Dillon spoke loud enough for James to hear as he watched the boy leave, head bowed and shoulders slumped over. Daryl laughed and leaned back in his seat like the jock he was. Dillon scooted his seat away, but Daryl wrapped his foot around one of the legs of Dillon’s chair and slid him back over easily.

“Now, now, don’t be rude Cup-cake.” Daryl whispered, leaning back in his chair and tilting his head back to stretch, placing an extended hand on the back of Dillon’s chair, while making eye contact with a group of four staring, smiling and flirty girls at the table closest to them. “Hey there ladies, lovely day isn’t it?” He winked at the girls and they giggled and spoke in unison. “Hi Daryl.”

Dillon rolled his eyes and whispered as best he could. “You’re g-going t-to—“

“What was that Hot Pants – I mean, D-D-Dillon?” Daryl turned as he whispered into Dillon’s ear, suddenly forgetting everyone else in the room.

Dillon sat as far over in his chair as he could, his face tortured rage as he fought the urge

to hit Daryl in the face, his hands clenched fists.

“You’re g-going to g-get us in t-trouble D-d—“

“Boys?” Mrs. Bartel came bustling over with her hands out at her sides, hushing students as she scuttled around the tables to make it to them. Daryl leaned back again in his seat and half turned to watch her approach, a wide grin on his face. Great, Dillon thought, he’s putting on the charm thick now.

“Why hello Mrs. Bartel, don’t you look just lovely today - nice cardigan.” Daryl spoke with the voice of a smooth criminal as the mousy librarian approached. Dillon didn’t have to turn around in his seat to see her face; he could listen to her thoughts as she came over to their table. *Crap*, he thought, *she actually bought the crap Daryl just dished out to her. That was pathetic.*

“Why, thank you Daryl. That was very nice of you to say, however,” Mrs. Bartel turned as she brushed the front of her sweater then hushed the girls behind her who were all in various stages of whispering, giggling, and ogling over Daryl, since it was a rare treat to see him in the library. “However, I notice as I approach your study table that you do not have a book, and it’s been ages since I’ve seen you in here, so, may I ask, what might you be doing in here, Dear?” She stood in front of Daryl to block the view of the girls behind her, upsetting all of them while she smiled down at the football stud. He continued to stretch and lean back on his chair, smiling up at her then looked over at Dillon who was shaking his head in disbelief, then reached over and grabbed Dillon’s history book and opened it, moving it away from Dillon’s hand to retrieve it. Mrs. Bartel did not look amused as she cleared her throat.

“Why, I’m reading Mrs. Bartel and Dillon here is uh, studying, right Dil?” Daryl’s voice was playful, like nails on a chalkboard.

God, please forgive me, but I really hate him. “Yes, I’m s-studying.” Dillon whispered as he tried to block out the dozens of continued whispers behind him.

Mrs. Bartel sighed loudly, tapping her foot as she scrutinized the two of them. “Fine, you may both stay however do be quiet, for with the way you two command attention, I’ll lose control of this library in no time.”

“Thank you Mrs. Bartel.” Daryl watched her leave, winking and nodding his head at several other doe eyed girls nearby before turning to whisper to Dillon as he shoved his face in the larger than life history book.

“Give it b-back,” Dillon whispered as he grabbed and missed getting his book a second time.

“Look, come outside with me and hang out? I’ll even shoo the twins away and it’ll just be us?”

Dillon shot him a shocked, ‘you must be kidding’ scowl then looked back at his Advanced English Literature book and scoffed. *Please make him go away...*

“Okay, okay, I’ll even call you by your actual name! Now that’s a bargain because, let’s face it, nobody gets called by their actual name when it comes to Yours Truly. So...let’s go,” And he said the next word like it pained him greatly, “Dil-lon.” He leaned in as he tried to control the volume of his voice and his excitement.

I cannot believe this is happening to me. I could use a friend more than anything right now given the earlier disappointment with Julie and instead of James, or possibly anyone else, I get the Anti-Christ in the flesh. “I-I can’t. N-no thanks.” Dillon didn’t look over at Daryl as he spoke, his face buried in the book he was holding out in front of him. *Please go away, please? Don’t you have anyone else you could bully right about now? Bugs to fry under a magnifying glass? Kittens or puppies to maim?*

“I’m only going to ask once.” Daryl whispered, his voice sweet and overly charming.

“O-kay.” Dillon whispered back, this time looking over at Daryl and shaking his head in understanding. “Bye.” He turned back to his book

Daryl leaned in, his voice seething in sudden anger as he spat out his words. “Well, then I guess I’ll start by saying I know there wasn’t any wind when my paper flew out of my hand, so that was a nice little trick, bitch - I mean - *witch*.”

“Daryl, is that you talking over there again?” Mrs. Bartel called out from the check-out desk.

He ignored her and continued, eyes locked on Dillon’s side profile, especially his pretty nose. “And as a witch, you can either serve my needs and work for me, or suffer the consequences, and I do mean suffer, for I can deliver pain like you’ve never experienced before – or maybe you’d like that?” He closed the history book and pushed it over to Dillon. He paused before he stood up, catching his eye on Dillon’s trembling hands as he continued to hold his literature book in front of him, refusing to look Daryl in the eye. “You wouldn’t want word to spread about this witch hobby would you? As a freak already, I’d think you’d rather like to have

a normal high school experience maybe? And with me, a fucking fantastic high school exp—“

“With you?! Forget it!” Dillon spat out his words as he finally looked over at Daryl, who stood up and slammed his chair into the table, just missing Dillon’s legs by an inch, maybe two.

“Boys!” Mrs. Bartel started to come over, but Daryl walked over to the front door instead.

“Sorry Mrs. Bartel, but Dillon Smith over there uses too much profanity and I just can’t associate with that sort of inappropriate language. I do apologize for my outburst. It just so offended me, but I’ll leave now.” Daryl smiled and half-bowed in the librarian’s direction.

Several girls nearby all swooned being near him. Mrs. Bartel smiled and adjusted her glasses as she watched him turn and exit the room, along with everyone else there minus Dillon of course, who was instead staring at the wall in front of him and putting his head in his hands.
Why me, God?

The remainder of the day was both predictable and painful. Dillon knew he’d have Daryl in at least one class, but why Physical Education? Having been kicked off the varsity football squad for the rest of the season, Daryl had to take general physical fitness.

Dillon smacked his forehead into his gym locker after he saw Daryl saunter in, whistling a tune sounding an awful lot like ‘She Works Hard for the Money,’ by Donna Summer and smiling as he came around the corner to see Dillon, followed by Mr. Angleton, the sophomore boy’s PE teacher and personal fan of the VHS football squad, and the biggest fan of Daryl, of course. Mr. Angleton was yelling at a group of boys on the other side of the boy’s locker room to ‘quiet up.’ He then quickly appeared next to Daryl, his face a mixture of admiration and stupidity.

“So, where would you like your locker son, since those boys over there wouldn’t leave you alone?” Mr. Angleton was all smiles as he swung his master set of keys on his index finger, basking in his power as a P.E. teacher. Daryl pretended to not even notice Dillon gawking at him not three feet away as he purposefully kept his gaze painfully on the teacher.

Dillon liked his section of the boys’ locker room. There were only two other guys in his row and they kept to themselves across the way. Daryl being here would be the third and that was three too many.

“You’ve g-got to be kidding me,” Dillon whispered as he slammed his locker shut,

already suited and ready for class.

“Right here Mr. Angleton sir, maybe somewhere in this general vicinity would do nicely, since most of the boys are over there are trouble makers and you know me, I just want to stay out of trouble.” Daryl still chose not to acknowledge Dillon’s look of utter disgust and disbelief as he threw his arm out and made a wide, obnoxious circle around the two lockers right next to Dillon’s.

Just then, two boys Dillon knew as Martin Bertelli and Steven Kissler, both nice, straight-laced, non-confrontational Mormons who lived near him came over to their row of lockers and waited to be recognized, Martin raising his hand like he was in an academic classroom, wanting to answer a question.

“Well, I would think having a locker near Dillon here would keep you out of trouble for sure,” Mr. Angleton winked at Dillon and smiled. Dillon tried not to dry heave.

“Sure, sir, whatever you think will keep me focused on finishing the school year ready for next year’s season.”

“Mr. Angleton, uh...sir?” Martin spoke up, his voice hesitant and nervous, hand still half-way in the air.

“Please, just leave me alone, alright? I don’t want any trouble.” Daryl held his hand out towards the boys in a pleading way to silence them, choosing not to look at them but managing a deceptive wink at Dillon, who quickly turned and gathered his things to leave, not wanting to hear the production.

“You boys need to suit up for class NOW.” Mr. Angleton opened a locker located a locker away from Dillon, “I think you’ve harassed Daryl enough and he’s trying to stay clear of that.”

“But Mr. Angleton, sir, we simply said ‘hello’ and he freaked!” Martin spoke up again, his face shocked and frustrated to the point of being on the threshold of crying. He just couldn’t bear to be labeled a ‘harasser’ or one who ‘causes trouble.’

“See? I can’t get away from this.” Daryl whispered, looking away, his voice pleading for understanding as he glanced up to the ceiling.

Mr. Angleton bought it of course, and Daryl got his way. Dillon quickly walked by them, head down and trembling inside. *This isn’t happening to me, it just isn’t happening...God hates me.*

Basketball was the punishment of choice for the day and the boys gathered along with the girls at the outdoor courts. Mr. Angleton had split the group so the girls could play a scrimmage game on one half of the court and the boys on the other half.

Dillon wasn't good at any sports and basketball was his least favorite, since his hands were what he considered his weakest body part and his wrists looked thin and stick-like; the thought of shoving a heavy basketball into an arch way up high and then hoping it hit net or backboard at least, was not even a remote possibility for him.

As they all lined up to be broken into teams, Dillon shot Daryl a glance from the far end of the line and noticed he was balancing a ball on his index finger and spinning it perfectly. He sighed. *Here we go. It figures. I get the pick of the bullies and just my luck he's good at everything.*

Daryl shot Dillon a smug look in return then mouthed the words, 'you're mine.'

Dillon quickly looked away as Mr. Angleton separated them. Dillon and Daryl were on the opposite teams, after Daryl, as captain, chose not to pick him.

That's fine, Dillon thought as he stood there, one of two boys left while the girls looked on and giggled at his expense. He was used to being the last to be selected. Unless David was there, he wasn't wanted by anyone and today, for the first time, he didn't seem to care much, he wasn't in tears or trembling at the thought he wasn't liked. Why bother? And being selected by Daryl was no compliment he decided as he was forced to join the opposing team to the reception of groans by a few of the actual basketball players there.

As he walked over to Martin's team, one of the boys pushed him lightly and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear, "the girls are playing over there." Laughter ensued as Mr. Angleton called the two captains to the center to start the game.

Dillon ignored the boy, but Daryl didn't. As soon as play started, Daryl ran by the same boy as he passed the ball, then threw a quick but powerful elbow right in the boy's abdomen while Mr. Angleton was busy setting the girls up on the next court. The boy dropped to the ground gasping for air. A few of the others nearby saw the exchange but at Daryl's glare, they continued playing. "Ouch, bet that's gotta hurt, huh?" He laughed softly as he watched the boy look up at him in utter disbelief.

Dillon stood off in the corner and watched, his face in horror over the realization Daryl had defended him. It can't get much worse, he chanted. *Eventually the dreamer awakens from*

the nightmare, right? Wake up then Dillon, just wake up...

Daryl stood there and waited for the boy to catch his breath then he leaned over and held out his hand to help him up, smiling sweetly. The boy looked up at him and hesitated, not sure if he should take the Devil's hand or suffer yet another possible hit from behind for the pause in judgment. He took it, figuring he didn't really have a choice, and as he was lifted half way off the ground, Daryl let go and the kid fell back down hard. Daryl then, as if on cue, turned casually to intercept the ball from one of the boys traveling by him. Stepping back gracefully, he shot from the three point line and scored effortlessly. He looked over at Dillon and winked as he stood there admiring the ball swoosh in the net.

Meanwhile, the injured boy lay on the ground for another minute, trying to get off his back and grimacing. Daryl ran by him again and pointed an 'I'm number one' finger at the boy and smiled. Unfortunately, Daryl's newest victim didn't know what he was getting at by that gesture, but Dillon knew. He knew Daryl surprisingly well for hating him so much. Daryl wanted to be the only bully on the block when it came to Dillon's misery. Scary, Dillon thought, as the basketball game went on and he remained in his corner of the half-court, avoiding the ball and the other boys while trying not to make eye contact with Daryl the show-off, but he'd rather have half a school full of bullies out to get him than Daryl himself. Daryl scared him that much, because unlike the others, Daryl truly did NOT have a conscience. He was by the very definition of the term, a serial bully and now, as he slowly walked back to the lockers, Dillon knew that Daryl was focused only on acquiring his talents for personal gain. *Why does he need a witch? And why me? What kind of trouble does Daryl want to submerge himself in...and me too for that matter?*

Once inside the locker room, he grabbed his things and tried to avoid Daryl's chit-chat but it was like running away from a dozen police vehicles in a stolen car during five o'clock traffic with a police helicopter hovering overhead - there was no escaping Daryl.

PE was the last period of the day and today would mark the start of not bothering to change out of his gym clothes just to go ride the bus home. No, Dillon thought as he grabbed his stuff and crammed his clothes into a duffle bag, from this day forward he'd just ride the bus in his gym shorts. *What's the worst that could happen to me anyway? I'd get teased? What else is new?*

"So...no need to say 'thank you Daryl, you rocked my world' on the court today, 'cuz

nobody disrespects my witch and gets away with it - that's my motto from this moment on – no shit!” Daryl laughed as he pulled off his shirt to reveal his perfectly tanned and muscled torso while he leaned against his locker, admiring the color of Dillon’s hair from above.

Dillon continued shoving his clothes violently into his gym bag, leaning over the bench near them and pausing as Daryl mentioned the word witch, but deciding not to give him what he wanted – a reply. He then turned to leave, but Daryl blocked the way. The other boys quickly left after watching their exchange. The locker room was quiet and Dillon knew he only had a few minutes to make the bus. Daryl stood in his way, changing his clothes and eyeing Dillon intently.

“I-I n-need to go get the b-bus now,” Dillon spoke as he grabbed his bag and held it to his chest, stepping over the bench next to them to try and get by Daryl with a hesitant step.

Daryl finished changing his shirt then reached out and grabbed the bag easily out of Dillon’s hands and threw it across the hall in the opposite direction of the door. He slammed his locker shut and glared at Dillon, his demeanor and his voice changed in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, he was all business and no more play.

Dillon gulped and saw Daryl again for the first time, at just under six feet he was four inches taller than Dillon and all lean muscle mass; his shoulders particularly broad for his body type. He leaned against his locker again and smiled wickedly, enjoying his power. Dillon had to keep from puking, for his stomach was almost in his mouth.

“No, you’re not ca-ca-catching the bus right now, Cupcake. We’ve got issues to discuss and I’m not in a hurry – lucky you. No, I think a clarification is in order here, ‘cuz I just need to know where I stand with you and us.” Daryl pointed at Dillon, then himself. “In the beginning, I just thought you were pretty to look at, better looking than any of the bitches here hands down, and I’m not alone in that observation by the way ‘cuz you should hear what’s been said about you sweet face around school.” Daryl laughed softly as he thought longingly for a second on the subject then continued, “But after a while, you’ve shown me why I was drawn to you in the first place, and it had really nothing to do with that pretty mouth of yours, but rather, your eyes and that witchy head of yours. And now I want that part of you. The rest is just...gravy.” He smiled and looked proud of himself at his revelation of Dillon’s true worth.

Dillon couldn’t believe what he was hearing. *This guy’s truly insane, and I thought all this time I was? He’s got me beat by a landslide...*

“H-H-Hello? Stutter boy? Do I need to grab your attention? I said I need to know!”

“Know what?!” Dillon found his voice after pushing his lunch back down his throat. He took a step away from Daryl and towards the showers and no available exit.

Daryl sighed and rolled his eyes. “Are you going to work for me or not? In return for your services, I can protect you. We can work out the rest of the details later. I’m the only one who knows who you are and what you’re capable of - what we are capable of together - but you need to drop this ‘I can’t be around you ‘cause you scare me and might rape me’ crap like you’ve been doing. I’m not going to hurt you, but I always get what I want, and I don’t take disappointment well, so you might want to just give it up so we can move on.” Daryl remained leaning against his locker on his side, arms crossed and his body exuding confidence and power.

Dillon couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Give what up?! I am n-not a—“

“YES YOU ARE! You’re a witch and I’m the fuckin’ devil and we belong together – get it?! We’re like John Travolta and Olivia Newton John, struttin’ our stuff at the school carnival! So just quit hiding behind your Bible and that Christian family of yours and embrace what the devil has given you, because God sure as hell isn’t equipping you with your power, Sweetness. And I’ve asked for it, begged for it - would do anything for it - and yet here I am swallowing my pride to ask you to share what you don’t want to acknowledge with me. Still I’m trying and you aren’t making it easy, so I’d suggest you accept my invitation and join me, or else.” He smiled again, his voice calm and psychotic, wavering slightly during the middle of his speech as his anger tried to sneak its way in, but he kept it under control. He could easily cover his seething disappointment at not being given powers he could use to dominate others but when this little she-boy stands before him, equipped with everything he deserved to have instead and not even accepting it, was enough to drive Daryl over the edge. He could feel his feet balancing on the edge of sanity and oblivion. He was ready to jump and he knew it. He began to lose his patience as he watched Dillon’s innocent face. “Who’s your devil, bitch? Who do you pray to late at night while your unknowing Christian family sleeps, Bibles in hands? Which lucky devil in hell do you bend over for to receive such recognition - not that I’d sign up for the same - I’d just like to know who is he?!” Daryl couldn’t hide his anger at that moment, and his eyes looked incredibly wicked and dark.

Dillon found himself speechless again for the tenth time today. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He took another step back and away from Daryl ready to bolt.

“Where do you think you’re going? Nothing back there but the showers Sweet Cheeks and you don’t want to be around water right now – trust me.” Daryl spoke sweetly, pointing his finger at Dillon and smiling again. He hated water and anything at all to do with it - swimming, skiing, even bathing and having water running down his body touching his skin - made him feel intense revulsion. “Nobody gets me,” Daryl whispered as he paused to think about it. “I bet there’s no water in Hell,” he chuckled as he realized the irony of something so perfectly suited for him.

Just then, the twins came around the corner and smiled at Dillon, Alvin raising his eyebrows up and down, absolutely grinning like an idiot; Allan looking like one hundred percent business as usual.

“Hey there Cupcake,” Alvin whispered, wiggling his fingers in a sadistic ‘hello.’ The two of them stood behind Daryl, who didn’t look amused suddenly, his daydream quickly interrupted as the presence of mediocrity entered the room.

“So, what’s it gonna be?” Daryl asked, picking at his cuticle and staring at his hand, trying not to notice or acknowledge anyone else in the room.

“Uh, I-I d-don’t know. I-I n-need t-to think about—“

“Uh, n-n-no, you d-don’t. Geez Cupcake! Hell, you need me around just to fuckin’ talk for you, don’t cha? I could be your very own God-damn spokesperson!” Daryl shot up and stepped over the bench, the twins behind him laughing softly at his comment.

They all advanced on Dillon, who turned to leave but didn’t get far; the twins had him by each arm and as he tried to kick and wiggle his way out of their monstrous hands; it only made it easier to keep him contained.

They were all in the shower room now. As a large, white tiled, square room with shower heads along the three walls and two small partition walls four feet high to mark the entrance inside, the boy’s shower area was very sterile and reeked of a crisp, white sanitarium smell. The twins turned with Dillon and faced Daryl, who strolled in casually, shaking his head and smiling in disappointment. “Answer me – NOW.”

“Can I just hit him once? Just to keep him in line? Please?” Alvin began to whine as he held onto Dillon’s right arm. Allan shot him a wicked grin. Daryl ignored him, his eyes locked on Dillon’s.

Dillon could only shake his head ‘no’ for he was again too afraid to speak, trying to open

his mouth and verbalize a plea for more time, but it just wasn't possible. He knew he was done for anyway. He couldn't work for Daryl, couldn't accept and embrace the evil Daryl represented. It just wasn't his style.

But maybe I could just pretend? Maybe I could go along for now, and then when I was safe and out of the boy's locker room of all places I could tell my story to Mrs. Sands and my parents, and maybe Tommy and Daniel too, so that I can have the protection of those who love me! But then they'd know, because deep down I think I know too; I am indeed a witch and as a witch, I've drawn the attention of the only living devil I know. Maybe that's why David was drawn to me too? Okay, just kill me now. My life is over and I don't care anymore. My kind shouldn't walk the earth and serve the likes of Daryl and his idiot monster sidekicks. What would David do right now besides kick some ass? He'd say something smart and sassy and at least piss his enemies off. Throw out an insult? Sounds predictable for sure, and definitely not my style, but being quiet and taking hit after hit without so much as a scream doesn't help either. He opened his mouth to scream out 'help me' but nothing came out again. He looked at Daryl helplessly.

"Ha! Ha! Princess can't even scream for help! No fuckin' way! Too funny!" Alvin laughed and snorted like the overgrown pig he was. Daryl, of course, chose to ignore him.

Dillon scanned the room for anything to help him out, but they were in the shower room and there was nothing there to assist him but the shower heads, and they didn't look moveable.

Daryl smiled as he watched silently while Dillon looked around, as if reading his mind and agreeing with him. "That's right, do something a witch would do - for me right now. That would be a beginning, wouldn't it? Hmm, what to do, what to do..." Daryl looked around the room while the twins both took turns staring at him in disbelief. "Let's see, oh, well, this one should be easy. Make those cheesy light tubes above our heads explode. I want it dark in here I think - add ambiance - yeah, that'll do just nicely." Daryl turned and slowly walked to the edge of the shower room and leaned against one of the wall partitions and waited. He waved his hand slightly and the twins let go of Dillon, pushing him behind them and into the center of the room, standing above the drain, ready to perform like he was on stage in a play.

Dillon hesitated, thinking he shouldn't do this, it would only add fuel to Daryl's psychotic dreams of world domination and suppression with him the perfect weapon at his disposal. No, Dillon realized as he stood there, hands across his chest, head bowed and staring down at the

drain, he couldn't give Daryl what he wanted right now, that would be more hurtful to him in the end, than say, several beatings at the hands of the twins. He sighed and tried to focus and pull inward so that when the onslaught of pain came pouring down, he'd be far enough inside it wouldn't matter. He whispered loud enough for all to hear, his voice, broken and hoarse, "No... n-never."

"*Never?*" Daryl asked, his voice animated, pretending to be shocked by Dillon's response and rejection as he motioned for the twins to begin by nodding his head and without even saying a word.

Before Dillon could attempt to answer him, Allan grabbed him from behind, pulling his arms back, while almost instantaneously, Alvin delivered a single punch to the abdomen.

"Can I give him more?" Alvin was absolutely giddy as he half turned and checked with his boss.

Daryl got up and walked over to get a closer look at the scene and Dillon's reaction. As he approached he could hear Dillon gasping for air, his head down and his legs giving way. He leaned in and grabbed Dillon by the hair and lifted him up to get a closer look at his face. Allan tightened his hold as the boy began to fall down and pulled him up and to his chest, pinning his arms down at his sides and wrapping him tightly in a bear hold.

"Ouch, that had to hurt," Daryl threw Dillon's head backward as he let go, puzzling the twins by acting angry and shocked. "Damn it Alvin! Maybe you should pick on someone your own God-damn size, like say your brother?" He spoke sharply, his voice accusatory. Alvin stopped jumping up and down like a buffoon and looked stunned.

"What? But you said—"

"I was joking idiot!" Daryl turned his attention to Dillon again, who at this point, had regained consciousness and was beginning to breathe. "So, changed your mind?" He grabbed Dillon's hair again and forced Dillon's head to move up and down while the twins watched, laughing and mocking.

"S-Stop! Help!" Dillon yelled out the last word as Daryl let go and moved to the side, just in time to allow Alvin to deliver yet another blow to the stomach, but missing and hitting lower to avoid his brother's arms and hitting Dillon right about where his bladder would be had it sat outside his body. The blow sent him spinning in his head, the pain searing up his spine and out his mouth as he cried out, unable to drop to the ground and pull up into the fetal position.

Instead he fought with Allan, who had too strong a hold around him. After a few seconds of struggling and not getting anywhere, Dillon yelled out, "I HATE YOU!" He began to cry, slumping over the front of Allan, watching his tears drop down the drain.

Daryl watched and listened to Dillon cry and moan in pain. It was appealing and he was drawn to it strongly, feeling himself holding his breath in revelry. "Sure you do, sure you do, and I hate to love you too, but I do, I really do."

He then did something that shocked himself - he sent the twins out. "Let him go and leave the building. I don't need your services anymore - both of you - bye-bye now." He stood back and waited; the twins shocked and speechless.

"I thought we were going to make him pay for being an uptight, selfish little princess, remember?" Allan asked, still holding Dillon, although loosening his hold somewhat to allow room for the boy to breathe.

Daryl shot Allan a mean look, then smiled, not answering him but waiting, his arms across his chest as he stood there. Alvin began to walk away.

"Uh, come on Allan, let's go. See ya around Sweetheart," the stupid twin laughed and bent down to try to look at Dillon's face, but long blonde strands of hair blocked his view. Allan paused for a second, registered the look Daryl had given him and the silence that ensued, and dropped Dillon down harshly like a sack of potatoes. He stepped over him and walked by Daryl, mumbling "Talk to you later Daryl, let me know what's next."

They left the room as Dillon watched from the cold floor, their ratty, oversized black tennis shoes all he could see from his view as he curled up into the fetal position and grabbed his stomach.

Daryl knelt down next to him and watched, barely able to contain his happiness at being alone with his obsession. "Thank you Satan," he whispered into the drain as he reached down and grabbed Dillon by his hair again and dragged him across the room kicking and struggling to pull himself up unsuccessfully against Daryl's strong hold. Unfortunately for him, Daryl finally got him up to a standing position, reaching down with one arm and grabbing him by the front of his shirt and lifting him to a standing position only to slam him into the white-tiled wall.

The force of the slam knocked the air out of Dillon as the wind smacked back into Daryl's face.

Even his breath smells sweet, Daryl thought as he pinned his body against Dillon's,

keeping him standing while they locked arms and Dillon attempted to struggle weakly, still not recovered from the assault earlier. His legs felt like jelly as he allowed Daryl to support his weight upright, however he began to panic as Daryl moved in, his face mere inches from Dillon's.

Their closeness, their touch created an electric shock that made Daryl smile at the flow of current between them. It was pure revulsion for Dillon as he tried in vain to push him away and that only fueled Daryl's fire. He made the mistake of glancing into Daryl's eyes. *His eyes are on fire and he's consumed by this...and I'm done for...*

Daryl was beginning to believe he was possibly receiving Dillon's magic and he spoke with barely contained giddiness. "I always get what I want...and I want you – with – me." He leaned in to kiss him, but Dillon was able to move his head off to one side. Now smelling Dillon's neck after being denied his mouth, Daryl could feel the harsh electricity between them begin to generate power, and he found himself in ecstasy as he began to absorb it.

Under Daryl's hold, Dillon suddenly disappeared in the haze that followed. Waking up in a puddle of ice cold water, Dillon took a much needed breath in and looked around the room. His body felt contorted, but he was too stiff to move to a more comfortable position from the disheveled heap he had become on the ground. The cold air around him hit his face harshly like an ice storm, waking him immediately.

The trail of water moving down and emptying into the drain came into focus as he blinked, flinching at the repeated drops of water hitting his cheek and sliding down to his mouth, running along his upper lip, they eventually reached the ground. The cold around him felt like a burning fire; the water seeping through his clothes to cling to his skin felt brutally cruel.

He then began to shiver in the coldness, his lips light blue, matching his eyes. When he finally, completely came to, he shot up quickly, slamming backward into the wall behind him, hitting his head and looking wildly around the room, expecting to find Daryl standing nearby. He rubbed his head, felt a presence lingering and maybe even hovering there in the room above him.

Suddenly, it was as if Dillon couldn't control his breathing - had he forgotten how? *Why do I feel like I'm under water?!*

He grabbed his chest and tilted his head upward to the ceiling and opened his mouth, forcing a long breath in, feeling as though he was submerged in ice again – a revisit from the

time in his bedroom not so long ago. He gasped, jump-starting his breathing to come fast and heavy. He pulled his knees up under his chin, crying and checking himself to make sure his gym clothes were on and intact, noticing the front of his shirt was ripped and torn at the collar and his shorts, disheveled but intact. He spied a shoe across the room, the other still on his left foot. He shuddered and trembled in fear as more tears came down. Huddled under one of the showers, trembling as the water slowly dripped on his head, not bothering to move out of the way, Dillon quickly went into shock. I'm so cold, he thought as he rocked back and forth, watching his breath fog and crystallize in front of him, holding his arms and feeling the coldness lingering along the right side of his face, his neck, chest and down the entire right side of his body. He couldn't help but breathe it out each time he took what felt like a cleansing breath in. He noticed small ice particles on his right leg, covering his body hair like snow. He reached down and lightly brushed them off, watching them float in the air like magical pieces of dust, psychedelic colors brilliantly shining.

"How long was I out?" He sobbed as he whispered to the drain in front of him, watching and listening to the water emptying into it like tiny rivers from around the room. He was barely speaking, afraid he wasn't completely alone. He glanced around at all the shower heads, noticing for the first time that they were all pointed in his direction, some unnaturally so. He shivered in just his gym tee shirt and shorts, which were soaking wet with more tiny flecks of ice on the sides of his shorts.

I haven't been this cold since the funeral, he thought as he traced his finger on his leg, making a star pattern there. At that moment, Dillon heard a scraping sound and looked up to watch a small, four inch wide jagged piece of ice run along the tile floor, scraping like chalk along the ground until it finally sat on the edge of the drain. He froze sitting there watching it melt into the metal hole in the ground, the occasional dripping of the shower heads around him like drums in his head as he slowly realized what might have just happened here.

Chapter Twenty Six

How Sweet, Your Threats Are

Blackness from the drain drifted up to the ceiling as it lingered there like mold, staining the walls around it as the air froze and time stood perfectly still. Born a stain, and stretching out from the center of the ceiling, the evil settled in and displayed itself like a cancer reaching out; a black tree of branches as it extended down the walls to trickle between the tile grooves of the shower room.

Manipulating the environment around him was becoming second-hand nature to the Devil, and he was absolutely giddy as he easily orchestrated the shower scene to his approval. His power was growing and he marveled at his brilliance in a world he was not allowed to be a part of – yet.

After leaving another mark on the dark soul Daryl, and listening to him run out of the locker room like a scared, wet puppy, the Dark Lord descended and took form as he touched down on the drain, first as drops of black water from the ceiling, then a river, fanning out like a mushroom coming back in again to take shape in all his watery brilliance.

Dressed in black, a color of choice since losing his most prized possession, Azmodeus smiled over at the living soul that was Dillon, thinking how lovely a consolation prize he would soon be; a softening of the disappointing blow that was his brother. *Yes, I see you now and call you out...*

Hmm, he thought as he watched the living angel slide down the tile wall and slouch to the side, hunched over and sitting like a rag doll in front of him. He shot over like a colorful tornado and leaned forward to get a closer look, kneeling down balancing on his knee to watch the Beauty sleep; his flowing black cloak a mirrored reflection of the stain that had remained on the ceiling. Azmodeus could see the boy perfectly - every detail, every perfecting quality that Dillon possessed - only inches away from his being. He could also now notice the living world around him, his face a mixture of mischievous intent and nervousness. Azmodeus felt like a kid at Christmas, having snuck out of his bed in the middle of the night to inspect and play with his presents. He also knew he was risking soul and possibly, at least a limb if the Seeker got played, by being in the Living World, but he just had to meet the boy's earlier challenge. He just wouldn't be *Him* if he had stayed in his Underworld home. Inspecting and marveling at the brilliance of the young soul he would soon collect, Azmodeus spoke. "My, my, my, what a find

you are!” He then paused to notice Dillon’s gym attire and frowned.

“Interesting choice of wardrobe, my dear, however, looking at you now, I’d say it would be safe to bet you’d look spectacular in troll garb.” He laughed as he reached out and lightly touched Dillon’s right leg, letting his eyes travel down to the boy’s foot then glancing across the way at the shoe lying across the floor and smirked. “I think it’s safe to say Daryl wasn’t a perfect gentleman was he? He didn’t take good care of you...no...he didn’t.”

Dillon stirred and pulled his leg up as he shivered. The white tiled room a sheet of ice in places now, the cold water pooling around the boy as the Dark Lord reached out and brushed hair out of his face, tracing his cheek and mouth, finally resting his thumb and forefinger on the boy’s chin; those perfect lips quivered and Dillon’s teeth began to chatter under the cold spell.

Azmodeus pulled his hand away reluctantly after hesitating as he watched the boy’s lips begin to turn blue. He didn’t want to kill him – that alone would send his slightly tarnished, easily forgivable, soul straight up to Heaven and out of his reach.

He knelt down on his leg and scanned the locker room and community shower. “How revolting, no wonder they can’t keep kids in school.” Smiling as he stood up, hands on his waist and still casting his eyes down at the soul lying before him looking like a sacrifice bent for the taking, Azmodeus sighed and continued. “Daryl needed to have the hose on him - or shower heads - for the boy needed a strong dose of cold water to calm him down.” He laughed and shook his head. *Darn kids - they just know no boundaries, do they?*

Azmodeus continued as if the shower heads were all questioning his actions. “Yes, it’s true, I sprayed him, probably a little harsher than I’d normally spray a stray dog wandering on or around my property or in this case, someone out to destroy my prize, but what can I say? I’m a ruiner of parties, a bearer of bad news, and a thief in the night, or in this case, the light of day. Speaking of the ‘light of day,’ where’s your soon to be God forsaken Guardian Angel now, hmm? Funny it ended up being me at your disposal – lucky for you I arrived when I did, ‘to do my own spying,’ as you put it yesterday.” The Dark Lord laughed again at the boy’s defiance, for it just didn’t suite him, not with his fragile beauty, soft spoken voice, those melancholy eyes and that sweet sounding stutter he owned. “You’d be his for the taking if I hadn’t come to save the day, pity for him and very, very lucky for you I chose to stop him, however I couldn’t help but watch for awhile as they tortured you – you understand, right? I am, after all, weak for that sort of entertainment. And just for the record,” Azmodeus began to brag as he changed his voice from

funny and mischievous to lawyer and stern father, he turned and spoke to the shower heads again with a finger in the air to prove a point as Dillon continued to lay motionless on the ground. “I would like to commend your strength in not embracing your craft, staying strong and resisting its usefulness during times of duress, for it was there waiting with fainted breath for your command and, of course, I would have helped,” he turned, his hand extended out and his finger playfully, he moved around in a circle while the water collecting near the drain began to tunnel upward into a small hurricane, then sighed as he casually walked through it, the water shooting away from him as if he were a blast of hot air.

He walked back over to stand in front of Dillon, kneeling down again to touch his hair. “If only you would have embraced it like the others. But like your brother, you surprise me, and that my Sweet - that keeps me interested and vested in your training.” He smiled again at the pretty one, so dainty and weak and looking suddenly very uncomfortable hunched down in a semi-sitting, semi-lounging position, Dillon’s head in an unnatural side slump. The Dark Lord pushed him lightly down on his side to the ground hesitantly and acting as if he’d brake the boy by doing so and placed his head gingerly on the floor. Not realizing his hand was still under the boy and forgetting for a second, his cold touch as he watched the boy’s neck freeze where he was touching it, he quickly let go and shook his head to awaken himself from his gaze. He then stood up and walked around the drain, stopping briefly to look down the hole. Deciding to change the subject after feeling a familiar feeling similar to the emotion he experienced at the cemetery, “I should get a favor from His Majesty above for this little coincidence in timing. And then, of course, there’s Mr. Fire Starter. Hmm, yes, looks like our Daryl is too much like my kind for his own good. His greed for power and domination needs to be kept in check since he wants to fuck with my future property.” He pointed his finger at one of the nearest shower heads as if it were his servant and continued. “Yes, he might need a spiritual revelation or two, just to drop his ego down a notch or three.” He turned and stuck out his left hand, palm up and held it in front of his eyes, staring at the blue light emanating and beginning to swirl in his palm. His eyes turned from blue to yellow as he spoke in Latin, “Venire Belial, venire Bucon, venire Byleth. Ego tres summonere.”

He watched as the blue orb in his hand spread out and rose above it, spinning in mid-air as it turned inward and disappeared. He turned towards Dillon with a playful swing of his black cloak, billowing around him perfectly as he spoke again, this time in English. “I guess my witch

was right about Daryl – but,” He took another step and was across the floor in a millisecond, kneeling back down so that he could whisper to Dillon specifically as he spoke, inches away, “We shan’t tell her that, for it would ruin her lack of self-worth.” He then reached out and lightly traced Dillon’s lower lip again, his eyes transfixed on the boy’s breathing as he felt the warm air touch his skin. *Natural, innocent heat...*

He leaned down further and blew a small amount of his own air into Dillon’s face as he whispered, “Wake up Sleeping Beauty, wake...up—“

The cold air hit Dillon hard and woke him instantly. After a few minutes of cold shock, Dillon slowly came back to the present time. After a few more minutes went by, he leaned his head back against the wall, his neck stiff and cold as it popped in response, and closed his eyes. When he woke up again he focused them, squinting as he noticed a body bending down and a familiar face staring right back at him, an awkward smile showing itself for him to recognize.

“Hey there, Dil - my God - you gave me a scare! Are you okay?” Tommy reached out his hand and brushed Dillon’s hair away from his face, shaking off a few shavings of ice from his fingers afterwards, a puzzled look on his face as he did so.

“What are you...doing?” Dillon asked his voice dreamy and distant.

“Uh, well, there’s ice in your hair which I find more than disturbing and looking at you, I just, you look...well...cold. What the hell happened in here?” Tommy stood up and looked around, his face suspicious and his voice protective and loud. He took a few steps around the drain and lost his balance, almost falling but correcting himself as he noticed the slippery, partially iced ground as he slid sideways. “Jesus...what the hell,” he whispered as he stopped sliding and regained his balance, looking up at the ceiling and noticing an irregular shaped black stain directly above the central drain in the floor. It could be mold, he thought as he watched its pattern branching out from the center irregular at first, but at closer inspection, perfectly symmetrical with each finger like projection. It looked like a beautiful, tribal tattoo.

He made himself pull his eyes away from the stain after a few seconds - although it was difficult to do - and scanned the shower room again. He walked over and picked up Dillon’s shoe. He then knelt down and placed it back on his friend’s foot and tied it with care, wiping some of the shaves of ice from Dillon’s leg as well. Dillon smiled weakly because for the first time since that fateful night, he was happy to see Tommy. His face began to thaw enough to allow facial expressions again, but he still couldn’t speak very well.

“Come on, your family is worried sick and everybody is out looking for you right now, even the police are involved. Danny is checking the school grounds, and I thought I’d check in here.” He helped Dillon up slowly, almost carrying him as he threw his arm around him at the waist to support him up. “What happened Dil? Can you walk? No, don’t worry about it. I can carry you easily,” Tommy went to pick him up, but Dillon quickly woke up and stepped back.

No way! No need to carry me, I’m just fine...I just need a warm bath, Dillon thought as he balanced himself on his legs. He looked up and made eye contact with Tommy, who was looking more and more distressed by the minute. *I better say something...please God, forgive me for lying, but I just can’t tell the truth, not all of it anyway...*

“I’m f-fine. I-I was attacked by,” Dillon hesitated, thinking if he spoke about Daryl, then they’d know about the close exchange and God knows what else, and word would get around school. The twins were easier to name. *After all, they did beat up on me at least. Daryl never did throw a punch during the interrogation; he let his grunts do the dirty work for him.* “The, the t-twins—“

Tommy came charging over and grabbed Dillon by the shoulders firmly, looking at him with an intense rage as he interrupted him. “Did they touch you? Did they do anything like that to you? I swear to God I’ll kill them if they did!”

Dillon opened his mouth to speak, but just shook his head instead, stunned at the emotion Tommy was displaying and feeling a twinge of guilt after feeling an intense feeling of relief in knowing Daryl could die at Tommy’s hands if he ever decided to tell. *Oh God! What have I become?* He began to cry quietly, wiping a tear off his cheek as Tommy immediately softened up and let go of his hold.

“Take off that wet shirt and put this on.” Tommy took off his own tee shirt, then his long sleeve undershirt and gave that to Dillon in exchange. Putting it on and feeling the body heat still lingering in the material made Dillon sigh in relief. It was so warm!

Tommy threw his corduroy blazer he was wearing around Dillon’s shoulders and helped him put his arms through it like a professional nursing assistant. It was a quiet, awkward moment, the longest they’d spent any time together alone since that horrible night but it didn’t last long.

He helped Dillon to his car with Danny holding his gym bag, neither one of them saying a word. They didn’t go home though, not right away. Dillon lay in the front seat with the heater

turned on him full blast, smiling and closing his eyes, trying not to listen to Tommy sing along to his overly used tape of the duo of ‘way too good looking for their own good’ guys from the United Kingdom, “I’m Your Man,” by Wham!ⁱⁱⁱ (“I’m Your Man,” music by Wham! Music From The Edge Of Heaven, 1985) with a determined sound to his voice as if he was trying to persuade someone.

When Dillon did open his eyes, they had pulled up to a parking spot next to a rundown gray and white trailer in a park of single wides near the school.

The twins were on the varsity football squad with Tommy and Daniel. They were a close team, everyone supporting each other, partying together, studying together, and working out together. All that changed in a quick drive to trailer town. Dillon watched in surprise and horror as his brother and Tommy charged out of the car, Daniel out before the car even came to a stop, and ran into the unlocked trailer. Within a minute’s time, Alvin came flying out the front door, hitting the dirt face first, followed quickly by Tommy, whose lower lip was bleeding. He brushed it off with the back of his hand with a determined, fierce look on his face. A few well placed punches to the face and kicks to the abdomen and Alvin had pulled himself into the all too familiar fetal position, whimpering and covering his head with his hands. Daniel came out a minute later, brushing off his hands and rubbing his knuckles. Allan never did make it outside.

Dillon sat back, eyes wide opened as he watched the violence unfold. He felt horrible, nauseated, and somehow responsible for the attack having just occurred. *Two wrongs DO NOT make a right, never have, never will - you know this - why did you continue this violence today?*

He shook his head and closed his eyes to keep his inner voice quiet. Things will either get worse, the violence repeating itself in full circle, or he’ll never see the twins again, but what about Daryl? He felt Tommy’s hand on his shoulder as they got back in the car. He flinched at the touch of the hand. He was jumpy and had to fight the desire to scream out every time Tommy would touch him - helping him put on warm clothes, walking him to the car, putting his seat belt on for him, and now lightly touching his shoulder. It was like daggers in his skin to feel another human’s touch and he couldn’t understand why.

“They won’t touch you again, we guarantee it.” Tommy said softly. Those were the only words spoken on the ride home.

In a nearby 1986 white Toyota Celica, parked just outside school grounds sat Daryl in the

driver seat, shivering uncontrollably with the heat blasting his face and body; his entire being soaking wet and icy cold. It was a chill he'd never experienced before – an actual presence! The ice had soaked through his skin, freezing him on the inside as well. He couldn't drive, could barely turn the key in the ignition after fighting with it for minutes, his eye-hand coordination dysfunctional. *Can't fucking leave...I can't fucking leave!*

He slammed his hands on the steering wheel twice in frustration. He had to sit there and defrost for an incredible amount of time. *Magic works that way, Daryl.* He kept hearing the voice in his head repeatedly.

When evil presents itself, it permeates and leaves a stain. You are stained. You have made yourself noticed. Be warned, be very, very warned.

He heard the whispers in his head, his name spoken repeatedly in different languages, in strange voices, screeching noises and yelling fragments of high pitched sound. He shook his head and shot his hands up to cover his ears as he closed his eyes and shivered again. The only sound in the car, minus the continued blast from the heater, were his teeth chattering. Another source of pain, he grimaced.

Daryl was, like Dillon, in a state of shock, having seen and experienced an evil he could feel but shouldn't have. He thought of the expression of the three monkeys sitting in a row, each covering their mouths, eyes or ears and the expression that went with it. The same image on a sticker placed over his school binder stared up at him from the passenger seat.

"I've seen evil, I've spoken to evil, and now I've heard evil - fucking Hell! I wasn't going to hurt him! Just wanted some fun, for fuck's sake! I'd thought you'd approve, Mr. Devil Man!" Daryl yelled out his frustration to his steering wheel, and the occasional cars driving by, their passengers staring at him as they quickly sped along and floored their vehicles. "What the fuck are you looking at?!" He paused after yelling at some kids he knew from school then continued his monologue. "I guess fucking with a Christian witch isn't allowed then?! Huh?! Thanks for telling me that now! And who in Hell ever heard of a Christian witch anyway?! And, and (he sobbed pathetically) - Why not me? Can't I have what he has...please?" He brought his hands up to rub his neck and noticed they were trembling, reminding him at that moment of someone else.

...weak, I'm weak!

Daryl gasped at the revelation, trying without success to control his body shaking.

The image of the twisting shower heads entered his head again and he sat bolting up in his seat, scared almost to the point of screaming hysterically as he relived the moment. After a few minutes of re-warming, he began to cry silently, rocking back and forth to soothe himself. As he looked in the rear view mirror briefly to watch himself cry, for he'd never cried before, Daryl held his breath in as he noticed a lone tear trace down the side of his cheek. Wild, he thought, suddenly noticing his eyes were horribly red and swollen from the intense blast he suffered in that shower room and the invisible choking incident. His chest and arms hurt as well, having received most of the blasts. "My back hurts too," he whispered, as if trying to make the invisible jury around him sympathetic to his cause. He reached up and grabbed his throat, rubbing it and checking the mirror again to see if there was a mark. Those fingers around him were so cold - a cold unlike anything in this world and long too - he sobbed and cringed at the image of that shower head above him, twisting itself down and extending out several feet from the wall to inspect him for a second, getting him to make eye contact before blasting the cold water.

He began to cry again as he traced the harsh dark red and purple line across his throat, his eyes burning intensely. It stung with an incredible jolt when he swallowed, so of course he swallowed frequently because he thought about not doing precisely that. *Isn't pain ironic? The more you try to avoid it, the more it serves as a reminder it's there.* He shed another tear but wiped it away harshly.

Looking away from the rear view mirror and to the hood of his car, Daryl saw a single black crow hopping around on it, the heat from the car's engine too hot for it to stand still. It looked pissed as it spread its wings out and cawed at the boy three times harshly and loudly before flying off.

Daryl sat back and finally breathed out. "That was oddly strange and perfectly timed," he whispered. Then the laughter followed - hysterical, high-pitched laughter. Daryl sat back and thought of villains he'd admired through the years and their signature laughter and laughed even more and for a very long time, thinking and fueling his laughter as he thought how he'd make a great 'bad guy.'

Once he was able to return to his car to fill up the gas tank after it emptied on him, he went straight home, walking by two very angry, beaten and bruised twins who were standing at the entry way to his half million dollar residence in the hills of Vista. He didn't even turn to

glance at them as he casually walked up the entry way and went straight into his house, still feeling electric sparks with each step he took, shooting up his legs and out his mouth. Daryl was an addict newly made. He laughed out loud.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Feeling You in Wasteland

“Hey, can I have some of that? If it deadens the pain, I’ll drink it all.” Joel flinched as he moved slightly, the pain from the gash in his left side throbbing. He reached out his hand and waited to grab the silver flask Sarin was drinking.

Sarin took his time, but finally smacked the top back on and tossed it callously across the fire into Joel’s outstretched hand. He caught it easily and smiled, ecstatic with the continued improvement in his hands since leaving Sanctuary.

Joel looked around the room as he took a swig. They were all sitting around a warm fire for a change, David having finally put his foot down and demanding the light source to refuel his soul.

“Let all who want to come, come. I’ll give them a proper reception should they decide to visit, but I want my God-damn fire and I want it tonight!” He had been in a foul mood since they left Sanctuary, but it became worse yesterday, when he had received his first injury in the Underworld. He wasn’t focused and had fallen over during a street fight, grabbing his midsection. Thinking back on it later, he could have sworn the pain felt like two fairly strong punches to his abdomen from out of nowhere.

Luckily for him, the two men he was fighting became temporarily stunned as they watched him stagger, each of them looking at the other from opposite sides of David, wondering which one had dealt the blow. David’s hesitation was brief enough to allow one close combat hit – a slice across his forearm, barely missing his face. The rest of the fight was quick and redemptory for David, since it had become widely known among those who followed and traveled near him that he was merciless and legendary in his fighting style. He was enjoying his fame until yesterday. The reality check was hard to digest; the fact that he could feel pain and actually receive wounds given his skill level and cockiness, was hitting him hard. David felt mortal again after a brief period of what he felt was immortality and his mood reflected the disappointment.

As he sat there by the fire, he un-wrapped his bandage on his left arm - his strong arm of course. He smirked then scowled at the hit that had gotten through to him. Fuckers, he thought. *Well, at least they paid for their sins - I made sure of that...Damn it! Dillon, I miss you...and someone’s fucking with you again...*

“David?” Leselle whispered, having crept up next to him, she called his name repeatedly as softly as she could to not stir his anger.

“Yeah? What?” He looked annoyed as she broke his train of thought while he was undoing his bandage.

“Could I?” She motioned to his arm sweetly.

He watched her for a second then shot a look at Sarin from across the fire. Sarin smiled at him knowing his thoughts and agreeing. Leselle was sucking up - again.

It was, as if, by sweet talking her way around the males, she could continue to avoid taking responsibility for herself. She had not fulfilled her agreement with Sarin since they'd left Ulleren over a month ago. She was supposed to become self-sufficient, able to defend herself and learn the art of self defense at least. Both Joel and Sarin had attempted to teach her on several occasions, but she had resisted, frustrating easily and making excuses. During battles she'd hide near either Sarin or Ulnd, keeping clear of David since he ended up always being the most surrounded fighter; the numbers fighting against him never one to one. However, when they weren't fighting, or in David's case, looking for fights, Leselle tried her best to serve him in any way she could; her fancy for him having grown strong since Sarin rebuffed her at Sanctuary.

David let her have his arm. She had become quite the little witch healer. She gasped when she unraveled the bandages. “Oh, Dave! Does it hurt badly?” She looked up and batted her big brown eyes, her hair falling down and around her ears again, much to the dismay of the men in their group, all of them thinking she shouldn't be advertising her feminine form.

He rolled his eyes after glancing down at her briefly; how he disliked females acting 'female.' *Why can't they just learn to rise above their gender weakness and make themselves more powerful because of it? I'd be one hell of a tough bitch if I were a girl,* he thought as he turned away from her and spoke, not looking at anyone in particular.

“It doesn't hurt. Nothing hurts - get it? I feel no pain. And for the last time, MY NAME IS DAVID, not Dave - understand?” He glanced back down at her with his question, his voice bordering on hostility as he tried to detach himself from the group he shared space and time with.

She only nodded silently then went to work on cleaning his eight inch long gash from his elbow down to his wrist.

He was frustrated and worried as he sat there brewing in the light of the fire. Ulnd and Sarin spoke quietly across the way, while Joel took his turn to stand watch in the corridor. They

were in a sky rise building on the tenth floor in a large meeting room with a table nearby big enough and certainly long enough to seat twenty people, with chairs scattered about, some broken down with legs missing, obviously used for firewood. There were graffiti markings in a rainbow of colors around the room, and all the windows were broken and smashed in places, some of them completely barren of glass. David turned to look out the row of windows to his right to watch the desolate landscape from his perch on the table, as the artificial sun slid down the sky behind the post-apocalyptic cityscape dimly lit. He saw buildings in the horizon on fire, heard glass exploding and the faint screaming of souls in peril.

Nights in Second Plane were chaos exemplified. It was as if the idiots only knew how to come out at night to create havoc; how fucking predictable, he thought as he yawned. Those caught outside at nightfall without the backing of a significantly large army, were quickly indoctrinated in the ways of His Wrath, for Second Plane was considered by most in the Underworld as ‘The Dark Lord’s Garbage Disposal.’ It also served as a filter, with several beastly creations of goblins, grotesque zombies, and other slime of the Underworld placed here to do his bidding – that is, to destroy and eat anything remotely human. It was said repeatedly that the Dark Lord enjoyed watching the onslaught of countless human souls fall to waste in his creation of ‘Hell on Earth.’

The scenery was post-war apocalypse with a Hellish twist added for flavor and good movie watching fun. David sighed, hoping Third Plane would be more of a challenge for him.

He suddenly flinched in response to Leselle working on his wound. I felt that pain, he thought as he glanced down at her. *You useless little wench - you jabbed me because I yelled at you, didn't you?*

He sighed and decided in a second it wasn't worth making words over. He had found himself becoming less talkative in the last few weeks, preferring to save his voice instead. It was as if no one deserved to hear him speak, not even Joel. He thought of Leselle again and frowned down at her. *I'll just look the other way the next time we wage a battle and you let your hair give you away again.* He smiled in silence, thinking her image, with her long hair acting as a siren to all around them, would be her eventual downfall.

He then let his mind drift to Dillon, always trying to keep it trained to stay on his brother for as long as possible. Unfortunately, he thought, there were always interruptions.

That pain...that pain was a punch thrown with some serious force. Thinking about it

again, David could feel it shoot through his abdomen twice in a matter of minutes. Luckily for him the two idiots he was fighting when the attacks occurred didn't last long once they'd pissed him off. He'd always considered fighting humans mere fodder - a good time to be had for sure. Watching their helpless expressions of pain and agony as he sliced through them or fried them, as the case was many times when his fire would escape unchecked, was all priceless entertainment. He could also now easily see why elves such as Sarin, Emen, and even that asshole Jackal, had avoided and had such disdain for the human race. Humankind was shameful and most annoyingly predictable in the simplest of terms, especially in battle, and it pained him having come to this realization about his kind.

Thinking about his time in the Living World however, David knew and felt these thoughts already, hating and denying most of the living human souls around him near and far. He was disinterested from the beginning and deep down, he knew why. Thinking about his past existence made him suddenly frown, and he struggled to think about it, trying as best he could to erase those memories. It was definitely working, he decided, as he tried to remember some of his time above while he sat there in reflection. Joel made it easier as well, since he was one of only a few good memories of life above. David sighed loudly. He was in a predicament and he knew it. A large part of him wanted to forget everything he was and suffered through up above, but there was always Dillon on the other scale, and he weighed so much...*I don't want to forget him and I WONT forget him...but he represents the good of humanity...and he is my bloodline...*

"I need a cigarette," he whispered into his free hand as he sat alone and let his thoughts take over again...Oh, how he wanted to denounce his human identity! He wanted to transform into Underworld greatness, but so far the only changes he could actually see were the color of his eyes to match his mood, and his long, black fingernails. He also grew slightly taller and maybe aged a few years by the feel of his broadening shoulders, but that was all he could gather since his descent down. He knew he had aged in the six or so months since his descent - Sarin had mentioned it not too long ago - but does the age continue? *Since we do age faster down here, probably a few years to every half year, and it continues till say, the end, then why aren't there any old people here? Do I even know how long it's been since I died?* He smiled at the image of him as an old man...*no way - doubt it.* He thought of his brother again. *Dillon keeps me from forgetting it all.* He then cringed as he thought of himself as fifty with a beer gut while Dillon was still twenty. Shuddering for a second, he turned from the nightscape across the horizon and

met eyes with Joel, who had just reappeared.

“They’re out there again and they want—“

“Well, they can’t!” Sarin yelled as he shot up, Ulred following as if on cue, grabbing their weapons and running out the door to the hallway. David didn’t move in the exchange, not even blinking an eye, but he looked over at Joel and half-smiled. Joel blushed.

“They want to see you. I didn’t think it’d be a crime to allow them to stay here, I mean, most of them are orphans in need of a leader...and they’re all in shock – you know – like I was when I first came here, except I was at least given an introduction by you, Dave. They have no idea what they’re in for and some of them are really young – like kids and such.” He wasn’t getting the humane response he wanted from David’s face so he began to fume. “They’re getting destroyed, Dave! And they’re *our* kind! It’s fucking sad—“

“But necessary, and their purpose is extinction and we’ve already discussed this Joel. I can’t save them all. I’m nobody’s savior, remember? You know this - you know what my purpose is here in Wasteland, so get off your soapbox and deal with it. Besides,” David hopped down as Leselle finished wrapping his arm and walked over to Joel, who had leaned up against the wall near the exit with a frustrated, defeated look on his face, arms across his chest in a defiant stance. “They’ll find another. People are sheep remember?” He watched Joel grimace at the memory of people as useless objects, but continued anyway, thinking to himself how much Joel had become a mercenary. “And you and me,” he stopped in front of Joel and put his arm out to block the way to the door from him, as screams erupted in the hallway and Sarin yelled obscenities, “I’m Farmer Ted and you’re Farmer John.”

“Bullshit, Dave. That’s total bullshit and you know it! Damn it! Just go out there and talk to them - speak to them about what they’re in store for because they’re lost! Or at least allow me to!” Joel’s voice had that Dillon-esque, pleading quality to it and it annoyed David greatly, and Joel as well. Hearing himself now, he had to fight the urge to kick his own ass for sounding that way.

Since their arrival in Wasteland, Joel had quickly realized his place at David’s side was in constant jeopardy. Any given day he’d find himself either bickering, getting into shoving matches or sitting near David and talking through the night. And sometimes when the mood would inspire them both, they’d sneak out on night missions to traverse the area while they supposedly stood guard, purposefully seeking out trouble instead of watching their posts. They

were young men acting like renegade clowns but they were also soldiers for a cause, and Joel loved every minute of it until recently.

Thinking about it, he couldn't even get David to look at humans they passed on the streets, let alone stop to help the wounded or outnumbered with the way he'd changed. Becoming more ambivalent with an occasional passionate disgust, David's attitude worried Joel greatly. He was also not as much fun and fun was Joel's middle name, along with grumpy, sleepy, and seriously whiny at the worst possible times.

"Forget it Joel. You aren't to talk to any of them while standing guard. We've already discussed this, remember? Jesus, are you losing your mind again?" David remained in the same position as before, except he leaned in to watch Joel intently, knowing his physical presence made his friend and confidant weak in the knees. He loved his charm and embraced it like a warm fuzzy blanket. He could always fall back on it whenever he wanted to get his way.

"First off, I'm not Jesus." Joel pointed a finger at his blue hair while David tried not to smile. "And B, you know, you used to care about these people and fought to protect them, remember that, way back to last week? When we first arrived here we only sought out to help the helpless against the zombie monkeys of Wasteland as we called them – and it was fun and thrilling to make a difference – I mean, hello?! You and me - make a difference?! Who would have thought it?!"

"Not me." David whispered as he shook his head yes.

Joel ignored him and continued. "And you enjoyed it too! I know you did, so don't deny it Dave! I know you! Now that you've got a stellar reputation and this hero worship, you just decide on a whim you aren't interested anymore? And thirdly, who the fuck made you King, and then gave you the right to step down? So what now? Now that the thrill is gone you're bored and want nothing more to do with any human except me? Or are you going to eventually tire of me too, because I'm human, Dave! And here's the latest news flash – SO ARE YOU!"

David shook his head in disagreement and began to speak, but Joel didn't miss a beat in his monologue.

"These people are coming to you for direction, not just protection and you sit in here and light your God-damn fire to draw them in so you can send your evil elves out to rip them to pieces when they show up!" He wasn't getting through and he noticed David was pinning him against the wall. "Let me go Dave." He was pissed and disappointed and his threat attempted to

be real as he pushed on his friend's outstretched arm, but David knew how to work him. Joel was predictable too.

"Relax Joel, or you'll work yourself up into a frenzy of emotion and I'll be forced to smack you sane again." He turned and leaned against the wall next to Joel and sighed. He knew Joel was partially right, but he didn't care to care anymore.

"I swear Dave, if you don't lighten up—"

"You'll what - leave me? Please. You're not going anywhere and you know it." David leaned back only to push himself off the wall to walk over to where Leselle sat, except he went to one of the ten by ten foot windows and leaped up onto the edge to balance there. Leselle gasped and fought the urge to run over and grab him, instead she watched him stand and lean against the window frame casually.

Joel just couldn't let go, as talkative as his nature was. "Don't try to deny the fact that you're lighting this fire is a fucking beacon in the night to draw everyone here! For what purpose Dave? Do you want to be found and caught by *him*? Maybe you do, maybe you want him to take you away to his Ninth palace so that you can have your tea in gold cups and smoke your God damn cigarettes while you both crunch on ice cookies?!"

David silently, out of spite and to the grin of Leselle sitting behind him and watching along with Joel, held up his left hand while holding onto the side of the window pane with his right, and swung it back and forth as if hailing either a taxi or an airplane. Fire sparks and what first appeared as tiny finger-like flames emanating from his hand lit the air around him. Joel fumed as he tried not to notice the attention David was getting from the hundreds of souls below who were yelling at him to jump out.

He smiled watching David's profile, standing there for a long minute, trying to fight the urge to go to him, but finally relenting and walking over. He leaped up alongside David, his balance only matched by his friend, as the two former pupils of Oleander sat down on the edge of the six inch wide frame effortlessly and leaned their heads back until they touched each other, their backs touching as well as they supported each other's weight. David quickly withdrew the fireworks display as he gave in silently to Joel's approach.

Joel looked out at the night sky, lit up in places by fire, and tried to imagine he was sitting in a hotel window on vacation with his grandparents. *If you squint with your eyes just so, the scenery almost looks normal, like I'm alive again.* He sighed and David nudged him. It was as

if he knew. *He must know when I'm feeling blue to match my hair.*

It was nice watching the horizon and enjoying what both David and Joel knew to be London. They'd recognized Big Ben and the Queen's Palace a week ago when they first entered Second and ran across London Bridge, screaming at the top of their voices as they skipped along, arms locked together like Laverne and Shirley, one of Joel's favorite television sit-coms (he had a crush on Shirley). "London Bridge is falling down! Falling down, falling down! London Bridge is falling down! My fair lady!"

As if reliving the moment way back when David still cared about helping humans in need of helping, Joel smiled at the memory and whispered to no one, "Isn't London pretty at night?" A silent minute went by and he heard the response he wanted - a joke.

"Of course it is, my fair lady."

"Shut up Dave. You wish I was a lady...and fair, so there."

Leselle sat back and wrapped her blanket around her as she watched them bond again. They'd fight then mend, fight and mend, it was touching and upsetting all at the same time, she thought as she watched them touching each other subtly, as if grounding themselves, and wishing she could join. When they were as they are now, she thought, nobody was allowed in. They are two amazing, unique humans connected - bound and tied hopelessly to each other through shared, living memories.

She sighed and lay down to watch their dark forms being lit by the fire. How she enjoyed David, watched him from a far and marveled at his ability to adapt and flourish in his new environment. He was indeed making a name for himself here, a legend in her presence, and she knew it from the first night she'd watched him adapt within minutes to the pace her kind had placed on him in the race to make it to Ulleren before the closing of the gates. He was graceful from the start, and now, he exuded power and confidence unlike anyone she'd ever seen.

The loud noises shifted her gaze away as she glanced over at the door leading out to the hallway and heard the voices of humans pleading for a chance to see and talk with them all. She looked back over and watched David's outline not moving, his silhouette perfectly still and almost relaxed as he laid his head backward onto Joel's shoulder; Joel did the same. She sighed again as she watched them. She heard them both giggle as they each whispered into the other's ear. Her Elvin ears picked the words out easily.

"Hey, do you feel up to a little base jumping off a ten story building in Wasteland without

a parachute to an audience of hungry zombies below?”

“You first.”

David had basically taken over their group in his silent, persuasive way. Sarin allowed him the step up in rank for reasons Leselle wasn't quite sure of, since he was so against any of them ever questioning his decisions and his authority. But with the changes she'd seen in David having amazed and impressed her, so did she notice the changes in Sarin and Ulred. They followed David around like enamored zombies, smiling at him when he threw his little tantrums (which he did frequently, much to everyone's, except her, dismay) and afraid to give him challenging words in return for his episodes of immaturity. He was by all standards a fierce leader however, and he and Sarin seemed to take turns taking charge of the situations as they presented themselves – frequently, due to the nature of Second Plane.

However, at times such as now, she noticed David liked to check out and lay back, more than willing to allow his co-pilot to take the reins, but it seemed the episodes were few and far between. Still, she thought, she did enjoy the show and with David and Joel, it was at least entertaining and funny to watch.

Sarin and Ulred returned, both of them grumbling under their breaths as they conversed back and forth, approaching the fire. Sarin glared over at Joel, who was facing them as they approached. David stared at the horizon beyond.

“Your time isn't up yet, *Joel*. We've cleared everyone out and sent a few hurrying off. So basically, with that said, we've done your job for you, so you can return to your post now.” He made his voice drip with sarcasm as he casually walked over to the fire and sat down. Ulred spoke up, which was a rarity.

“Uh, David, you really shouldn't sit there—“

“Really?” David interrupted as he hopped down off the ledge and walked over to grab his trench coat and his long, Japanese style sword - his favorite weapon. He threw his coat around his shoulders as he continued to walk towards the door, not looking back or stopping as he shoved his sword down along his backside. “Didn't realize I was advertising ‘come get me’ with His mark, so I guess that means it's my turn to stand guard since I've enticed more stragglers.”

Sarin jumped up in time to watch him leave the room. “David! It's not your turn! You're next, remember? Fine, take a double shift, not very social but whatever.” He scowled as

he watched David walk out of sight without returning a word.

Leselle noticed Sarin looked sullen. Strange, she thought, but he's changed ever since he spent that night staying up and talking to David on the bridge at Sanctuary. She had watched from the shadows in jealousy as they sat there in the night's light and bonded in their intimate talk. What a pair they were, she decided, as they laughed back and forth softly for hours that night. The very next day, he had turned her away. She'd been allowed to lie next to him every night, but no more. No, that night he had lost interest. She cried herself to sleep for a month.

Joel smiled as he watched the exchange occur. How quickly David could silence the elves in his presence. It seemed to Joel as if it was just yesterday, they were both cowering and agreeing to follow these same creatures around. He quietly got up and grabbed his stuff while Sarin watched him suspiciously. It was no secret to anyone within eye shot that Joel and Sarin didn't care for each other. Joel pretended to ignore the look given him as he casually strolled after David, ignoring Sarin's comment, "Where do you think you're going?"

The hallway was dark and empty as Joel walked through, pausing as he noticed no sign of David. Suddenly he felt a light tap on his shoulder, but he didn't turn around. He sighed.

"That's twice today. Damn, you're getting slow in your old age, or maybe it's just all that blue dye seeping into your dead brain." David whispered as he leaned in to speak in Joel's ear. He then lightly pulled a tuft of blue curls as he walked around Joel.

Joel sighed again while he breathed in the sweet breath so near him. It sent shivers down his spine all the way to his feet as he watched David walk to the stairwell. "Let me guess, the ceiling? You hung there like some fucking ninja assassin while I walked under you? How did you know—"

"That you were going to follow me? Because I know you, now come on. And by the way, just for the record, it was the door frame. I balanced myself above the door you walked through."

Joel stood there stunned, listening to David not only talk to him again in more than one syllable answers, but actually making eye contact as well. He missed those eyes when they stayed blue. He followed David into another room. "Geez, Dave, you've said more to me tonight than you have in a month. I feel like I should scream out one of those windows how happy I am right now." He laughed as he smiled a cheesy grin to cover up his hurt feelings he'd been carrying around lately.

“By all means,” David threw his hands out and the bottom of his trench coat billowed out, it’s inside lining a stream of colors and images of the Old World. He found himself staring at it and daydreaming at times when they were actually allowed down time, for Sarin was never one to stay put for very long.

Not wanting to let his good mood pass him by, silly Joel dashed into a nearby door and past a series of offices to another group of large windows identical to the ones in the other room and hopped up on a ledge of an opened window. He screamed loudly as he leaned out, his hands to his mouth as he yelled his words dramatically. You could feel the trust in the air around him as he let go after David grabbed his jacket, so that the only part of Joel touching the window frame were his boots.

“ATTENTION, ATTENTION! LISTEN UP DASTARDLY SOULS OF WASTELAND! HE SPOKE MORE THAN TWO WORDS TO ME TONIGHT! HE LIKES ME! HE REALLY, REALLY LIKES ME!”

David smirked then pulled him back in, having held him out long enough by one arm. *Oh, how Joel enjoys taking advantage of my strength. It’s okay though, because he makes me laugh. Who the fuck ever did that? Try no one, not even Dil.*

They jumped on the ledge after giving high fives and looked down at the street below, lit fairly well in the dark of night by several bon fires. They waved pageant style at several creatures, all having come running over frantically looking around then up at them; the zombies grimacing and yelling back in their obnoxious high pitched squeals, blood on their faces and frustration in their voices at having been interrupted in their nightly feeding; in their mad rush to hear the source of the sweet human voice, several humans were now scurrying away from them. It shocked the zombies as they ran into the street to search and see for themselves, which human would openly advertise his or her existence. Anyone willing to do that obviously knew something they didn’t know, or so they hoped.

“That’s right! Come and get it!” Joel yelled down sweetly, turning around and shaking his ass out the window to the group of a dozen or so grotesque-looking zombies staring up at him longingly. David watched from the side line, stepping down as he thought about what he had noticed upon entering and residing in Wasteland, the zombies were smarter than they looked. *They won’t come all the way up ten floors for two humans because of their selection on the ground...they’re also lazy as hell...*

As they stared up at Joel, the hesitation apparent on their bloodied, skeleton thin faces. The zombies instinctively knew the overly confident human above them wasn't worth the tasty feast he'd be. No, even the zombies, one of the lowest 'slime' the Underworld had to offer as the Dark Lord referred to them, weren't stupid enough to willingly participate in an obvious act of stupidity at least until they saw the mark.

David turned away from the window as Joel hopped down laughing, both of them enjoying their shared moment of silliness, only to meet faces with a group of very disgruntled elves.

Sarin walked past David and looked out the window, while Joel followed suite and did the same. Zombies were coming from every direction to their building, motioned forward by the dozen or so zombies already there, their screams like sirens in the night.

Joel held his breath as he watched. "Wow! Looks like there's more zombies coming over – oh my! They're really coming out of the – and there's so many – oh...shoot." Joel's voice trailed off as David began to laugh.

He looked out as well and smiled, watching Joel's panicking face. "Looks like you sounded the alarm to come and get it and they are a comin' to get it Joel!" He laughed as Sarin gave him a glare. "What? We were just having a little fun, Sarin."

Sarin backed away from the window shaking his head. "Let's go, NOW! We will escape through the roof. Move!" He ordered and ran and they followed.

Running over to the stairwell, the elves were able to detect with the echo, how close the humans and the zombies were. Sarin turned, the others following, and ran to the elevator at the other end of the hall, yelling behind his shoulder at the group. "They are gaining floors quickly, but hopefully the group of humans down there will slow their progress."

Leselle could also hear the voices coming up from the stairwell near them, as well as the screams from the zombies having followed the mass entrance of humans into the building, picking off a few as they ascended the stairwell. Ulned reached out and grabbed Leselle, pulling her along. She shuddered as she stayed close to Sarin and Ulned, realizing that David was not a protector after all, but out for only himself. She glanced over at him to watch as he pried open the sealed elevator doors with his amazing strength.

The metallic doors opened quickly under his hands and David moved with the confidence of an experienced rock climber, jumping above the doors along the inside of the elevator shaft in

one leap to climb upward.

Joel stood there mouth opened and watched David disappear, then sighed in relief when he saw a familiar hand dangle down to beckon him over. The elves were already in the elevator shaft and climbing up at their own pace.

David locked hands with Joel and hoisted him up, having remembered his weak wrists, he waited for him. The elves however, quickly left the humans behind. He tried not to let it bother him as he helped Joel cross over and traverse the vertical challenge of moving up four stories to the roof with weak hands.

Once they stepped foot on the roof, David and Joel ran over to where the elves were standing on the edge of the building, looking down. On either side of their building were smaller structures, the left was an apartment complex ten stories high, the right was a much smaller building. Sarin turned to them as he walked back towards the center of their rooftop, yelling as he did so, the wind blowing his long white hair off to the side as he spoke.

“I hope you humans can jump after the mess you’ve just created! Get a good running start and let the wind take you across! I’ll see you on the other side!” He smirked as he winked then turned and ran faster than anything David had ever seen before. He blinked and Sarin was landing on the other rooftop, his knee resting on the floor to touch down lightly, his hand on his sword as he took it out and scanned the area.

Damn it! He’s never run that fast before! Not fair!

Ulred and Leselle followed, both deciding to go at the same time, more for Leselle’s comfort than Ulred’s. He didn’t care but was happy to oblige her, smiling as he stood tall with her recognition of him as someone worthy of escorting her. It’s about time, he thought as he beamed. “Ready?” He whispered. She nodded and they left, their bodies flying through the air like acrobats as they shot across, however both of them landing not as gracefully as their Elvin leader. Ulred tripped and stumbled briefly to balance himself, while Leselle fell down hands out, tucking herself in and rolling to a stop.

David and Joel ran back to the center of the roof like the others but instead of turning and running, they walked a few feet to the side of the elevator shaft and leaned against it, facing their future destination, both silent and unsure as they watched the elves leap from their roof top to the next easily, as if playing hop scotch. Joel sighed and turned to David. “Care to go back down and fight our way out? I’m always game for that! Really! No shit! Let’s go...Dave? Oh

please...Dave? You're not actually thinking we could make that jump are you?!"

David stood there and listened to the voices of the humans and the zombies sounding closer. The screams louder and from what he could gather with his hearing, the zombies sounded pissed and larger in number. He paused and thought he could easily go back down and fight his way through, but who knew how many zombies were in their building? And how many stupid humans were in there as well? How many would help him and how many would back stab him? He hadn't a clue how many humans he'd made enemies within the month he'd been in Second Plane, but he stood there and thought, probably quite a few...hundred. And he quickly learned upon entering Second that humans weren't to be trusted anyway, for when you'd least expect it, they'd turn on their own, however the zombies were predictably brutal regardless.

In small numbers or alone, zombies were easily defeated, for although supernaturally quick and able to climb walls and crawl on any surface like insects, they were only a threat in large numbers; a swarm of zombies crawling around and over you and attacking from all angles could do some damage if a fighter wasn't quick enough to keep track of them all. Just one bite and he'd have their poison coursing through his body, changing him, distorting him and turning him into some zombie freak after they'd eat some of him first.

No thanks, David decided. *I'll fly, take a fucking leap off a building like Superman, even if it means I'll fall.* He turned to Joel. "Remember base jumping? You asked if I wanted to do that without a parachute? Well, I've changed my mind and instead of you going first, we'll go together – like a couple of drag queens, holding hands and jumping to safety. Just please don't scream—" David quickly pulled out his sword in time to turn and slice through the midsection of a zombie, having climbed up through the elevator shaft. As it fell to the ground still slithering and screaming in two pieces, he kicked its trunk and it helplessly rolled away. "Damn it! Die already!" He yelled at it, before he quickly turned and kicked a second one in the face with a round house and knocked him falling down the elevator shaft.

With Joel behind him, watching and fretting from behind his protector, David shot a controlled stream of fire out his hand and looked down the shaft with the light it emanated. There were at least fifty zombies climbing up the elevator shaft from all four walls like rodents. He could see the gleam in their eyes as they all focused on him. Joel shot back. "Great! What the hell were we thinking when we called them?! Oh God, we're screwed! We are sooooo screwed!"

“Shut up Joel!” David kicked at another zombie trying to come out of the shaft then took a deep breath and shot his hand down, blasting a powerful stream of fire through the elevator opening, torching several dozen zombies and turning as he heard their screams and wails as they dropped down. That will only buy a few seconds of time, he thought as he turned and ran over to Joel. “Ready? Let’s go, because I am not going to let Leselle, or Ulned for that matter, make me look like a sad little human afraid of heights. Take my hand!” David gave Joel a stern look. Joel had a panicking thought. *What if my hands are too weak to hold onto him?*

“You’ll be fine. I’m not going to let you fall alone.”

“Gee, thanks, that’s reassuring—I-I can’t believe this is happening! Oh God, I promise I won’t scream obscenities out any windows ever again, if you’ll just—“

“Hello?!” David shook Joel by the shoulders. “God isn’t listening Joel! He’s not here! Now take my hand and close your eyes if you need to and I’ll guide us across – just think light, okay and try to keep with me - the same step as we leap okay?!” He grabbed Joel’s hand and squeezed it tightly, pulling Joel to him and whispering, “One, two, three—“

They took off running, Joel hesitating briefly, but with David pulling him by the hand. They ran and jumped off the ledge at almost the same step, catapulting across and watching the building in front of them coming closer and closer, the elves getting bigger and bigger as they almost fell on top of them.

David made the landing, but Joel was a foot short, and fell off the edge with David still holding his hand, slamming him down where he stood close to the edge. David laid there staring down at Joel, suspended in the air and trying to yell.

In a second’s time, David got his footing and stood up, pulling his friend with him while the elves all hovered around trying but not knowing how to help and not be in the way. After getting pulled up onto the ledge, Joel struggled to breathe, pulling his friend in close and hugged him tightly. As he clung to his hero, David stared up to the zombies all leering down in frustration at him. He flipped them off as he walked backward with Joel still attached to his front, following the elves to the other side of the roof. “What the hell are we doing, Sarin?” He commanded, his authority suddenly making itself known.

Sarin quickly walked over to the edge and looked down then across to the rooftop directly in front of them before turning and looking at David and sneering as he watched Joel slowly let go.

“You can let go now Joel - you’re fine - now turn and flip off the zombies.” David spoke like a father and Joel did as he was told, using both hands and smiling as he did so.

“We’re going to jump more than one rooftop, David. I need to create some space from those zombies you’ve got on our trail—“

“But they’re over there! We’re fine to just go down and move on the fucking ground! I know I can move faster on my feet than up here!” David fumed as he watched Ulred and Leselle go and stand behind Sarin as if silently agreeing with him. He suddenly felt as though Sarin was purposefully jeopardizing Joel, putting him in harm’s way to prove a point he’d been pitching all along. “Just because you can jump like a threesome of gazelles doesn’t mean you can rub it in our faces and push the envelope on how many times we can attempt these rooftops, Sarin! Besides, Joel might not make the next jump and I’m not going to lose anyone over this! No fucking way Sarin! There’s the ground route, and we’ll attack along the way—“

“You don’t understand David - they have our smell in their damn noses now and they’re faster than fast! You’ve - NO – Joel’s awakened every miserable zombie in Wasteland and they have our scent! DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THAT MEANS?!” Sarin stood there his hands on his waist and shook his head with a look of frustration over David’s sudden lack of good judgment. “They’ll follow us until they find us, and I don’t know how many you’ve summoned here!”

David paused. He didn’t know about the zombies’ sense of smell. Good to know, he thought as he glanced over at Joel, seeing only the top of his blue head because his face was staring at the ground. Oh, how he hated being called out by Sarin. The sting of not knowing everything and having to rely on another was something David wasn’t used to ever having to do. He went to open his mouth but Sarin interrupted him, coming in close as if reading the hesitation in his face. “You still need me David, so try not to let your head get too big. I’d hate to think all the celebrity status you’ve achieved here might cloud your judgment and allow you to lose sight of your purpose.” He pointed and lightly touched David’s shoulder with his finger, then turned to face the others, his voice loud and authoritative. Even David was listening.

“We’re gonna jump, but you don’t need the accuracy this time - just the speed - because although the distance is the same, the trajectory is basically parallel. We don’t have much time, for those zombies are looking like they might want to play along.” At that mention, David and Joel both turned in time to see three zombies jump and fall to their miseries, one holding onto the

ledge, and the other two on the ground in a cloud of dust. David ran over and sliced the zombie's hands with his blade, then leaned over and watched it fall, kicking each hand over the edge as he stood there. One of the hands grabbed onto the front tip of his boot as he kicked the air twice, the second time sending it across to bounce off the side of the next building. David then looked up at the zombies above him and shot his hand out to see how far his fire would go, and sure enough, it reached them and they ran away from the edge for a few seconds.

That's right, run and hide. He smirked, then ran back over to the others. He didn't notice as he returned to his group, or maybe he had forgotten, since his cold spells had become few and far between thanks to his newly found and utilized inner heating source, but his mark had drawn the zombies to him. Now they all congregated on the nearby rooftop to watch him run back, his neck like a beacon in the night.

Joel was pacing and shaking his head, not sure what he would do, while Sarin and the others were already on the nearby rooftop standing there waiting for their slower human sidekicks to keep up. The sight made David angry as he ran back over. He was better than that, and so would Joel – he'd make sure of it. He walked over and stopped him from pacing. "Let's do this Joel! This one will be easier and I'll still hold your hand, so you won't fall okay?" He glanced over Joel's shoulders to the elves then back to him, looking intently into his eyes.

Joel felt himself travel into those clear blue eyes - the coolest shade of blue he'd ever seen in another – and couldn't help but go along, even if it was just to end up on the cement ground in a crumpled mess, as long as David was holding his hand. He whispered in a barely audible voice so as not to risk the others hearing, and leaned in to David's ear, "I'll do this if you promise me someday, just you and me?" He pulled back and watched David nod his head yes hurriedly, while eyeing Sarin and noticing his suspicious, almost jealous expression from across the way.

Joel of course, failed to notice any of that. Beaming while David grabbed his hand and pulled him forward into a run, he didn't have time to hesitate and back away. As he was thinking about letting out a scream in protest, he was already airborne, however this time they landed still running onto the next rooftop.

David wouldn't let Joel stop to congratulate himself, for as they ran the full length of the rooftop, the elves on their heels, David took flight again. This time, he and Joel leaped off the ledge at the same time and landed together perfectly. Joel couldn't stop laughing while they

moved along, not stopping to acknowledge what their mere human bodies were doing, for it just wasn't comprehensible.

The distant triumphant laughter of two humans filled the broken down industrial skyline and drifted backward to the dozen or so zombies hot on their trail, however, with their numbers dwindling down with each jump they had to take to get to their meal, they eventually found themselves in various pieces on the ground, while the band of mysterious humans and elves above them, flying through the air, shot out of sight, their smell dissipating as the night went along.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The Hunt Begins

The leader of the zombie clan, if there could be a leader, since they all swarmed together chaotically, turned and pointed at them, a toothy, wicked grin on his face as he silently addressed his group of dozens of soldiers.

He was the one they would get - the marked one - the fire human. He would be their ticket out of Wasteland, for zombies were placed to stay in Second and Third Plane only by the Dark Lord, never to be allowed to traverse the Underworld beyond the Hellish maze they were put in to do His bidding.

This fire human was their ticket out, and the chosen leader of the moment, decided they would all follow him and the mark would light the way. Bite him once, he motioned with a single, ripped up finger, and make him one of us, then we will have our way with the One who keeps us here. We will have his prize in our possession, and as one of us, the fire human will make us strong. The Dark Lord will be forced to see us beyond our boundaries here, and we will be able to eat our way across the Planes freely.

The zombie leader was the first to leap off the ledge, hurtling downward to land on the edge of the next building. He turned and screamed up to his soldiers to come and they did - a hundred strong all took the leap of faith in small groups across to join their leader, all with images of tastier morsels to eat in their empty heads, better than humans at least. They dove, a third of the herd falling to the cement alley way below, but the rest of the flock continued to push forward, the mark in the distance, barely visible to their blood thirsty eyes as they continued, the leader pushing forward.

After another three leaps of faith across apartment buildings, the zombies, including the leader, found themselves either hanging off the edge or on the ground. The few hanging found their way down by crawling and leaping from window ledge to window ledge, to stairway, and finally jumping down. Exceptional climbers, able to traverse almost any landscape, the remainder of the zombie clan, twenty or so strong, found themselves in the alley and frustrated, the leader screaming out as he noticed the human's smell leaving his nose. He went to run out of the alley way to attempt to catch the human on foot, his fellow creatures following him, when he stopped fast and looked on at the entourage of new meat before him. He hesitated of course, as did the others, as they noticed as zombies tend to do, that these were very, very confident

creatures to stand in front of them, especially the human.

“Who are you pursuing, fools? I can’t ever recall a large group of flying zombie idiots leaping over rooftops before, have you, Sir Hunten?”

“No, Master, I have not seen this before, what say you, Nagul?” A chorus of “No, Captain Hunten,” was registered behind him as they peered curiously at the group of ragged zombies, noticing the dozen or so who were unfortunate enough to miss the jump, sliding around on the ground, pulling broken legs and arms back into place and cracking necks straight as they all leered at the group of Nagul in return.

Drake causally strolled over to the zombie leader and spoke, ignoring the other zombies. “Who were you chasing?”

The leader smiled, drool sliding down his chin and dripping onto the ground in front of him. He could easily reach out and take a bite out of this interesting human with the black and blue eyes, but he hesitated again, for he noticed the human did not draw any weapon and was standing with his hands behind his back. Worst still, he had no smell. The other zombies encircled him as well, however Drake kept his gaze on their leader.

The Nagul stayed back at the entrance to the alley way, their reptilian skins metallic gray in the light of a nearby fire erupting in a store front window. They smiled as they felt the heat radiate onto their thick skins, a bunch of hybrid lizards; their eyes tiny slits almost closed as they enjoyed the warmth, neither one of them showing any concern over the zombies surrounding their leader.

Drake sighed as he thought of how to proceed, rubbing his goatee as he stared at the ground, ignoring the screams of the zombies around him. This whole scene, he decided, was the strangest oddity he’d come across in his pursuit of the human, and so far, his pursuit had yielded nothing. It was as if this little piss ant had literally fell off the face of hell, yet he knew the little insect was somewhere - that much he knew.

He frowned as he looked up again and noticing the zombie leader’s hesitation to attack him. This can be easy without having to kill them off. Use and abuse, that’s always done me well, he thought.

Zombies do not talk, most are too stupid to attempt to communicate with, but this one seems slightly more intelligent than the others, Drake decided. “This prize you pursue, is it a male human with His Mark on him, lighting the sky? Hmmm?” Drake shot his arms out to the

sky dramatically, then watched as the zombie smiled, more drool sliding down his chin.

“Interesting...did the marked one travel with a small band of three elves and one other male human?”

The zombie leader nodded his head and smiled, raising his hands as he tried to count, showing his four fingers outstretched along one hand, his thumb missing, and the index finger of his other hand pointed up as well to prove his point.

“Right, yes - there would be five altogether - and you were chasing them on the rooftops?” Drake sounded like he was speaking to mentally challenged adults as he paused to watch the zombies all look up to the roof above them and point, the leader still watching Drake intently. “Really? How impressive. My guess is you were chasing them not for food, given the copious amount of human flesh I’ve seen running scared around here just in the past hour, but for something else? I’d say you want a reward for your hard labor and risky, incredibly stupid - albeit stunning - performances on the rooftops above me - correct?” He watched the leader smile again, this time it actually nodded its head in agreement, gleeful at the thought of not being out of the race for gold yet.

“Well, lucky for you, not only am I looking for him too, but I can grant what it is you seek, for I work for the Dark Lord and this one we hunt is his property. He will not be harmed, but merely pointed out to me - that is all. Track him down and lead me to him and I will grant you what you wish for. Do we have a deal? Fine then, now move ahead and we will follow you at a distance.” Drake turned and disappeared, having teleported to the alley from the middle of the street where he had been, while the zombies turned around frantically looking for him and finally spotting him again. This time, Drake was grabbing hold of a young man with a noticeable bloodied mouth and split lip by the back of his hair and pulling him into his personal space, whispering in the young man’s ear. The Nagul were around him, fiercely protective of him and ready to follow the zombies.

In a second’s time the zombie leader addressed his group and off they ran in quick pursuit, now fifty in number, along the street in a swarm formation, with Drake’s group sauntering along behind them at a distance.

The jumpers, as Joel renamed their group after making his tenth leap across the rooftops, had finally stopped on a smaller apartment complex to regroup. Sarin ran over to the edge to

look back at their escape route for signs of the zombies. At one point earlier in the night, he almost lost his footing as he landed and glanced behind him, noticing the glows from dozens of pairs of wild eyes coming at him in the dark. The scene was unnerving, and he now stood there, leaning on an outstretched knee to look across the dozen or so buildings they'd just traversed, not sure if he'd indeed seen what he saw earlier. There were no zombies in sight, but he felt uneasy, and spoke with his back to David, sensing his approach.

"I don't see them, but that doesn't mean they're gone." Sarin spoke in a whisper, still looking at the rooftops across from them and inspecting every line visible for shifting, moving bodies. It was hard in the dark, but luckily for them, there was always something burning in Second Plane to light the sky.

"You don't honestly think—"

"YES, I DO!" Sarin spun around and glared at David, who took a step away from him and readied himself for another lecture by crossing his arms in front of his chest and sighing as he glared back at Sarin.

"In all my days I have NEVER seen a zombie - let alone a hundred of them - jump across a building to pursue meat. First off, they're not smart, can barely operate a door knob, let alone orchestrate a hunt across buildings, and furthermore, they don't discriminate - everyone and anyone can distract and pull them away. I could grab and throw a bone across the street if they came upon me and they'd all go chase after it like bumbling idiots!"

David smiled at the image and thought of his stupid Irish Setter Rueben. *That's not true - Rueben wouldn't chase after any bone I'd throw. That dog hated me.*

"In other words, they have no attention span whatsoever, and yet they followed us for several jumps - not stopping, not getting distracted, nothing!" Sarin turned back to his perch and leaned forward on his knee to view the horizon of buildings once more. He was nervous and was trying as hard as he could not to leave them all right then and there, his nomadic tendencies screaming in his head to leave and leave now - take no passengers - but he made the mistake of making eye contact with David while he yelled his observations, and those eyes pulled him back in. He had turned away quickly, but he was already sucked back into David's world.

David walked over and stood next to him, copying his pose and staring out, then calling over his shoulder, "Joel! Get your ass over here and take look out for us, since you have built-in God-given night vision, you bastard!"

Joel laughed as he strolled over, after having shared another laugh with Leselle and Ulred while reminiscing his earlier fear of base jumping without a parachute. “Sure, Captain.” He ran over gleefully and hopped up onto an air conditioning unit six feet wide and four feet tall towards the far corner of the building near Sarin and David and looked out, only to quickly stumble over backward onto his ass as he gasped and pointed, hopping back up and sliding down the slanted side of the wall to face Sarin and David, both looking at him with suspicion and David, amusement. “Holy fuck! We’re screwed! We are soooo screwed!”

David grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, while Sarin ran over to where he was and perched himself there to see, along with Ulred. “Shut the hell up Joel! What did you see?”

“They are coming for us, on the ground in a swarm, probably fifty strong, but maybe more. Is that what you saw, Joel?” Sarin called over after he jumped down, his voice sarcastic and biting as he poked fun at Joel’s initial reaction of doomsday.

Joel nodded his head as he watched David, then focused on his mark glowing bright in the dark. “Maybe they want that? M-maybe they are working for Him? Dave? Let’s get the fuck out of here, come on!” This time Joel was the one to grab David and pull him by the hand, but he just stood there and shot his eyes over at Sarin, who had just hopped down and walked over to him.

“If they’re so stupid, would they even know about my mark? I know the humans here don’t. And do the zombies work for Him?” David whispered harshly at Sarin, while he pulled his hand violently out of Joel’s, after suddenly realizing thanks to Sarin’s quick glance that they were both standing side by side holding hands like a couple about to take the plunge into unholy matrimony. Luckily for Joel however, David had other distractions at that moment, for the thought of low life zombies chasing him suddenly pissed him off and he wanted nothing more than to meet them in the street with his blade.

Sarin sighed as he read David’s face. “Yes, they’re stupid and no, they don’t work for him, because he can’t stand them. That’s why they’re stuck here, to weed out and eat all the humans, most of whom he also can’t tolerate having access to the Underworld. He wants neither zombies nor humans past Third Plane – especially the zombies, because they aren’t good enough to be there according to Him and let’s face it: they were once humans to begin with. And lastly, although I hate to admit it because it does seem far-fetched,” Sarin glanced at Joel who was

giving David a hurt look for pulling away from his hand, as if they'd always held hands during times of stress and why would he do that?

“Joel might have something here. They might be drawn to your mark and want to improve their living situation by bargaining and turning you in for the right to leave Second and Third Plane for a ticket to the Underworld.”

Leselle gasped as she threw her hands up to her mouth and shook her head. Sarin ignored her and everyone else for that matter, keeping his eyes locked on David's. “Still, we need to go now. They are nearer than I'd like them to be, and they are building in number as they move. Hopefully, they've lost our scent, so let's go. This time turn east to jump instead of going north, we'll go at a diagonal to the northeast, for I know the passageway there to Third Plane, and if we hurry, we can make it in time.” Sarin grabbed David by the shoulder to shake him out of the trance of wanting to fight which was written all over his face, for Sarin could tell his newest companion wasn't one to leave the scene of a fight and run away. He liked him for that, and so much more.

“Make it in time for what?” Joel called out to him as he watched him leap across to the building behind them, landing effortlessly and running to its northeast corner.

“Before it closes, for it only stays opened at night. When dawn comes, it's closed until nightfall, which is why we want to make it soon, because to be stuck here with those zombies and a closed portal would not be a good idea.” Leselle chimed in, her voice way too happy-go-lucky given what she'd just informed them about.

She's in a lovely state of shock, David decided with disgust as he watched her grab Joel's hand, pulling him to the jump. He frowned as he walked over and unlocked their hands forcefully, putting Joel's hand securely in his and giving him a look that screamed, 'shut up!' They took off running and leaped, Leselle and Ulred behind them, as they landed safely and ran over to Sarin to make the next jump, zigzagging across buildings as best they could in the dark.

In the hunt for their capture, the zombies picked up the scent with a strong wind. The Nagul smelled him too, and the captain turned to Drake to speak as they ran along at an easy pace far enough behind the zombies to not show themselves first.

“I smell him now, Master. He is finally, in my midst, and they smell him too,” Hunten pointed back to his lizard men, all of them smiling and snorting as they took in his scent, nodding

back and forth amongst themselves while in military formation.

Drake ran at the head of the pack, his ranger swagger made him stand out as an experienced huntsman and traveler. He wore black and dark brown leather mixed with velvet, as if unsure how to present himself; a man split into two personalities to match his dual colored eyes - part huntsman and warrior, part gentleman caller and ladies man. He wore brown leather pants and chaps, with boots that came up to his waist and attaching to his utility belt. The leather was used and abused, but it was magical in its ability to repel weaponry. He had matching arm wraps that traveled up to his shoulders and then traveled downward, in a crisscross pattern to meet again with his belt. Underneath his leather garb, he wore a black velvet ruffled shirt, making him look the part of a medieval prince, and he wasn't shy about showing off his perfectly toned and powerful body line, for his clothes were tight enough and flexible enough to be second skin – and they were – hiding sliver weaponry along his arms, chest and belt. He also chose to arm himself with his saber. It was a powerful long sword he called Beast, for it had a mind of its own and when he battled, his wield of it was not only lightening fast and fearless, but an artform to be watched in awe. He was a master swordsman, but that was his past, and he hated having to show off his skills as a warrior. Instead, he enjoyed his newly found and recently acquired magical powers, for having destroyed so many powerful beings, including two Council Members, he had absorbed their powers and magical influences - and that was how the Underworld recycled itself. Underworld evolution was paramount to success and survival. Once destroyed, a creature's power and essence belonged to the one who terminated it, or as many the case was, touching the soon to be deceased worked in the same way.

Drake absorbed everything in his path he deemed easy prey. Rarely did he keep stragglers or survivors, but there was the exception. Through force, fear and intimidation, Drake had employed a very deceptive spy. This particular creature, although having messed up on more than one occasion, was allowed to redeem himself time and time again by filtering into renegade human bands or renegade groups bent on resisting Drake's extermination of hybrid and unworthy human waste in the Underworld.

Like the Dark Lord, Drake felt very few humans were the exception to the rule - a rule that deemed all humans waste and filth, tossed out like garbage by The Creator Himself and sent down to their world to stink up and putrefy the air. He smiled now as he thought of his Nagul picking up the stench of humans. "Then follow the stench where it takes you and if the zombies

lose track, feel free to mark and take your own course, Captain Hunten.” Drake half turned to see his little human spy getting dragged along, his leash short and kept tightly wrapped around his neck and placed under the control of a Nagul warrior Hunten personally trusted enough to give such a tasty morsel to for guardianship.

“Yes Master.” Hunten grunted and snorted as he trotted along next to his Great One.

“And tell me, Captain Hunten, does his smell match his beauty you’ve described so eloquently before this day?” Drake smirked as he thought of the prize ahead and just outside his reach.

“Most definitely, Master. I am spinning with his scent.”

More hearty laughter from Drake as they went along, turning northeast to veer off track in single file, the zombies fanning out again, most in front and off to the northern part of the city, scattering out and over debris like soldier ants, picking through the trash and eating humans along the way.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Coldness Creeps In...Again

As soon as they walked inside, Dillon made a bee line to his room with his parents following quickly, grabbing him half-way up the stairs and turning him around. Father guided him back down and over to the couch with the three dimensional picture of Jesus beckoning him to stay for awhile and visit. He was literally escorted over to the couch with a parent on each arm and gently, but firmly, pushed down by the shoulders to sit.

Even with his small body size for his age, Dillon sank into the cushion, the old springs broken and not giving any support. He felt even less significant as he sank down a few inches more while his parents remained standing. He felt his mother sit next to him, her hand on his shoulder, and warmth began there.

The coldness he entered the house with was quickly dissipating and he breathed out slowly, feeling his body unwind and loosen. Then the shaking started, even after Mother placed a blanket around his shoulders and Father lit the fireplace; he continued to tremble, even with the cold almost gone, remaining only in his finger tips.

Tommy and Daniel both took turns describing the events of the afternoon as if they were there and he wasn't. He listened to their words, but the voices in his head were screaming at him not to, and when he paused and turned his head to listen to them, they started their own little rant.

Do you know He who sees you? Have you not his eyes in your head, His ears you possess, his mouth your vessel to bring forth all that is not yet said? We are the wretched, the vile and the diseased and we implore you! Listen to our scream! You are not worthy of His Majesty's praise. You are a shadow on a cold, cloudy day and He dismisses you, casts you out...there alongside your brother, you will rot and decay and the world will forget you, you'll see, it's true, they'll look right through you. You'll not leave a stain. God has forsaken you, the world will not miss you and your soul, now a wretch! You are vile and deplorably wicked! And now we come to you, see you through, see through you, see you too—

Dillon shook his head back and forth to quiet them. The chills continued to travel up and down his spine, stopping to linger and trace the line of his mouth as he sucked in more warm air. He let his hands fall down to his knees as he bowed his head in silent prayer.

It felt so distant and his words not spoken, but his lips quietly moved as he closed his eyes. He heard mocking laughter as he continued to pray, his mother's encouraging, worried

voice distant; his own words less audible because the wicked laughter was drowning him.

Finally, Dillon couldn't take it anymore and he threw his hands back up to his head, grabbed his hair to scream at them while trying to avoid their clicking, forked tongues and sneers from the nearby window.

“Shut up! Shut your mouths! SHUT UPPPPPPPP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The lights in the living room, the over head chandelier and the two end table lights on either side of the couch flickered twice, grabbing everyone's attention except for Dillon's, then all three light sources burned out at once. The room would have been pitch dark, for it was late in the day and the sun had gone to the other side of the world, but the fire remained strong and steady as it lit the chairs nearest its hearth; Daniel and Tommy's faces glowing yellow while their bodies darkly lined as they sat there not moving.

Mother held him in her arms and tried to rock him with her, but he was stiff and motionless as the anger leaked through his mouth, like words incriminating him he felt guilty, his sins on the table, and the demons were laughing at him.

He looked up from the hold of her hands and saw Tommy and Daniel both looking at him, not blinking, their faces appearing frozen in time. Father was standing next to him motionless as well, and mother had stopped rocking him.

The voices were gone too, it was as if they were only passing by, looking in a window at his view. Dillon forced himself to look over at the window where he felt they were, but it was empty, however before he could turn away, a distant clapping noise like thunder, and a loud, booming scraping noise on the roof of his house shook it suddenly.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

He shot up off the couch and breathed in and out heavily, as if having just run a mile in five minutes flat – for the second time today. “Okay, nobody's moving, the lights are out, but the f-fireplace is—“

He looked over and noticed even the fire was standing still, each flame clearly marked and lined. “O-Okay, this is, uh strange and uh, w-weird.”

“Well, not to those who choose to cooperate, my boy. You shouldn't be awake - big mistake - but what do we do about it now? We might just have to wipe up the spilled milk and move on, so...I guess I'll just have to invite you in on the capture – you know, give you a taste of what your future will hold for you? Come, they're waiting for us.”

Sebastian stood at the front door, leaning on it playfully as he watched Dillon from across the living room gawk back at him, standing between his parents, everyone including himself, motionless. It was as if his shock from the earlier scene in the shower room had never left him. Sebastian smiled and snapped his fingers and Dillon blinked but still didn't move. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing ventured forth audibly.

In a millisecond Sebastian was standing next to him, helping him walk across the living room, and playfully mocking him for his shaky gait. "That's right, one foot in front of the other and repeat, eventually you'll gain speed!" After a few steps and a laugh, Sebastian lost patience and picked Dillon up by his side and shot him through the room and out the front door, lifting him up in the air, his grand wings shooting out to push them both upward to the rooftop of Dillon's house.

The sudden take-off in flight awoke him and he gasped in the thrill of being airborne as they hovered above his home. It lasted a few precious seconds until Sebastian pointed to the horrible scene before them - Dillon's reason for being there.

There were two beasts stuck to his roof, both of them screaming at him, but no audible sounds were emitting from their grotesque mouths. They were speared through their midsections; one of them had wings that were crumpled and attempting to flap, one of the wings broken completely as they tried to move. The scene reminded Dillon of old, defective windshield wipers.

The other beast looked like a cross between a male vampire and a werewolf, as it coughed up black ooze and smiled at Dillon, its teeth poking through its long dog-like snout as they glowed in the moonlight. The spear through his chest was more grotesque looking than the other, for it had four sharp prongs in the shape of a modified pitch fork, each blade stabbing him in a square pattern across his chest and abdomen.

Both devils stopped screaming as they saw Dillon, realizing their fates and wanting to at least get a good long look at the one they were told to visit.

Sebastian pointed at them with his sword, while supporting Dillon easily with his other arm, his strength extraordinary as he hovered slightly above the demons Bucon and Byleth. "Who sent you here to haunt this boy I hold?!" Sebastian's voice commanding and authoritative, a new version of the angelic bounty hunter Dillon had not seen before.

Bucon laughed and sneered, his forked tongue he stuck out and wiggled at the angel,

mocking him sexually, attempting to slide around and creating an even larger hole where the spear was, opening its chest and allowing more of its insides to seep out. Byleth spat out dark, almost black blood from his snout, moaning in response as he went back and forth in his gaze between the two beautiful angels before him; the noises he made sounding like several dying dogs.

Sebastian fumed at their lack of cooperation and admiration, choosing to continue. “I know already who it was, demon trash! And Belial, where is that stink?! Speak!”

The demons only laughed at his wishful inquiry, Byleth painfully so.

Sebastian began to fume as only a young, newly appointed and inexperienced Guardian Angel could. They snickered at him instead of answering him.

“Azmodeus sent you, for only he can send The Three to do his bidding - that much, I know already - but WHY?! Why would he want you to haunt a heavily marked soul such as this one? That’s suicide, knowing I’m watching him!” *Is he trying to distract me with them?! What is that beastly underground weasel up to?*

The two demons laughed together again at the idea they had a choice in the matter, mocking the Sebastian, as their screams pierced Dillon’s ears. He closed his eyes and shivered; their voices already familiar to him.

“He is not marked! Your chosen one practices witchery! Your precious angel is a witch!” More haunting laughter ensued. “Your God will not protect him! We are already known to him.” Bucon growled then softly laughed, the pain suddenly evident on his bat-like face as he grimaced.

Sebastian visibly felt the shock and the demons both laughed louder despite their pain at his non verbal reaction, fueling his anger as he steadied his sword and raised his voice, the heavens above him thundering loudly in response, as if angered as well. Dillon flinched and hid his face deeper into Sebastian’s side.

“In the name of the Majestic God of all Creation I order your capture and execution this night, January 2nd, 1987! Gone are the demons Byleth and Bucon!” A beam of light shot out from his eyes and absorbed the two demons simultaneously, their cries quickly dismissed as they dissolved before Dillon’s eyes. He clung to Sebastian’s light pink blazer, his gray tie dancing around Dillon’s face as he felt the amazing warmth cradle him close to the angel.

As they floated to the ground, his movements graceful and elegant when he uses his

wings, Sebastian gently loosened his hold on Dillon then released him, turning and jumping with ease up to the rooftop and balancing there, sitting legs crossed and his head propped on his hand. He gave Dillon a look of hurtful confusion and for the first time in a century, he was without words.

Dillon stood there on his front porch and panicked, trying to think of something to say. “I-I w-was g-going t-t-to t-tell you—“

“Really? When? I would have thought you’d had ample opportunity in the countless number of meetings we’ve had so far to spill the beans.” Sebastian frowned as he watched Dillon stammer and stutter again. *He really doesn’t handle pressure very well, the poor lad. One more thing I’ll have to teach...*

“I-I was a-afraid t-to t-t-tell you.” *Oh God, I think I’m going to throw up—*

Sebastian leaned forward from his perch on the edge of the front porch cover to watch Dillon hurl into the flowerbed. He smiled as the boy continued to dry heave for a few more minutes, while he tried to decide what his next course of action should be. *I need to recover the damages I think I’m going to suffer. Come back tomorrow, yes, I’ll come back then and get the full story. Time to wake up, chop-chop!*

Dillon looked up and saw the room again, this time, light and warm. Tommy and Daniel were sitting in the chairs across from him, Tommy staring at him intently, trying to smile without looking afraid.

Dillon jumped off the couch and frantically looked around the room for signs of Sebastian, but there were none. He could finally hear his parents’ voices and turned to his mother as she rose to stand in front of him, her face once again filled with worry. “Darling, how are you? Do you hurt anywhere?”

He went to answer her, but his father jumped in as well. “Is there anything you’d like to add to Tommy’s and Daniel’s account of what happened, son?”

He turned and looked up at his dad and shook his head. “I’m fine, nothing hurts - can I go to bed?”

Chapter Thirty

Witchery

He couldn't go to bed until he took a warm bath. He watched the steam leave his arms long after leaving the bathroom, while turning on his side and hugging his pillow. His room was dark, but he could see the cross on the bed stand. He reached out to grab it, bringing it to him. Why had he not told Sebastian about his powers? Lying there alone, he couldn't remember the reason why, but right now, thinking about it, he was having a hard time rationalizing why he'd kept it a secret at all.

Could Sebastian take it all away, he thought, and if he could, would he really want him to absolve him of his powers? He answered a silent, audible 'yes' but he had to close his eyes and scream at the voices in his head to shut up as they argued with him, stirring that all too familiar self-doubt he had allowed to reside since his brother's departure. He suddenly found himself panicking at the thought of his life without magic, supernatural influences or his brother. Dillon craved a normal existence again, but only because he wanted his other half back to balance him and give him purpose. He wanted September, 1986 to come back to him, for that was the last month he could remember not being different, not having a care in the world; his thoughts only on his brother's spiritual well-being, his own safety and his ability to keep David away and far from the reach of the harsh, discriminating hand of their father.

He turned and lay on his back, staring at the dark ceiling and blinking more than usual. *Why did I not tell Sebastian about the magic earlier?* That's right, he thought, he knew as he lay there that by mentioning it to the angel, he was making it real and maybe that would be the last nail in his coffin of acceptance. His magic would send him down if he continued to use it, this much he knew, but he felt as he continued to blink at the ceiling, it was almost second nature now. It was indeed, a part of him and growing stronger every day. "It comes from my eyes - that much I know. I can feel it reside there, this power I harness. I can move things, play with light, and probably more if I experimented with it, but where does it come from? I never noticed it before, and why can I hear everyone's thoughts - well, not everyone's, but most people's thoughts are audible in my head - why?" He whispered to the air, waiting and expecting a reply. "Could this be who I am? Do I have this power for a reason? What do you want me to do with this, this curse you've bestowed on me God?"

He began to cry in frustration as he felt doubt creep in again and take hold of him. He

couldn't shake the look on Sebastian's face from his mind as the demons accused him of witchery. The disappointment he felt, along with the spiteful, arrogant laughter of the demons permeated his brain, repeatedly cycling through whenever he would let his mind race.

It was a long night of unwanted self-discovery for the boy, his own thoughts haunting him more than the trio of demons before. It suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. He sat up in bed and breathed out, blinking repeatedly at the sudden realization. *Where was the third?!* "A summoning of the three" was how Sebastian had referred to the demons, yet he only killed two Dillon could see. Maybe the third was killed before he had nailed the remaining two to the roof? *Maybe...*

Six thirty-two a.m. the next morning and Dillon shot up still stunned, shaking his head in disbelief at how very little sleep he'd managed to get.

As he sat there at the breakfast table slowly eating his cereal while everyone else shuttled around the room, Tommy came to the back door and knocked.

Daniel hopped off his chair and strolled over, grabbing his coat and backpack, kissing Mother as he got to the door to open it. Tommy looked surprised, expecting to be allowed inside only to watch as Daniel open the door, followed by Rachel, and step out instead.

Dillon glanced over in time to watch Tommy pause, then walk in, after both his siblings walked out. Opening the door himself, to the surprise of Father and Mother, Tommy leaned in and spoke to Dillon from across the room. "Come on, Dillon. I'm taking you too. I have no one else in the car, so there's a seat for you. Let's go. Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Smith." Tommy smiled as he kept the door opened and waited there for Dillon.

"Why, good morning Tommy. That's very sweet of you to wait for Dillon. Honey," turning to Dillon, she continued. "You need to get going. Don't keep him waiting." Mother smiled as she wiped her hands on her apron.

Great, Dillon thought as he slowly rose from his untouched bowl of cereal and reached for David's coat. *I'm now 'the date' my brother used to refer to and my 'driver' is waiting on me. I can't believe I'm willingly participating. It's a good thing David isn't here to see this spectacle.*

He walked silently by his parents, both of them standing there watching him intently, making him feel slightly insane. Is it that obvious, he thought as he walked by Tommy without

saying a word.

“Oh, Tommy dear, here’s the shirt you let Dillon borrow. I washed it for you last night, so you could have it back today.”

“Uh, thanks Mrs. Smith,” Tommy said as he grabbed the shirt and almost smelled it, catching himself and quickly holding the door for Dillon instead. Dillon walked by in sudden shock by the almost sniff event. *I can’t believe he almost smelled his shirt.*

Rachel and Daniel were both in the car waiting.

Tommy followed Dillon to the car, his shirt thrown across his shoulder as he thought about what he almost did. “Daniel! Back seat - the youngest sits up front – you know the rules.” Tommy casually slid into his seat, pointing to Dillon to go around and get in up front, but he just stood there.

“No way Tommy! That’s a big N-O! I’m not moving, k? Your best friend and co-pilot for the past two years running isn’t backing down, so forget it...get in back, Dillon.” Daniel sat looking straight ahead, with no intention on his face to move. Tommy sighed and sat there not putting the key in the ignition until he heard Dillon get in the back, having walked all the way around to the other side since Rachel was refusing to move over. Apparently her nails were still wet and she was dead set on keeping her hands out in front of her, fingers spread out like a cat hanging on a tree so all her nails could dry.

The long drive to school was painful. Daniel and Rachel took turns gabbing away over different gossip pieces floating around school. Tommy almost made Dillon smile a few times as he quickly agreed to everything the other two were saying just so that he’d not have to break his own train of thought or his gaze either out the window or in the rear view. It was interesting to watch him look and act perfectly polite, yet annoyed at the same time.

I see now where he gets his popularity. Everyone feels important when they converse with him, like he actually cares about what they have to say, yet he doesn’t. I must be the only one who knows this. Strange...Dillon stared out the window and tried not to notice the multiple stares from the rear view mirror. He was also almost sure he saw Tommy go to rub the side of his face on his shirt still sitting on his shoulder and instead, sniffing it as he glanced back at Dillon. Unfortunately for me, Dillon thought, I have excellent, superhuman peripheral vision! If only everyone else knew this...

Once they arrived at school, everyone went their separate ways. Tommy chose not to

follow Dillon around after he received several questionable looks from Daniel. As they all dispersed, he didn't even say good bye to Dillon.

On the way to first period class, Dillon caught Daryl coming at him from the opposite direction. He froze standing there in the middle of the crowded hallway, kids bumping into him and moving around him in a mad rush to get to class. He panicked as he watched Daryl approach him, his stomach queasy at the thought of yesterday's pin down session. He couldn't fathom the absurdity in being the only person who knew that the most popular, skirt chaser at Vista High and a few of the local surrounding high schools as well, including the alternative school of trailers down the street, able to get any girl he wanted, chose instead to shower his affection on an unwilling male participant in the locker room yesterday.

He tried to lock eyes with Daryl, although he didn't want to, but Daryl didn't return his stare.

He finally reached Dillon, getting close enough to almost touch his shoulder, and continued on, not looking or registering his presence at all.

Dillon stood there stunned and turned around to watch him continue to walk away, parting the sea of students around him as he went along, his gait slightly faster than the human eye could register.

Why do his movements look blurry?

Dillon watched him leave, then started to walk again, his stomach calming down for a second until he looked up in time to stop abruptly before running into the chest of Alvin. Allan stood next to him. They both looked surly.

“What in the hell did you do to Daryl?! Tell us now or we'll kick the shit out of you right here!” Alvin was fuming. Allan pushed his brother to the side to step in front of Dillon.

“What my brother here is trying to say is Daryl hasn't been acting right. Do you have anything to share with his friends? He won't talk to us, or anyone else, right Alvin?”

“Yep, not a single one! So why the fuck would that be, Cupcake? What the hell did you do to him after we left yesterday huh?! Did you work your whore magic on him and seduce him?!” Alvin was ready to hit Dillon, and Allan held him back with his outstretched arm.

“Better answer him, Cupcake, 'cuz I can't hold him back much longer.” Allan whispered and he actually looked serious for once, Dillon thought.

He tried not to smile at the 'seduce him' comment. *This is actually funny...David would*

just eat this up if he were here. Just be like David and bite back.

“I didn’t do anything to him that he didn’t already do to himself. Maybe he discovered good taste in people and decided neither of you qualify?” He spoke loud enough to keep his stutter from sneaking out and it worked.

The twins stood there, mouths opened and both unsure and – wait, did he see it? Did Dillon see fear and maybe a slight hint of apprehension in their faces? He walked by them slowly as they stood there uncertain as to how to act and, to Dillon’s delight, remained speechless.

Getting to first period without fighting was astounding to say the least, he thought as he slid into his desk. He got out his book to turn to the assigned page, his hands visibly shaking. *Wow, that was odd and totally not me back there, but I’m still alive and untouched even!*

After his first class, traveling through the halls to go to his next class, Dillon found himself once again absorbing the countless stares and newest whispers of insanity thanks to Julie’s gossip yesterday. He swore to himself it wasn’t EVER going to change. *My life*, he thought as he walked to his locker for lunch, *will never be the same and I guess I should have known this from the moment I stepped on his grave and spoke down to his tombstone. How do you recover? You don’t, and whoever said, ‘life goes on’ is full of shit because it doesn’t – not for me. It simply doesn’t. Life goes nowhere, and all I have left is the wait.* “He’ll come back,” Dillon leaned against his locker door as he whispered into the small metal box as if there was a tape recorder in there, “I know he will. I just hope I recognize him when he does—“

“Dillon?” Julie whispered as she leaned in close, scaring him as he slammed his locker shut and took a step back from her. She held her arms out and grabbed him gently by his elbows to pull him back to her.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you! I just, well, it bothered me yesterday seeing your face and watching you go into the library like you did. I guess I was just—“

“Don’t explain. I get it already and I’m the one wh-who sh-should apologize – I shouldn’t have t-told you.” Dillon shoved her hands off and started to walk away as he continued to talk, not looking back at her. “I sh-should have known you cc-c-c-couldn’t handle it.”

Before he could walk three steps she was grabbing him by his shoulder and spinning him around. Geez, she’s strong, he thought as he adjusted David’s coat and checked to make sure she hadn’t rip it. Looking at her again, he instinctively moved his head back from her glaring red

face, thinking she could either hit him or kiss him. With Julie he was beginning to realize nothing was easily predictable.

She stood there, her hands on her tiny waist, her face steaming mad. “I CAN handle it! I just - you know!” She looked exasperated.

He couldn’t decide at that second what he should be feeling, primal fear at the thought of female violence, or comedic relief over her lack of intelligent word selection.

“No, I don’t...uh, know.” He looked at her again, trying to figure out what the ‘you know’ comment was all about, since she’d just used it twice, and deciding he was just angry with her big mouth. She was the reason he’d been receiving all the whispered lunatic comparisons as he walked the halls yesterday afternoon and this morning. She had to go and open her pretty mouth. *Girls can’t keep secrets, Dil. Have you not been paying attention?* The voice startled him, looking around and behind himself as he searched for the origin of the familiar sound.

Julie didn’t seem to notice as she continued on. He watched her mouth move fast and expressively, but he couldn’t hear her; the only sound emitting in his ears was his heart beat, loud and booming, almost crashing down on top of him. He looked at her but saw Daryl again, this time walking behind her, not looking at him at all, with his head down and a strange, slightly distorted look on his face. He wore shades to cover his eyes and a fleece jacket with a hood over his head, as if protecting him from the sun. That’s odd, Dillon thought.

“Uh - excuse me Julie. I h-have t-to go.” Dillon ran past her as she yelled after him, “I’m not done yet! Don’t leave! I’m sorry! You didn’t let me tell you that yet!”

He ran across the lawn, catching up to Daryl and almost reaching out to touch his arm, but pulling his hand back at the last minute, unsure whether or not touching Daryl was a sane decision. He used his voice instead. “Daryl? Daryl?! Wait – t-talk to me!”

He stopped walking and stood there watching him continue to walk away alone – which in itself was completely unheard of when it came to Daryl. He was NEVER alone – ever - whether he liked it or not. Daryl finally stopped after walking five or six steps and stood there not turning around to meet his gaze; his only body language depicting acknowledgement of Dillon’s calls was his head still covered by the hood of his jacket, turned slightly to listen.

Dillon began to panic. “Uh, I-I n-need t-t-to ttt – GOD HELP ME, WHY CAN’T I SPEAK?!” He threw his hands up in frustration and rested them both on top of his head. He couldn’t speak when he wanted to, and now, he felt he really, really needed to. After last night’s

adventure on his roof and one missing demon still unaccounted for, and Sebastian mad at him and possibly not paying him any more visits any time soon, he felt Daryl knew something and whatever it was, it was making him silent.

“Dillon!” Julie ran over and stood in front of him again, startling him and blocking his vision of Daryl. “I said I wasn’t finished talking to you, now let me explain, okay?” She stood there exasperated, her voice pleading as she kept moving around in his line of sight, so that he couldn’t see past her. He finally physically moved her and walked towards where Daryl was supposed to be.

“Hey!” She protested as she fumed with his repositioning her. She couldn’t help but feel electricity travel up her arms after he’d touched her though; he was suddenly very strong, and she felt David was there instead. She reached up and brushed away her hair as it fell around her, flipping it back and smiling suddenly, looking at Dillon with batting eyes.

Daryl was nowhere to be seen. Dillon walked around in circles in the middle of the quad and scanned the area, but he was indeed, gone. “Where did he...?”

“Dillon? Come have lunch with me? We can sit where you and David used to eat, just you and me okay?” She walked over and wrapped her arm in his, pulling him away from the scene of students walking by and grouping together to whisper about him again. She turned him around and smiled as she gazed into his eyes.

Dillon looked baffled as he thought about a way to disappear like Daryl. Julie was someone he didn’t want to see right now. *I feel like one of a thousand gazelle captured by a female lion on National Geographic. I can’t escape and she looks hungry.*

“Uh, okay.” He resisted as she almost dragged him to the statue V.

They sat down as several students got up to leave. Dillon felt all eyes on him again, but for the first time since David’s absence from school, he actually didn’t mind it; he was with someone who wanted to be with him. He was in the company of a friend, well sort of, he grimaced as he quickly remembered his grief. *Why can’t I be normal?!*

“Okay, just let me talk and you listen. First off, I feel awful! I mean - the worst I’ve ever felt – over what happened yesterday. I guess I got scared with everything you told me on the beach. My God! And the crows! Remember? And David’s visit with them...it seems like it was two days ago, but it was months ago!” She gasped as she threw up her hands and startled Dillon as he opened his brown bag. “I was so scared that night because it just didn’t make sense and it

was too crazy to believe – not that you’re crazy! I don’t mean that when I say the whole topic of our discussion was crazy - just beyond comprehension - and I’m pretty level headed, you know?”

Dillon glanced over at her while he nibbled on his sandwich and thought about all her run-on sentences. *Did she maintain a single thought or was she a jumble of nonsense? Is this how girls think?* Scary, he thought as he shook his head.

“Anyway, I needed to talk to someone else and Jason was grounded from his phone.” She leaned in to whisper more gossip, looking around her to make sure no one was listening, “He was caught with dope. Anyway, I just needed a friend, you know? I was like, panicking.”

Dillon flinched as he listened to her begin to talk like Rachel and every other girl at their school. What is she doing? He couldn’t keep quiet. “Why are you talking like an idiot? Please find your Julie voice, okay? I’ll wait.” He whispered these words as she continued to ramble on, but she heard him and stopped to pause and look down. He waited for her to speak again and when she didn’t, he felt badly. *I just can’t be like David, although at times I want to, really, really want to.* “Okay, look I’m sorry, g-go on. I’m listening.”

“I’m sorry Dillon. There’s no excuse for my behavior yesterday or the day before. I made the mistake of calling my two girlfriends - you know them - Hailey and Jennifer? Well, by telling them, I basically told the world and I didn’t realize that until yesterday when I arrived at school. I couldn’t believe they’d managed to tell the entire school on a Sunday evening. Monday morning was a nightmare and seeing you at lunch, I was just so ashamed. Jason knew too, but unlike the others, he didn’t tell anyone.” She smiled thinking about him. “I guess girls just don’t make good friends, me included.”

A long pause followed with both of them trying to silently decide the next course of action. I shouldn’t involve her, Dillon thought. *It’s too late, Dil, and you know it.*

He looked up after hearing David’s voice and met eyes with her, watching a tear begin to form on her cheek as he reached up to wipe it off before it fell. It was so naturally and perfectly timed, they both smiled at each other. Dillon sighed as he contemplated his decision. As much as he hated it, he needed to be alone.

Too much at stake to drag another innocent person into this hell you’re stuck in Dillon and you know it. But she already knows! She knows and she looks like she won’t walk away from it – just look at her!

Dillon looked at her again and smiled at her strong, confident beauty, not speaking a

word yet.

“So, do you forgive me? I’m in agony over this and you’re taking your sweet time! You know, David would be doing the same thing right now if he were here. You two are so much alike. A person just needs to get to know you first to see it. And I see it. I’m one of the fortunate ones, I think.”

He looked away and sighed again, but she pulled him back to her. “Please don’t close me out, Dillon! I was shocked at first, but if you think about it, that’s understandable, right? I’ve thought about it now for two days and I not only believe it, and you, but I want to know more. Can you just let me be with you? You could use a friend too, you know, and I apparently don’t have as many as I thought I did. Besides, they raided Jason’s locker and found more weed, so he’s expelled. He was my rock, you know?”

She sounded suddenly sad and lonely as Dillon finally looked up at her, identifying with the phrase, ‘he’s my rock,’ having used it with David to his mother.

“I can’t be alone right now, please?” Her pleading was beginning to give him a headache. He rubbed his temples.

“Julie...I jj-just don’t know...there’s so much at stake, and you’re too involved already. I just don’t know! Something tells me you’re in danger, and I-I couldn’t live with m-myself knowing I could have prevented it, if something happened...to you. Besides, you don’t know who you’d be dealing with, but I do, and it’s bigger than you think and definitely real.” He couldn’t maintain the volume of his voice, his whispering unnatural as he looked around them. *Why am I unintentionally whispering?* He purposefully raised his voice. “Look, David’s death was no accident. He got involved in something not of this world, and they took him! He didn’t stand a chance and I’m talking about the strongest, most intimidating person I know - and now he’s gone – just like that! He was taken in his sleep so that he didn’t have a choice or a chance!”

Two girls sitting near them looked over and began to whisper. Dillon paused and looked down again, staring at his untouched sandwich, squished between his hands. “I c-can’t involve you. It’s j-just not right, but I f-forgive you, okay?”

Julie shook her head as she heard his speech. “No, it’s not okay, because whether or not you accept it, I know! I already know and more importantly,” glancing at the two girls still sitting nearby and whispering in his ear, “I believe you...I know you’re not crazy, Dillon.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.” He mumbled as he tossed his untouched

sandwich into his bag, having lost his appetite quite some time ago.

“Everything you told me, I accept as the truth and I can’t explain it, but I blindly accept it! And although you might not believe this about me, I actually have no faith!”

He glanced at her and thought about agreeing with her, but decided once again, he couldn’t be David. *I know you have no faith, it’s that obvious...*

“I have never had faith in anything. I struggle just to believe in God, let alone the ways of this world! My family is Catholic, and I go to mass every week with them, accept communion and occasionally, when forced to do so, I go to confession. I go through the motions because it’s expected of me, but I don’t feel any of it! I feel like a stranger,” she paused then corrected herself. “Actually, I feel like an imposter, a fake, when I sit there among the masses at St. Francis Cathedral. Instead of paying attention to the sermon and praying, I sit there and admire the stain glass windows and marvel at the gothic architecture! I feel like an intruder and I hate that! Add to the hypocrisy I’ve already mentioned with the fact that I have never believed in an afterlife or heaven, and definitely didn’t believe in the concept of hell and you’ll realize I’m truly a non-believer.” She wiped away another tear and continued, wringing her hands to keep them from shaking, realizing now what it feels like to actually confess her sins to an angel.

Dillon sat staring at his sandwich poking through and enticing him to try it again and thought about the eloquence of her words and how, when Julie really wanted to get her point across, she was actually very articulate. He felt guilty for comparing her to other stupid, empty-headed girls and almost verbalized an apology, but she was on a roll, and had already moved on to another topic.

“I thought it was all black mail - adults feeding me threats and creating all this fear of the unknown and divine judgment should I decide to do something sinful and wrong. Now, I believe it, but not because of fear or guilt, I believe in the forces of good and evil because I have finally seen the struggle! I believe in your struggle! You have shown me a new perspective on life and how fragile it is and that there are other forces at play – other places too, beyond what we are allowed to see. Am I rambling on?”

Dillon looked up at her again and sighed. *She won’t give up, Dil. Told you so...*

For the remainder of the school day, He regretted his silent decision to accept Julie back into his entourage of one. He knew it was wrong, but his rationale was this: could any sane, young, high school boy anywhere in the country, or ANY guy for that matter, blame him for

being weak with her? “Can you take me to Zion Cemetery sometime soon?” He’d asked her as they departed friends again.

“Just say when,” she whispered back as she turned and walked away from him, slipping her phone number in his jean pocket, her hand lingering there. Dillon froze at the light touch and after the small, intimate exchange ended and he walked to his next class, he sighed in relief as he gratefully realized there was no way he was not into girls, not with a reaction like the one he just had. “You’re okay, and your body spoke for you, so don’t worry.” He whispered as he went along, trying to avoid the laughs from kids around him who were watching him talk to himself again. “Damn it! I need to stop doing that!”

As far as seeing Daryl, there were no more sightings to be seen in the halls, yet something gnawed down deep in his stomach to get to the bottom of the situation. He spent all of eighth period thinking about it, pondering the events of yesterday. He remembered waking in the shower room and feeling ice cold. He thought about Azmodeus and cringed, knowing that the Devil seemed to prefer icy coldness to fire and heat.

He held my hands at the cemetery and they were cold for days. And yesterday, I woke up in puddle of ice and frost on my legs. Daryl won’t talk to me, and all I can remember is feeling him press into me to keep me standing and then waking up on the floor alone. He was definitely there.

“He saved me from Daryl,” he mumbled as he continued to stare at the same page of the novel he was supposed to be reading in English class. A boy sitting in the desk in front of him whispered back rudely. “Quit talking to yourself, freak. It’s not good for your health.”

Dillon didn’t look at him, didn’t even hear him, but his stomach began to tighten and lurch forward in his body at the revelation he might owe the Devil a favor. “He accepted my challenge and the crows, they told him just the day before...”

He must not have minded the insults I threw at him, which means either the crows were nice and filtered what I had said, or he really likes me. No, he thought, thinking of the summoning of The Three and why Azmodeus would bring them here to scare him if he indeed, liked him.

What purpose would that serve? Is he trying to bully me and keep me silent by scaring me half to death? He must be playing with me...what were their names?

“Byleth, Bucon, and, and, what was the last name? The last one...starts with a B...Be... Belial!” He whispered loudly the last name then instinctively shot his hands up to his mouth in fear. I shouldn’t have said that, he thought, still holding his hands to his mouth as he purposefully avoided the stares of the growing number of surrounding classmates whispering around him.

“Who the hell is Be-lial?” One student whispered.

“I think it’s a code for ‘be a liar.’” Another student whispered back.

“I don’t know but the freak won’t shut up. He’s talking about Daryl though.” The boy sitting in front of him whispered back as he snickered.

“Maybe he put a spell on Daryl. You know, he’s been acting weird and I heard that he’s trying to turn into his brother – you know the one who died?”

Dillon sighed and leaned back in his seat, his stomach a massive ball of nerves. *I’ll never be normal, whether I try to or not, it just isn’t my nature. David was right, the key to longevity and perpetual self-entertainment is the pursuit of invisibility because popularity, especially my kind of popular, really sucks.*

He stood up with sudden effort and walked like an amateur drunk over to the substitute teacher, requesting to go to the bathroom.

As soon as he got out the door, Dillon made a rush for the boy’s bathroom three doors down and ran into the nearest stall just in time. He knelt and vomited repeatedly. Luckily, the bathroom was empty, he thought as he held his long bangs out of his face with one hand, and tried to steady his body upright with the other hand so as not to actually touch any part of the porcelain seat in front of him. Balancing perfectly now, it was a science to vomit cleanly and gracefully and unfortunately, he had it down to a tee since his brother’s passing. As the last gag left his body and the old, familiar shake began to set in, Dillon also began to relax.

Pop! Pop! Pop...and the sound of a sliding shuffle was heard followed by a quick scurry across a wall. Dillon shot up and looked around his stall, but saw nothing. *It sounded like a spider - a big one - and he’s stretching his legs, maybe? I hate spiders!* He glanced around the floor where he was kneeling. *David loves them, but I absolutely fear them with an irrational intensity unlike any other paranoia.*

An audible gasp and moan of pain, followed by another popping sound shot through Dillon’s sensitive ears, making him stagger backward, realizing the sound was coming from the

far wall opposite the door.

Wait - am I alone? I thought I was alone...

He leaned down and looked along the floor under the five aligned stalls next to his for shoes and saw nothing. He then looked under his own stall across the floor to the urinals and sinks and saw nothing. He knelt up and contemplated opening his stall and leaving, but he wasn't quite sure he could leave yet.

Nonsense Dillon, just get up off the bathroom floor and go back to class!

He stood up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand when he heard it again.

“SCREECH!”

He jumped back at the loud noise, hitting the side of his stall and looked over at the door he'd purposefully shut and locked as he ran in earlier. Suddenly, his peripheral vision picked up what appeared to be Daryl moving along the wall like a crab, above the first stall, his head turned around unnaturally so that he could watch Dillon as he moved along, right under the ceiling.

But that's not possible!

He flinched again as he heard another popping sound. He watched Daryl's head click up to lock eyes on him, but instead of seeing Daryl's green eyes, Dillon saw black, hollow orbits. Add to that image, the sound of bone and cartilage being unnaturally stretched, along with the wicked grin on the boy's face and the image would haunt Dillon for several nights to come as he slid down the side of the white washed brick wall in the stall farthest away and watched what used to be Daryl taking the side step onto the adjoining wall cautiously, as if half-expecting to fall, his legs twisted and lying backward in crab formation while his arms hung down, unnaturally bent at the elbows and the wrists; the arms dangled and dragged along the wall, smacking into it. Dillon quickly became paralyzed in fear as the thing approached.

This isn't happening! This isn't happening; he's not actually walking sideways on the bathroom wall. Who...what's happening?!

Dillon slid sideways along the floor until he smacked the back of his head against the door and leaned there, watching the creature crawl effortlessly and defying gravity, down the bathroom stall to sit, straddling the toilet seat, his hands perched on the front as he pulled his legs around and tucked them under him, like a spider about to pounce. He smiled down at Dillon, looking suddenly larger than life.

Dillon slid on his back and rolled under the stall after he got a quick glance at Daryl's

drumming fingers on the porcelain seat and saw that the nails were incredibly long, twisted and black, while his hands, neck and face – the only parts of his body not covered by his clothes – were ashen gray.

Once out of the stall, Dillon staggered backwards, barely on his feet as he balanced himself there in the middle of the bathroom and waited, holding his breath and not sure what to do. He wanted to bolt and run screaming down the halls, but who'd believe him? *And Daryl's in there somewhere...right?* He couldn't leave him as much as he didn't like him, he just couldn't leave and save himself.

As he continued to stare at the closed stall door, he could hear a soft laugh from behind it, then watched as it creaked and slowly opened to reveal him, or it, still perched on the seat like a devilish frog. Whatever was in Daryl popped his neck and adjusted his cervical spine while he flashed Dillon another wicked grin.

“Nice places, bathrooms are. They allow you to expel and cleanse your body of evil waste and refuse, and this one is soooo clean! And look-at-you! I much and thoroughly enjoyed your dainty display of vomitus projectus into this here waste receptacle.” He reached down and lightly patted the side of the toilet with one hand, his voice suddenly sounding like something out of a Western cowboy movie. “What is it you humans call this thang here? Ah yes! A bathroom to-il-et! Foolish me, I guess I'm a little behind the times. And to think you didn't even leave a mess, just a present left in this here toi-let to tease me to you. All your fear and trepidation lured me to your presence here, and of course, most importantly, you didn't get a drop of waste on your pretty, piously clean, garments.”

What used to be Daryl then reached down with one hand while still maintaining eye contact with Dillon, and scooped up some vomit mixed with water. He sniffed the puddle in his hand while strings of stomach bile and tiny flecks of Dillon's barely touched sandwich hung from his thumb.

Dillon suddenly gagged and dry heaved as he watched the creature drink his vomit then lick his hand. When he was finished, he swatted and dusted his hands together like he'd just finished a tasty meal and hopped forward and straight upward, balancing perfectly on the top of the stall, his back now leaning against the wall as he stood there.

Dillon staggered backward some more until he smacked his back into one of the sinks and braced himself there. He glanced out the door off to his right and tried to get his feet to

move, but they felt glued to the floor.

“Everything is so clean, horribly clean, and disgustingly...clean. Are you clean? What lies beneath your skin? I wonder and I ponder that thought as I remain stuck here in this petrified, grotesque waste of a human’s soul cage, summoned from my comfort to satisfy a simple curiosity! Why does He command me so?” Daryl’s imposter spat at the floor and paused, his face permanently set in a sullen frown as he spoke his last question towards the ground. Dillon blinked as he gazed up at the creature, still in disbelief.

“So let’s have it! Are you indeed as pure as your God claims you be, or are you like everyone else? Are you one of an expansive, collective mass of human disappointment for the Creator to wallow in? Will you be another poor, weak and misguided human soul choosing the path most walked so as...not to have to speak too much? You do speak, do you not?!”

Dillon suddenly felt his fear dissipate as he finally began to control his breathing. *Yell Dillon, just yell and if anyone hears, they’ll come and if they don’t, at least you won’t stutter...*

“Wh-who are you?! Where’s Daryl?!”

The demon stared back, finally gazing at the boy with a look that made Dillon’s fear quickly return. His eyes were completely black, which was frightening enough, but somehow the image of two black holes was so disturbing to Dillon, it just rendered him completely immobilized.

Well, I guess that explains the dark sunglasses today, he thought as he stood there feeling like an idiot at the thought earlier he’d had about Daryl having possibly turned into a vampire. *I was way off on that one...*

“I am something more than you can see here, trapped in this useless meat cage. I am who you think I am and this whore I’ve replaced is of no concern to you. He is simply my soul of choice at the moment, and I, his only chance at greatness, for he can now boast that he once housed the famous,” he hesitated in his bragging as he first glanced upward, then over to Dillon.

Dillon whispered back to him in acknowledgement. “Belial. You are Belial and he summoned you here, but w-why?” He thought of Sebastian and went to say his name, but the faucet behind him turned on and he shot forward, startled and distracted.

“Say his name and the boy will die. I will rip him to pieces and carry him with me to hell, where he will spend an unknown amount of time, until I feel satiated that is, screaming in pain whilst I eat his skin. Is that something you want to live with – right - I didn’t think so.”

Belial paused and smiled, only to bend down and look at his side profile in the mirror behind Dillon. He brushed aside an invisible strand of hair and air kissed his reflection.

Dillon opened his mouth to speak, but this time nothing came out. Belial looked at him again as if for the first time in shocked amazement and shook his head in disapproval.

“There’s got to be more than this mere, tiny and pathetic morsel who stands before me. He is usually more discriminating! Not predictable in his trophy selection this time now is he? I thought he was taking more than pretty faces. He must be just picking them out of a top hat now!”

“How sad...well, as I was saying, this place is just way too clean. There just isn’t enough filth and wasteful residue in this living hell we find ourselves in, now is there? Me, I prefer a bathroom I can really sink my toes into - a swamp of impurities and excrement left behind by all God’s creatures – purging their souls through their asses. So, without further adieu,” he smiled, showing crooked, sharp and dagger-like teeth. “Let the expulsion begin!”

He gracefully leaped to the next stall door and as he did so, the first toilet began to overflow a dark, thick liquid. It seeped across the dingy white floor, coating and clinging to everything it came in contact with, moving upward unnaturally along the sides of the wall closest to the door.

Dillon watched in horror as the seeping sludge crept along, stopping and shrinking back as the sunlight lit the hall leading to the opened doorway. He darted his eyes back to the demon, realizing he’d not been watching him and couldn’t find him anywhere in the room. Dillon gasped and walked in circles around the middle of the bathroom; by now all six stalls were overflowing, and the smell was overwhelmingly strong. He went to speak and instead, breathed in the putrid-smelling air. He first coughed, then gagged, then vomited into the nearby sink; his instinct to not throw up on the floor overriding his common sense, since the shitty soup was now gathering around his shoes. He slipped and almost fell backward, catching and grabbing hold of the sides of the sink instead. He looked up into the mirror at his reflection while his feet still slid around under him then stopped as he saw the demon standing right behind him, leaning in to smell his hair with Daryl’s new nose, a nose turned upward and pug-like as he watched the enlarged nostrils vibrate as the sniffing continued.

The wicked toothy grin and those black eyes stirred something awake in Dillon, provoking him to advocate for his worst enemy. He whispered the phrases at first, then repeated

them louder each time.

“In the name of my Father, I command you to leave this child of God...in the name of my Father, I command you to leave this child of God!” Dillon finally found his balance and stood tall, still holding the sink as if his life depended on it.

“He is no child of God! Ha! You speak unholy lies! You have no allegiance with Him and He cares not for souls such as this one.” Belial reached up with a hand covered in shit, keeping it above Dillon’s shoulder, and let it drip down the front of his shirt. “Opps! Shouldn’t have done that! Now I’ve made a messy-poo on you!” The smell made Dillon gag again and he vomited in his mouth.

“The bitch is mine! The bitch is mine! Ding dong, the bitch is mine! Ha! Try to take him, pretty fool! Try to show yourself worthy of my time. That’s it, now show me love—“

Dillon turned and spat his vomit he’d stored in his mouth right into Belial’s face. The demon smiled as the yellow bile dripped down his chin and hung there, too thick to fall to the floor. The demon licked his mouth with his long tongue and then wiggled it at Dillon, whispering as he did so. Dillon turned back to the mirror, afraid to look over as Daryl’s tongue licked and wiggled around his cheek. “He kissed you with this tongue, didn’t he? And you sooo liked it, sooo much so, you kept it a ssssecret, protecting your lover from your brother and his friend because you wanted more than his tongue, didn’t you?”

The mirror popped and cracked as Dillon continued to stare at it. Several pieces fell into the sink. Belial laughed.

“That’s neat-o! Now I see why - yes, I see your witchy ways now! How glorious! And of course you flatter me with the hope of thoughtful violence, but honestly, do you really want to hurt me – or Daryl, I mean?”

Dillon breathed out hard and closed his eyes in shame. When he opened them, he watched Belial flick shit with his fingers onto the side of his face and laughed. A thick brown streak started at Dillon’s cheek and ran down, resting on the edge of his chin. Another brown blob hung off his earlobe. He closed his eyes again, not wanting to see the excrement for fear of vomiting again.

It’s not really there Dillon, although you can feel it tickle your skin, it isn’t...just open your eyes and look your enemy in the face, remember?

Belial shot behind Dillon in a blink of an eye and whispered huskily in his ear Marilyn

Monroe style. “Oh, how sweet love is...how fucking sweet of you to protect your lov-er—“

The rage from Dillon’s eyes took over as they shot Belial across the room, hitting the back of his head against one of the stall doors as he continued to rocket backward, slamming into the pipes sitting above the toilet. He shot up in amazement and grimaced, popping his neck again with one hand while he wiped the vomit off his chin with the other. He stood up.

“Neat trick, boy lover! Now I know why—“

Dillon slammed him back into the toilet again, knocking him off his feet and pinning the demon there with his eyes. Belial began to laugh as he struggled against the hold.

“Oh my, my, my, you are strong! What a pleasant surprise! Now be a good boy toy and let me up so that we can duel like proper competitors and begin your training, okay?” Belial struggled with the toilet seat, but he couldn’t rise off it. His arms he shot out to brace himself against the sides of the stall as he felt Dillon bore into him, trying to move him to the wall behind the toilet. “I...think...not!” Belial gasped and stayed there, Daryl’s arms bending unnaturally to resist Dillon’s power.

As he pinned Belial in the bathroom stall, Dillon thought of what he needed to do. It was suddenly so simple, he decided, smiling, his confidence growing with his powers. He watched Belial’s once smug face turn to a hesitating frown as he watched the boy think.

Dillon reached down and behind himself with his left hand. He took two steps toward the demon so that he was in line sight with the door to the hallway, the sunlight shining through. He knelt down while maintaining his gaze and his hold on the demon.

Belial panicked as he spat vomit at Dillon. “Foolish little witchy boy! Do you know who you deal with?! Wait, what are you—“

The piece of mirror caught the reflection of the sunlight from the doorway as he angled it to shine on Belial. The shit around the bathroom repulsed away from the light, cowering and hiding behind the stalls and crawling back into the toilets.

The demon gasped as the light from the sun and the reflection from the mirror stung his eyes, flinging his head backward hard. Daryl’s body then followed, smacking into the wall above the toilet as the light intensified under Dillon’s control. A scream came forth from the demon’s mouth so high pitched, the other two mirrors behind Dillon cracked in response, lasting a few seconds while Daryl’s body convulsed and shook violently on the wall. It quickly stopped almost as soon as it had started, with Daryl going limp and hanging there, looking crucified.

The image made Dillon drop his mouth in awe and he lost his concentration and his hold on the boy. Daryl fell to the ground after first landing on the pipe above the toilet.

Dillon dropped the glass without thinking as he suddenly felt the pain in his hand. He broke his gaze on Daryl and saw his hand dripping blood, pooling on the ground. He stood up and staggered over to the roll of paper towels and wrapped his hand. His palm was cut, along with his index finger, where he had been holding the glass so firmly, he hadn't realized the pressure he was placing on his hand. He held his arm up with steady pressure as he ran over to Daryl, surveying the room as he did so. It appeared as though Belial had gone – but where? *Did I send the demon back down to hell, or did I just send him down into the toilet, and if he is in the toilet, he could come out easily...*

By now all the vile excrement soup lining the walls and floor had retreated back into the toilets. Besides the mirrors being cracked, the rest of the bathroom looked noticeably untouched. Daryl was lying next to the toilet slumped over when Dillon got to him. He knelt down and shook Daryl's shoulder, then lifted his head up to inspect his face. He breathed out a sigh of relief as he gazed down at Daryl's familiar face again with no visible trace that a demon had once resided there.

Daryl opened his eyes and blinked them repeatedly as he stared transfixed on Dillon. "Am I dead? Where am I?"

"I don't know if you'd believe me if I t-told you, b-but you're safe. You d-did fall and I think you're hurt. H-h-how do you feel right now?" Dillon whispered as he went back and forth with his nervous gaze, from Daryl to the toilet next to him and back again. He reached up over him and flushed the toilet for good measure. "Good riddance," he whispered.

"What did you say? What are you doing?" Daryl went to get up and fell back on his ass.

Dillon stood up and reached his hand down to help his enemy stand. It was a strange scene, and he couldn't believe he was actually helping his nemesis out, but he was.

Daryl stood up with Dillon's assistance and stretched. He looked sore as he grimaced and shook his head. He was notably much taller than Dillon, almost dwarfed him, and Dillon took a few steps back to let him have his stretch. The two of them in a bathroom stall was beginning to give Dillon the creeps. He turned and walked out as two boys walked in and saw them both there together. Dillon panicked. Daryl walked over and stood behind him smiling broadly. The two boys turned silently and walked out quickly without saying a word.

“Oh, great! That’s just great!” Dillon threw his hands up and ran over to the doorway to yell at them. “IT’S NOT WHAT YOU THINK! Hey! Come back...!” He slammed his backside into the doorframe right as the last bell of the day rang out.

Chapter Thirty One

Second To Third

They got to the portal with minutes to spare. As they flew through, rocketing off the last rooftop and landing in an old, abandoned warehouse, Sarin was the first to survey the room, dusting himself off and making sure they were alone. He turned to the others, all of them standing there watching him.

“They are still going to come, so we need to keep moving. Third Plane is basically Second, only the humans aren’t quite so stupid and shocked, if you will. The lucky ones to make it here have evolved because of their survival through Second and Purgatory, and you’ll see the difference. Trust no one and keep on guard. Most of these evolved humans aren’t easily led here, and the ones to survive and make it to this level are the ruthless types,” Sarin turned and glared at Joel and David as he finished with, “But you already know that about your kind, don’t you?”

Joel turned and whispered to David, smiling, “Feelin’ ruthless?”

“Always ready to be NOT easily led.” David whispered back.

“Hey Sarin? Question?” Joel paused as Sarin frowned back at him and spat out a “No questions,” reply.

“Um...since David and I are now in Third, are we evolved too - because he and I are already in agreement about being ruthless?”

Sarin ignored him, but Leselle giggled and that was all Joel needed for an adequate response.

Sarin motioned them all to the large pile of wooden boxes lined up twenty feet tall to the edge of a stairwell ripped in half, and the only door out of the basement building they found themselves in.

Joel continued to whisper jokes to David and Leselle.

“You know, I can hear you even when you whisper, fools.” Sarin whispered back, then spoke in Elvin to Leselle and Ulred. Joel yelled out.

“Hey! That’s not fair! Speak American or go home!” He snickered and glanced over at David, who was beginning to climb up the boxes to follow the elves; they were already making the jump up to the stairwell. Joel followed reluctantly.

Sarin continued to converse back and forth with Ulred in Elvin, while Leselle remained

quiet. David finally spoke up as they all reached the stairwell and balanced there, looking down at the run down storage room from above. He turned and looked at Ulred, avoiding Sarin and spoke in Elvin. Ulred just stared blankly back at him, while Sarin turned to Leselle and frowned.

“When did you have the time?” He asked.

Leselle giggled. “He was a quick learner. It didn’t take long. We’ve moved on to Orc and specifically Nagul right now, right Dave?” She batted her eyes and smiled upward to her protector. David didn’t look amused but he smiled for show. “Yep, that’s right.” He ignored Joel’s baffled expression as he held out his left hand and showered the boxes below them with a stream of fire, then turned and ran up the rest of the stairs, followed closely by Sarin, who quickly caught up to him and pulled him aside, speaking to him in Elvin.

“The zombies will come and that fire you left behind will only buy us a few minutes. Stay close to me and don’t go off on your own. If Joel wants to, then it’ll be his funeral. You need to remember this is advanced Second Plane, and the humans here will only see you as a new victim to rip apart, not to try to hide behind you like they tried back there. There will be no hero worship here, so remember that.” He paused to think of more information, having suddenly earned respect for David’s acquiring his language. It gave him a thrill to speak to a human in his native tongue. “And they travel in groups or gangs, so ambush is common. The gangs can be large too—“

“Don’t speak to me in Elvin unless we are in private. This information you give me would benefit Joel too, so don’t piss me off and intentionally leave him out. I’ll only stay close to you if you aren’t exclusive.” David leaned in close to whisper in the elf’s ear as the others approached the top of the stairs. “I need you, but only if you let me. Remember that.”

Sarin sighed and didn’t bother answering. Once outside, they all squinted and held up their hands to block the bright light of the artificial sun as it almost blinded their arrival. The heat was intense too, and the air felt heavy. They stood there trying to adjust to the light when Sarin leaned over and whispered to Joel and David both.

“Joel, give him your invisibility cloak and make haste.”

“Why? I’ve tried and he won’t take it - trust me.” Joel answered.

“His mark will draw every slithering, slimy, low life bounty hunter to him and us for that matter! Besides, the Dark Lord’s hunters are already looking for him. I wouldn’t be surprised if

the zombies didn't draw attention to our escape. I know if I was hunting you and I looked up to see zombies flying over rooftops in mass pursuit, I'd be on board. Let's go." Sarin then noticed the hesitation on Joel's face and he began to seethe. They need to separate, he thought, for good. He leaned in to whisper in disgust at Joel. "You can watch and admire him once we've reached shelter, so try to hang on."

Joel took a step back and returned the glare. "You need to remember—"

"Let's go everyone!" Sarin interrupted Joel and turned his back on him after addressing the others.

They took off running down a deserted street corner in a metropolitan city, with large, massively tall buildings, mixed with smaller scale ones, and a feel that screamed New York City after the apocalyptic war to end all wars. There were no signs of life anywhere, and in contrast to Second Plane which was chaos on a grand scale with people running everywhere and unchecked carnage in the streets and doorways, here in Third, it was a scene out of a movie; an epidemic wiping out an entire city. Nothing was moving as he panned the area, but David didn't feel alone. Quite the opposite, he thought, I feel watched by thousands of eyes.

Joel threw the invisibility cloak over David's head in a playful attempt to get his point across as they ran along together in a group and David grabbed at it, frowning at them while he threw it on. "Great, I feel so loved by all of you. I think I'll hide now."

"We need to go this way to get off the main thoroughfare." Checking back to make sure David was covered and sighing in relief to see he had complied, Sarin continued the lead. After a few blocks, David called out to him, stopping himself as he jogged by a subway station. The others followed suit.

"David, don't go down into the tunnel. It leads nowhere, trust me." Sarin turned around and shook his head disapprovingly. The others gathered around them and David pulled the cloak down to expose his head.

"Wait! If the zombies are hot on our trail, doesn't it make sense to take the subway? The tunnels down there are a maze as well, but it's not open season like this city cage we're in. We should take the subway."

Leselle looked up at David and asked, "What's a subway?"

Sarin came back over looking peeved.

David and Joel exchanged a quick smile. "A subway is an underground train. Almost

every large city has one. It's a mode of transportation. We can get anywhere in the city with it. David's right, we should go down here." Joel pointed to the stairs leading down to the subway, and Leselle looked and saw the darkness enveloping the stairs half way down and immediately shook her head.

"Actually, I think this is New York City and that over there is Fifth Avenue." Joel looked around in a full circle and smiled like he had finally returned home. "This is my home Dave, only it looks completely deserted..."

"Wake up Joel! We aren't in this city of yours! And the plan isn't changing – it's not going to happen! We go where I say! You don't know what is waiting for you down there, but I do, and this isn't the Living World, or wherever it was you came from! Things are different now, boys," his voice sounded condescending as he spoke to David and Joel like they were first graders, "We go, NOW!" Sarin pointed in the direction he was traveling in, frustrated and ready to scream at the next disobeying comment. *I can't believe I'm here a sitting target, squabbling with humans over which way to go. I don't need any of this.*

Before David or Joel could answer, and while Leselle was pleading with them to listen to Sarin, he just turned and started running in the direction he had pointed to earlier. Ulned quickly followed him, and after a brief pleading session, Leselle ran after him also. David turned to Joel, who wore an expression of mixed excitement and nervousness.

"Well, looks like today is your lucky day, Joel. You get to ride the subway. Come on, let's go before I change my mind." David grabbed Joel by the shoulder and off they ran down the stairs and into the darkness.

The stairs kept going, three sets of them to be exact, and it was difficult to travel down in total darkness, but Joel led the way. As they ran down the last flight of stairs to arrive on the platform of the subway, they unknowingly ran under a quiet waterfall; a single sheet of water completely soaked them both. David shook his cloak and dropped the hood so that only his head was visible, while his mark remained invisible.

There was a single tunnel once they got to the bottom of the stairs. David ran over, his hand a flame as he scanned down both ends of the tunnel. Nothing could be seen anywhere. It was completely empty. He turned back to the stairs to yell at Joel to follow him, but he ran into him instead. Joel looked worried as he stood as close as he could to David. David took a step back.

“Uh, Joel? Try not to invade my six inch personal space okay? It creeps me out when I can feel your breath on me like that.” He watched Joel dart his eyes around him, then back up the stairs. He looked like he was going to lose it. “Uh, Joel...hello...fucking hell this was a mistake, wasn't it?”

“Dave?” Joel whispered as he took a step towards him again and almost rammed into him, still looking around the empty subway, expecting a herd of zombies to appear at any second.

“Uh, yeah Joel, right in front of you again, standing here, not six inches away. If you stuck your tongue out you'd lick me - just don't—“

“Dave? Do you think I could, uh, have the cloak for awhile? You're so, so good at this kicking ass stuff and I'm relatively new, you know?” He stood there like a three year old needing to pee.

David just stared at him silently for a minute, trying to fight the urge to run back up the subway stairs with his tail between his legs and chase after Sarin like a groupie.

“Fine, although you can 'kick ass' too, Joel, I know this because I've seen you act without thinking and although I shouldn't say this, there were a few times when I'd stop fighting just to watch you work. It was...impressive – but don't let that go to your head. Let's go, shall we? Which way do you feel today, right or left?” David held out his fire hand and casually spoke, as if he were a tour guide and Joel, his customer.

Joel smiled weakly, trying to appreciate the humor and remain on his feet at the same time, now stunned by David's compliment. He tried not to let it show, but inside, his heart was racing and his chest and shoulders felt just a little bit bigger. “Well, you are left handed, so let's go left. I've always liked the left...” His voice comically whimsical, Joel smiled again as David threw his cloak around him. Joel caught it and stopped him, grabbing it out of his hands and throwing it back around David's shoulders. “If you wouldn't mind just keeping the hood down for me, that'd be all I need to feel like I'm not alone.”

“You're not, Joel. You will never be alone. I'll always be with you. Come on, I suddenly feel violent - this should be fun.” David winked over his shoulder and ran over to the tracks and jumped down, catapulting and flipping forward, landing in an eight foot drop off. Joel followed in similar fashion, copying David and chuckling.

“I've always wanted to run the subway tunnels,” Joel put his hand to his mouth, making it

tremble as he spoke, while he jokingly made his voice sound emotional and shaky, “Since I was a child (cough). It’s a dream come true really.” He turned to David and continued. “I guess wishes do come true, don’t they?”

David smirked as he glanced at Joel, then grabbed his shoulder to pull him over to the edge so that they weren’t running along the center of the subway track in full view. “Sure, sure they come true. That’s why we’re here.”

They ran along the edge for a mile without seeing a single soul. David thought it strange, but he wasn’t concerned. *We aren’t in deep enough.* No sooner had he thought that, he stopped in his tracks behind Joel, running into him in the dark after he’d extinguished his light at the beginning of the tunnel.

“There are three tunnels, Dave. Which one do we take?” Joel whispered back as he leaned and knelt down along the edge of the track, tucked into the wall. He glanced over when David didn’t answer him just in time to catch the cloak and watch David walk out into the middle of the junction of the adjoining tunnels. He whispered as he walked away. “Stay there.”

He held his breath as he watched David walk out, his mark lighting the way easily for him. “What’s he doing?” He whispered to himself, then it hit him. “He’s flushing them out...”

David got to the junction and discreetly held out a torch and lit it with a quick flick of his finger, then blowing the fire so that a stream shot forth five feet to briefly light the first tunnel. It was empty. He turned to the middle tunnel and repeated the same, seeing a group of two dozen or so humans scurry away and hide, some looking back at him, but most just running and jumping out of the tracks and onto the ledges to disappear. They don’t seem as strong and ruthless as Sarin had made them out to be, he thought as he watched them run away.

He then turned to the last tunnel off his right side and shown his light, only to pull out his saber and slice through the midsection of a warrior jumping down behind him in ambush. He then quickly dodged two silver morning stars, each one going to a shoulder and followed through by flipping backward. He deflected another morning star with his sword when he heard an unfamiliar voice call out.

He looked over in time to see Joel standing next to him, catching his four pointed star boomerang after slicing through the neck of another would-be attacker on David. Joel spun his weapon in his hand. The voice spoke again.

“That was interesting! And you are only two?! I must say I don’t know what I’m

impressed with the most, the two of you alone in my subway with no back up, unless they're all hiding," laughter from other voices could be heard as he continued. "Or the dodging of my stars. I don't think I've EVER seen anyone dodge a star with a sword, have you Boomer?" The mysterious voice stepped out from the ledge and leaned against a metal pole holding up a massive beam above their heads. He wore a black jumpsuit but as he turned his head to the side to glance at Boomer, his Mohawk with its tall spikes became his prominent feature.

"Well," David stepped forward, still holding his long sword in his hand as he sliced it along the ground in a line. "Why don't you come down here and I'll give you a personal lesson?" He smiled sarcastically up to the Mohawk man.

Boomer came charging out of the shadows, fuming as he drew his axe and stood behind the leader. He was bald, large and packing at least three hundred pounds.

"Let me kill him, Master! The mother fucker killed Cay!" Boomer screamed his emotion as he pointed at the body lying near Joel. Joel and David both saw her now too; her head, having been separated from her body by Joel's weapon, revealed her long braid. It had unwound itself from a hat she was wearing.

"Oh, shit," Joel whispered, but David quickly nudged him silent. He stepped in front of Joel and spoke loudly. "She shouldn't have been in disguise! Besides, she was the one attacking. Maybe you should keep your bitches in hiding, instead of doing your work for you! Let him come, and you can follow, if you'd like—"

The leader pushed Boomer back and silenced him with one hand.

David laughed. "Can you get him to roll over and play dead too?"

"Nice marking. It's cool the way it lights the room." The leader spoke casually but his interest in David was obvious and sinister as he leaned playfully against the pipe for another second to check out the intruder. Some of the others near him were also venturing out and creeping forward to get a glimpse at the bold human. They all looked dirty, grungy and devious as they took in both the nice, clean forms of David and Joel.

The leader spoke again after getting his share of an up and down visual of David. "Do you belong to a tribe here? What people do you know? Maybe we know the same people." He jumped down, holding his hands up as if implying he was not interested in fighting, although David already knew this and smirked at the gesture. He wasn't in the mood to make friends as he watched the spiked leader take a few steps toward him cautiously, however looking at him

like he was a slab of prime steak. It pissed David off quickly. He didn't have to think about it.

The light from David's fire lit the leader's face as he stood not six feet from them. Looking beyond him, David guesstimated twenty or so followers and Boomer, who could easily count as two. "I don't need a tribe to prove to you what I already know," David whispered to the burning body quietly, then held out his hand and shot a stream of fire thirty feet long, igniting everyone in his path. The heat was so intense, even Joel stepped farther behind him, so as not to feel the intense burn. He surveyed the area behind them for stragglers while his friend destroyed the posse of humans before them.

Sighing in boredom, David lowered his hand and called out to Joel, and the two of them recovered the scene quickly, pick-pocketing the charred remains of the leader for a bag of gold pieces.

They started down the tunnel the gang had occupied and got about twenty feet when Boomer jumped out of the shadows and swung his axes, aiming for Joel and barely missing him as he dodged out of the way. Luckily for Joel, with his night vision he had already spotted Boomer crouching in the corner but hoped to avoid fighting him by just running by and exiting the scene. I won't make that mistake again, he thought quickly as he performed his version of David's famous back bend as the axes came across his body.

David was quick to turn and react, pulling out his saber and slicing through one of Boomer's arms as he moved it across Joel. An axe fell to the floor with a loud clang as the beastly man staggered backward grunting and still wielding his remaining axe.

David threw his sword down and pulled out his two daggers strapped to his legs and ran in for close hand to hand combat. Joel stood back and guarded the area to secure it while David dodged a few swings by the incredibly slow Boomer, only to finally and quickly get in close enough to deliver two lethal blows; a stab and slice upward to the midsection while he caught Boomer's arm in mid swing, grabbing and breaking it in two as he turned, his back to Boomer, and jabbed his second dagger straight back through the big man's throat. David turned and pushed him backward while Joel watched in awe.

For a second, Joel thought, they looked like they were dancing, every movement executed smoothly and oddly with Boomer's permission, as if he were along for the ride, at least until Joel watched Boomer hit the ground like a fallen tree.

David casually walked over and wiped his daggers on the fallen man's clothes while he

searched him for anything worthy. Joel watched, mouth opened, thinking to himself, *I'll never get used to this brutality, but David seems to thrive on it...*

“These humans are all fucking poor,” David yelled as he kicked Boomer’s side in frustration. “I can’t find anything worthy on their sorry asses, but maybe a few gold pieces. I kinda hoped this big guy here had a pack of smokes or something. If there’s anyone listening, what do I have to do to get a cigarette? What-do-I-have-to-do?” He clenched his fists as he stepped over Boomer’s largely distended abdomen and continued on.

Traveling another half a mile down the tunnel, they slowed down, coming up to a station and platform area. There were stairs leading up both sides and enough sun coming through to efficiently light the open room. David put on the invisibility cloak and motioned to Joel to stay at the tracks.

He returned a minute later and pulled Joel aside to tell him what he’d surveyed. “There are twenty or so guys and they just killed six or seven humans and now they have a girl and they’re passing her around. It looks like it’ll get predictably ugly.” David whispered as he looked away, his voice sounding disinterested.

“That’s bullshit! Let’s go help her. I’m not going to EVER get numb to that type of bullying, Dave.” Joel jumped up as David reached out and missed him, sighing and taking off his cloak, he followed him onto the platform. They both cleared their throats as they approached the group of rowdy men, all of them pushing a girl around, grabbing her body and groping her while she screamed, finally falling into the arms of the biggest guy, but he wasn’t the leader as he held onto her tightly.

The leader of the gang of scary looking subterranean human hybrids squatted on a cement landing near the stairs. He wore an old, brown gas mask straight from the Second World War and dressed in camouflage gear. He smacked a thick, long black chain against the side of the cement as he remained silent. He looked menacing and cocky, which only pissed David off more.

The leader looked over and saw David and Joel, then quickly looked away as if already no longer interested. The men all quieted down and some drew their weapons. The girl stopped screaming and stared at the two strangers, a pleading look on her face, her black eye makeup running down her cheeks from crying earlier.

“Sorry we’re late fellas - we’ve been behind schedule all day.” Joel spoke casually over

at the men as he approached.

David came over and stood next to him, brushing off his pants then clapping his hands together, as if mocking the scene with applause. “Nice job though, like what you’ve done here – impressive bullying and look Joel, they even have a hostage! Do you think a rape will be in progress here? Shall we intervene?”

Joel replied quickly with a “Yep, it’s superhero time again.”

“Yeah, it sucks to be Superman. Someone’s gotta do it though, right?” David turned to address the temporarily stunned group of scary looking guys. “But honestly, in all your fairness,” he pointed and addressed the group, “with that last group of bullies we just took out, we’ve already exceeded our quota for bullying bullies today, and from the look of this scene right here,” David smacked the back of Joel’s shoulder as he walked by him and over to the center of the group, “I think we’re right on time.”

“Yep, sucks to be you guys.” Joel spoke to the group as he pulled out his arm swords and shook his head.

“Correction Joel, it sucks to be us – we’re the ones outnumbered!” David spoke up comically and some of the men behind him snickered and laughed, taunting him as he unknowingly maintained their attention with his charm. “We’re the almost extinct superheroes, remember? Blindly fighting an unworthy cause, helping out damsels in distress...” David pointed his finger and shook it at Joel to reprimand him. More laughter from the back of the group as the men surrounded them. Joel nodded his head in agreement as he appeared sullen.

As David and Joel approached, David pulled out his saber, making sure to catch the girl’s attention as he twirled the handle in his hand. The only noise in the room was the smacking of the chain against the cement and the girl breathing heavily as she showed her understanding with her eyes.

The leader continued to smack the chain squatted there, confident as ever, apparently looking at David, although with the mask on, no one could really tell.

David balanced his saber on his index finger and before anyone could comment on his ability to keep it there, he shot it up in the air and tossed his own surprise – a mini dagger - piercing the side of the neck. His movement so quick, no one noticed.

The unknown captor reached up to grab his neck as the blood shot out in spurts, letting the girl go as he staggered backward. She caught the saber David tossed to her and turned, the

three of them in a circle, their backs facing the inside as they formed a human triangle.

The men had their weapons already in hand as they surrounded the trio. The leader muffled a laugh. “Kill them, but keep the girl alive - I wasn’t finished with her yet.” He smacked the chain again impatiently, letting it rattle under him.

“I hope you can fight better than your dead friends,” David whispered to the girl as he smiled at the leader and waved, purposefully not getting a weapon.

“Uh, Dave? Where’s your weapon? Please tell me you’re just in the act of deciding which of the many you have to use?” Joel whispered, his voice revealing his nervousness at his friend’s strange behavior.

David didn’t answer, distracted and amazed by his hands. They felt so powerful as he stretched out his fingers and breathed in. He focused on all of the warriors around him and none of them at the same time. It was as if he had the room already fragmented and filed away in his mind; able to pinpoint with unbelievable accuracy where every threat in the room was located. He could have closed his eyes and fought just as well. He also felt incredibly strong, and he uncharacteristically lunged forward out of their circle to start the fight, pulling two warriors to him as they swung their weapons. It was a bold move that ignited the battle for everyone while the leader watched, looking on from his perch in the corner near the stairwell.

Joel’s mastery of his pair of arm swords, thanks to the genius of Oleander, paid off for him. The mini swords spanned the length of most of his arms, extending out a few inches from the tips of his fingers and arching out near his elbow. The handles where his hands had to grip weren’t the heaviest part of the weapons. By spanning over his entire arms, they allowed the other parts of his body, mainly his elbows and shoulders, to do the majority of the work.

He engaged in quick combat, jumping and balancing off the side walls and moving through the scene faster than the warriors who pursued him, throwing his arms out and gliding through the crowd as he went. He was able to slice and move out of the way quickly - a trick David had suggested when they were grossly outnumbered against the zombies in Second; slice, dice, block and move on, not allowing another opponent to jump in or get you from behind. It had worked for Joel today, and he began to smile as he successfully maneuvered around the perplexed enemy, frustrating them and pecking them off one by one while they ran into each other trying to catch him standing still.

The girl fought with great valor, however most of the warriors chose not to engage her

too harshly, fearing they'd injure her and upset their leader. She was kept from getting close to the edge of the platform to prevent her escape, and when she did get close, they'd gang up on her and push her back into the center of the brood.

David started out in a blaze and flutter of movements no one could detect let alone, see. The two warriors to swing at him both received matching throat jabs, but unlike his fighting in the Living World, this time his strength crushed their airways, leaving deep fist implants and collapsing their necks simultaneously as they dropped their weapons in unison and staggered backward, holding their throats and gasping for air.

He was quick as he turned and dodged a series of swords, grabbing another sword out of the air with his hands, palms slapped together along the middle of its shaft; he snapped it in two and threw it like a dagger at a nearby fighter attacking Joel, hitting him in the side of the throat. The warrior with the broken sword threw it down and pulled out a metal pole two feet long with a spiked silver ball on a short chain. He swung it above his head as he motioned to David to come with him out into the middle of the room. He wore a goofy grin implying he was love struck. David smiled graciously as he accepted.

Walking towards the goofy warrior, David breezed through two others, both approaching him from opposite sides of the room. He dodged the first sword and stepped back, grabbing the arm as it traveled incredibly slow across his vision field - as did everything and everyone else when it came to his ability to track objects. The other warrior came in swinging his sword and David caught his arm as well, then pulled them into each other. Even with the two of them resisting, it was nothing for him to move them against their will. They stabbed each other as he reached up and slammed their heads together, crushing their skulls and pushing them apart effortlessly. They flew backwards across the room as he continued to walk over to the challenge. This time however, his challenger looked worried. He dropped his weapon and turned to run away, the other three standing nearby watching David's last move also turned and jumped into the track, running into the darkness and away from the scene.

David turned back to the group and noticed the girl just standing there still holding his sword, bent down and trying to catch her breath as she struggled to breathe. Joel was in the act of running up the side of the wall in a chase by the remaining warrior, only to turn and jump off the wall after traveling up ten or so feet while the warrior looked on dumbfounded. He did a back flip and landed behind his enemy, slicing down his back with both swords as he did so.

With his arms straight out, Joel divided the warrior's body in three perfect columns from his head and shoulders down to his feet. As his blades touched the ground, Joel hopped backward, landing on his feet. He turned and bowed to David as if expecting applause. The girl watching applauded instead.

David didn't see the leader, but he heard his chain hit the stairway as he ran out of the subway. Not wanting to let all of them get away, he chased after him, curious to see how he fought and could command such a large group without a face or much in the way of words.

As he flew up the stairs, David could hear Joel call up to him but he didn't stop. He knew they were safe for the time being and he got an instant thrill at being suddenly alone in the stairway. Once he got to the top of the stairs he fell backward, after getting smacked by the chain across his chest. He fell down four steps and stopped himself from sliding any further by grabbing the railing. "Fucking Hell!" He yelled in frustration at literally falling for a simple rookie mistake as detrimental as following someone without using caution. He breathed out forcefully then came bolting up again, expecting what he should have known to begin with. His mind raced with thoughts of Sarin shaking his head in disapproval. Thank the powers that be; Sarin isn't here right now to see that stupid humiliation.

As he ran up the last steps, this time, instead of dodging the chain, he caught it, and pulled by the leader, shot across and over the top of the wall leading outside like a newly caught fish on a line.

They found themselves facing each other in a tug of war on the street corner. David thought about his fire, but instead used his strength to pull the leader to him close enough to rip off his gas mask. He wanted to see his enemy. Why it bugged him not to know his assailant's face he couldn't figure out, but he stood out in the open exposing himself to the city above as he struggled to try to get at the mask; each of them taking turns hitting and blocking. This one is fast, I'll give him that, and he obviously knows his way around a fight, David thought, as they hit, kicked, and blocked their way along the side walk.

It was a choreographed event as they moved each other around in circles, each still holding onto opposing sides of the chain, at least until David decided to use his brain instead of his muscle. He glanced around his surroundings, quickly thinking up a solution. He whipped the chain around a pole nearby, catching the stranger off his feet enough to spin him around and choke him with the chain, pinning him against the metal pole. In two quick movements David

snapped his neck and dropped him, kicking him into the street in frustration as he did so. He rubbed his injured chest as the throbbing continued to annoy him, then casually walked over to rip off the mask when Joel called to him from the stairwell.

David turned to look at Joel but saw the mass of moving bodies instead. He waved to Joel to get down frantically as he saw them coming. Joel took off down the stairs after seeing the zombies also, at least fifty strong and maybe only a block away.

“Oh shit!” Joel screamed as he motioned the girl back down and ran after her.

David also ran over to the stairwell but paused as he noticed a band of Nagul and a dark haired man running behind and off to the side of the zombie clan.

The mysterious man stopped in the middle of the street and appeared to smile as he laid eyes on him. The image stunned and temporarily immobilized David as he felt the urge to fight and run at the same time. Joel reached up and grabbed the back of his coat from the stairs and pulled him down before he could make up his mind.

Chapter Thirty Two

Hide and Seek

“Do you know the tunnels?!” Joel grabbed the girl and shook her.

She looked stunned, not having ever seen a horde of zombies like that before. She suddenly snapped out of it as she watched Joel grab David, who was also still just standing there, and ran over to the tracks to jump down. She finally woke up.

“No, this way! I know a place we can go, but you’ll need permission. Follow me this way,” she pointed in the opposite direction on the other side of the platform. They followed her blindly along the edge, into the darkness.

They ran down about twenty feet when she quickly darted into the wall. They almost ran past her as she stuck out her arm and grabbed Joel to bring them inside.

Once inside the smaller tunnel, the door solidified shut. David and Joel both looked at each other then the door again, as it appeared to vibrate and move like charcoal colored jelly. It was clear enough they could look out at the tunnel easily.

“Did you see her hand actually come out of the wall, like I did, or are we on dope?” Joel whispered as the mystery girl grabbed him again to pull him along and whispered to both of them.

“I have to introduce you to Star, so that you can get permission. This underground safe house is strictly exclusive. Those creeps you destroyed back there were trying to gain access. They killed my friends and were going to torture me to gain entrance, but it wouldn’t have worked because I wouldn’t have cracked under the torture.”

She was boasting but David rolled his eyes and glared at Joel, pissed now and feeling as though saving her probably killed their cover. Joel tried not to notice him, but he knew what David was thinking anyway.

“Besides, I may not look it, but I’m loyal to a cause such as this one. I am grateful to you both for helping me, but—“

“Yeah, well, we don’t even know your name, so we’ll just hang out here until the coast is clear then be on our—“

“Her name is Patrick, Dave, isn’t that cool?” Joel chimed in, smiling at her while she blushed.

David rolled his eyes.

“Patrick, this is my best friend and personal hero, David Smith.” Joel held out his hand and touched David’s shoulder, then reached out with his other hand and rested it on her shoulder.

David pushed Joel’s hand off and fumed. “Look, don’t use me to get a quick feel of Patty’s shoulder, Joel!”

“Uh, it’s Patrick. I go by my last name, since down here a girl’s first name will give her away. I do know how to fight though, and I had my daggers, but they, they took them from me back there.” She looked down briefly and sighed, thinking of her lost friends.

David stared at her with sudden disinterest. “Gee that’s tragic. Now...moving on,” He turned to Joel, his back to her as she opened her mouth in anger and shock. “Did you see them?!” David smacked Joel in the chest with his opened hand to grab his attention as Joel mouthed a silent “I’m sorry,” to Patrick. “Damn it Joel! Come back from puppy love land and talk to me! Did you see them?!” He looked panicked for the first time ever, and Joel finally noticed as he looked at him.

“What the hell, Dave? They’re just zombies! You could probably take out all of them by yourself. So what if they have our scent. They won’t find us here, thanks to Patrick,” he smiled and winked at her and she quickly smiled back, while David looked disgusted.

“No, Joel! The Nagul!”

“Uh...what?” Joel finally snapped out of his drunken state as he broke his gaze with Patrick and looked at David. “Um...no, I didn’t see them, why?”

“Great, will let me be the first to break the news. They were with the zombies and coming, at least twenty strong—“

“Oh, shit - twenty?! Are you sure? Really?! Oh, we’re screwed, we are sooo screwed,” Joel whispered to Patrick, his voice giving him away as the type to surrender quickly.

“Who are the Na-Nagul? Is that how you say it?” Patrick asked. David looked at her and thought he’d heard her right. *Yep, thought I picked up on that accent. This chick is French.*

Joel started to panic, looking around them then out the doorway anxiously.

“But there’s more, Joel. Oh, it gets better. Their leader saw me and smiled. He looked, really, really, fucking powerful. I could feel it and I can honestly say I’m worried - what if he was sent by Az - by him?” David whispered the last sentence as he leaned into Joel’s space, trying not to include the girl and ignoring her as she stared at his side profile. He was about to say something sinister and wicked at her when Joel spoke, after calming himself down. He was

pacing back and forth in the small six foot long by three feet wide corridor.

“You mean like, a bounty hunter? Sarin mentioned something about every bounty hunter in the galaxy hunting your ass.” Joel spoke quietly as he finally stopped pacing.

“No, I hate to break it to you, son, but that guy was no bounty hunter - he was much, much more.” David sighed and looked down.

Patrick spoke up, deciding now was the time to speak. She was getting a thrill over being in the company of two beautiful, and obviously wanted, young men. She tried to contain her excitement at knowing that these two humans in front of her were from another place and dimension. She was horribly intrigued and smitten.

“Come with me so that I can at least get you a pass and when you meet her - and it’s a ‘she’ so I’m warning you - don’t insult or hurt her feelings—“

“We won’t! Of course we wouldn’t *dare*,” Joel assured Patrick, but she glanced at David and Joel cleared his throat. David flashed her a quick fake smile.

“He’ll be fine, really! He’s quite charming once you get to know him, he’s, uh, just having a bad hair day. Happens to all of us right?” Joel put his arm around her as they walked away then quickly turned himself back around as he heard the familiar screams and ran back over to David, who stood over near the door. It hardened before them, but they could still see out and across the tunnel.

“Can they?” Joel whispered.

“No, they can’t see inside, don’t worry.” Patrick went to grab Joel’s shoulder but he paused, motioning her over with his hand. Several dozen zombies ran by then stopped and looked around, their faces dazed and confused as they jumped up onto the eight foot high platform and walked around, smelling that familiar scent but not seeing any movement or signs of life.

David held his breath as he saw them approach. Two Nagul warriors followed the zombies, one of them grabbing a zombie and throwing it the full length of the tunnel as it walked across his path. He snorted and chuckled at his buddy, who also laughed. The injured zombie got up and cracked its neck and screamed back at the Nagul, with an expression on its face to ‘knock it off.’ David shook his head in disbelief, unable to fathom these creatures let alone the fact that they communicate with each other like humans do. He just couldn’t believe the scene before him. *I just want to go home...I just want to sleep in my bed again...I want to see Dillon*

again...

“We are so screwed,” Joel whispered repeatedly.

“Sssh!” David whispered back, his hand across Joel’s chest as if he would protect him. Patrick stood behind the guys and also held her breath as she watched the eight feet tall reptilian warriors walk around in amazing war garb she’d never seen before.

“Oh my,” she whispered. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Well, trust me it isn’t pretty facing one of those up close, let alone twenty. Come on, I don’t wanna see anymore.” Joel went to leave, but David and Patrick stayed and watched, glancing at each other, both surprised they silently agreed on one thing: the Nagul were cool to look at.

David sighed as his mind raced again, nagging at him with obvious thoughts. “We shouldn’t have left Sarin. That was a big mistake I think I’ll regret when I’m captured tonight.” He rubbed his forehead in worry as he whispered to himself quietly, “I can’t believe I left him like that...I’m so fucking stupid.”

“No you’re not Dave - don’t say that. And you’re NOT going to get caught. Sarin is an asshole.”

“Joel, just shut up. You’re not making it better, just worse - much, much worse.” He looked up and stared at the Nagul, listening to their snorts and hissing was almost comforting, an early memory of his first night in purgatory.

Suddenly the mysterious man appeared, teleporting there in a flash to stand in the track and fume, rubbing his goatee and thinking intensely. As he turned to address the Nagul behind him while the zombies crawled around near him, amazed and drawn to his power; their worship evident and intriguing to watch from the sidelines, David noticed his eyes – one black, the other light blue and they drew him in. He recognized another figure standing in front of the human as well. He turned to Joel and whispered.

“Do you recognize the Nagul warrior next to that guy?”

“No, but then again, I didn’t meet any of them back in the day—“

“That was the one fighting Sarin on the plains that night. He must be the leader. He looks prominent.” David stood there in front of the door and chewed a long black finger nail as he continued to keep eyes on the man before him, listening to him finally speak, his voice deep and growling; it matched his eyes, disturbing yet slightly entertaining.

“Well, they didn’t just disappear, Captain Hunten! I suggest we comb the area for the little rats until we find them. I’m curious as to the location of the elves they were supposedly with. I am disappointed Sarin is not with them, but I suppose that is only my gain, given their predicament and their inability to leave Third. Still,” he spoke casually as he walked around the track, then shot up onto the platform area continuing to walk as if simply taking a step forward.

David opened his mouth in awe as he watched the magic unfold before him so easily.

Drake continued to talk down to the warriors as he paced the upper edge of the tunnel above them, hands behind his back, his black and brown outfit making him look the part of a dark, sinister Robin Hood. “I can’t imagine those little humans actually leaving the expert guidance of such a ranger as Sarin, but then again, they are young and incredibly human still, aren’t they?”

Captain Hunten and a few others snickered as they listened to every word he spoke, breathing in his brilliance; they were his captive audience as they watched him.

“Uh...what’s he talking about, Dave? What did he mean when he said we’re stuck in Third? We’re not, right?” Joel sounded worried.

“I don’t know Joel. I don’t get that either, but considering we don’t know where the portal is to Fourth, I’d say he’s probably correct in his statement about our situation.” David whispered harshly. If he could kick his own ass, he would he thought as Sarin entered his mind again. He vaguely remembered the elf telling him back in Sanctuary about that major detail. He turned and kicked the wall lightly in frustration. Sarin was great to have around when they were in a bind.

He was the go-to man - I mean, elf - and now, now who am I to go to? Joel? Not a chance. He’s afraid of his own shadow most of the time unless he’s saving some damsel in distress and Patrick? She’s a damsel who wears a man’s name but dresses in a halter top with cleavage that jiggles when she breathes quietly. He sighed and thought for a split second it wouldn’t be that bad to be caught and presented to Louis, would it? *At least he has cigarettes...*

“Send your warriors up and down this perimeter searching the walls and the floor. I’ll help you and brighten up the place.” Drake raised his arm out in a fist, then opened his hand, palm out and fingers extended. The tunnel became bright as day. The Nagul all surrounded him, then bowed to him and fanned out to search.

Captain Hunten stayed there, looking suddenly concerned. “Master, shouldn’t we

summon Him to come since he specifically requested such when the marked one was found—“

“BUT HE’S NOT FOUND CAPTAIN! Do you see him yet? I sure as hell don’t! You expect me to disturb Him when I have not yet acquired His precious little play thing yet? No, I don’t operate that way! I’ll find the useless human prize, not to worry and when I do, I’ll deliver him with a big fucking red bow on his precious, little head.” Drake raised his hand only to pull it into a fist like he was actually squeezing David’s little head. Captain Huntten immediately bowed down and reached for Drake’s outstretched hand, nudging it with the top of his head in a submissive gesture.

“Eww, you, a human toy? Ha! Try scary action figure with a huge chip on his shoulder,” Joel whispered as he looked over at David and noticed his friend’s eyebrows furrowed and his mouth in permanent frown.

I take that back, it would be bad - very bad - to be caught right now. I don’t want to be a human toy...

Drake fumed as he scanned the area, pausing as he appeared to look right at them, causing David and Joel to step back a few feet in response. “I’ll get my title if I have to look under every rock I come across – where are those zombie idiots?! They’re supposed to *smell* their way around yet I don’t see any of them!”

“They’ve moved ahead Master Drake,” a Nagul warrior spoke up as he bowed his head.

David and Joel both looked at each other, mouths opened. They both whispered to each other at the same time different sayings. “Oh, fuck,” and “we are so screwed.”

“Then they must be onto something fool! Follow them!” In an instant, Drake disappeared again, and the Nagul ran on, following the screams of the zombies through the tunnel.

David sighed worriedly and leaned up against the wall. Joel smiled at the departure.

“Let’s go. I want to introduce you to Star.” Patrick turned and walked down the short corridor.

They followed her down a long, winding and curved stairwell. She was a beautiful girl in a tom-boyish way, standing just under six feet tall, the same height as David and Joel, with jet black, short hair. She wore camouflaged pants and knee high combat boots matched with a similar looking button down jacket and the now famous black halter top, showing that she was indeed, female. From the back, she looked like a man, with large shoulders and a gangly gait,

but once again, when she'd turn around, her chest was first and center, and at least Joel was mesmerized.

They traveled down the incredibly long and winding staircase in the dark, the shadows created by the occasional torches lining the walls distracted and played with David's eyes; the fire called to him as he went further down. He was reluctant to leave the doorway and the image of Drake. He didn't want to hide, but felt it necessary for the time being. As they walked down the stairs, the excitement, challenge and danger of the Nagul and Drake continued to call to him the further down he went.

Once they got to the bottom the noise level skyrocketed. The sound of multiple drums could be heard pulsating through the doorway they approached. David became immediately interested again.

As Patrick walked up to the door, it opened and they entered. She walked in first and motioned them inside. There were no guards at the entrance and once they entered, they walked into a large warehouse three stories high, with a stage at the far end. There were several hundred people packed in, either dancing on the ground floor, over at the bar, or hanging over the second floor balconies that opened up along the walls above and around the room. The place was lit dimly by several low hanging chandeliers with fire pits in each center.

Upon entering and off to their right, the guys noticed the large bar stretching across the back wall. Several worked there, serving drinks and talking to the hordes of people gathering around it.

The music was intense with several drums the size of bus tires beating, along with four large metal banners hanging down along the back of the stage. The banners were vibrating as eight people stood opposite each one, hitting them with heavy clubs in tune with the beat. It was perfectly choreographed and the crowd responded by dancing their approval.

David walked in with an immediate presence about him and his mark glowing brightly, and several people standing near the door turned and watched him with much interest. He scanned the room as he entered, Joel following behind him and Patrick off to the side of the bar appearing to be trying to get someone's attention. The dozen or so people near the bar all stopped talking and turned back to stare at David while he purposefully ignored them. It was becoming a routine for him, this ignoring. He suddenly stopped walking as he heard Joel speak.

"Nice place you have here. I like it." Joel spoke as he hesitated first, then reached out

and lightly shook the hand of the hostess. She motioned for him to kiss the top of her hand and he did so in an awkward fashion.

Patrick cleared her throat as she tried to get David's attention. "Star, this is David, Joel's friend. They just saved me from a group of potential parasites. I owe them my continued existence." Patrick half bowed to Star as she glanced nervously over to Joel, who on silent command quickly reached out and grabbed David by the shoulder and turned him around. David let out the beginning of a laugh before Joel could reach out and pinch him.

"Ow! What the hell, Joel?!"

"Enchante," Star breathed out in drippy forced sex appeal as she glided over to stand in front of Joel so that David was forced to see her again. She stood very close and was at least two inches taller. He could see the stubble on her neck as he smiled coyly up at her.

She was a tall transvestite, hilariously dressed like a drag queen about to go on stage for a grandiose performance. She was slender and tall, wore a long cherry red wig and a silver sequined evening gown that plunged down the middle of her chest, showing cleavage even Joel would stare at. Her dress had long slits down both sides to reveal her long, skinny man legs and she tapped her sliver space boots as she held out her hand; a white glove donned each arm to the elbow.

David whispered to her before he took her hand. "You shouldn't wear heels, Star. It puts a guy at a disadvantage when he has to look up to meet you." He reached over and lightly grabbed her pointer finger and wiggled it gently, choosing to play with her so that he didn't have to kiss it. She giggled as she flipped her fake red hair behind her masculine shoulder.

"Sure thing, love - I'll keep that in mind. So...you like what I've done to the place, do you?" Star then glanced at Joel as if just now seeing him for the first time, admiring the color of his hair, then turned to David again, transfixed by his glowing yellow mark.

David and Joel both looked around and nodded silently in agreement. Star noticed the attention they were getting and smiled her approval.

David could feel her stare at his mark and he began to seethe. Why it angered him to know everyone he would meet or come across would know he had ties to Louis, he didn't know, but it pissed him off every time. They don't need to know about me, or him, or us, he thought as he stood there mad at the world.

"Well, it's taken me awhile to achieve all this, but it's been worth every ounce of my

efforts. This is my home, and I invite you to stay, however, we do need to sit at my personal table upstairs and talk, Sugars. I am curious about a few things and you know how we women get when we're nosy!" Star giggled in creepy guy fashion then hiccupped. Patrick joined in with soft laughter, softening the noise somewhat as they all walked over. The people around them parted like the Red Sea to let them through. As they walked by the bar David stopped and stood there, looking around and pondering his predicament.

"Dave?" Joel whispered, concerned and worried as he watched his normally stoic and overly confident friend look apprehensive for the first time since they all sat in the cave and discussed his relationship with the powers that be.

David turned to Star, who had continued to gab, walking a few more feet like a runway model. She turned towards them and paused, hand on her hip to show off her outfit as she flipped her wig again. It was beginning to annoy him. He wanted to reach out and rip it off her skinny little head and tell her to embrace himself. He instead smiled sweetly at her and spoke with an air of confidence that gave Joel instant relief from his worries. Star was going to be easily manipulated, David could tell, since she appeared to be about the same age and more importantly, she looked stupid as ever.

"I think we should just chat at the bar. I'd like a drink right over there. Care to join me?" He walked over to her and held out his arm. She paused as she looked back over to her personal suite with its comfy lounge chairs and privacy drapes. A girl needs privacy to get to know her guests...she began to talk when he interrupted her.

"But I thought we could—"

"I don't think so, Star. Let's go to the bar and have a drink, shall we?" He smiled at her again, his eyes commanding her. She blushed and smiled back.

"Of course, what was I thinking?" She giggled as she glanced over his shoulder to Patrick and Joel, both watching her reaction to him in awe.

"I honestly don't know what you were thinking. Ladies shouldn't think anyway, it makes their skin wrinkle and furrow around the eyes - not at all attractive." They both walked over to the bar with its many onlookers; her arm wrapped in his as he escorted her. Joel smiled as he shook his head and watched.

"Oh no, not attractive at all, darling - I agree! But nobody likes a stupid girl! I need to think to operate this place, you know?" She nudged into him in a playful but manly tap, almost

knocking him off his legs as she let out a deep laugh, then reached out to balance him again, apologizing for her strength. Joel and Patrick walked behind them; Patrick giggled while Joel tried not to let his jealousy show at not being David's center of attention.

David shot the bartender a wicked grin as he whispered back to her, "But I do enjoy stupid girls, Star. I like them dumb and non-operational."

Star giggled again huskily as she kicked off her high heel boots at the bar.

Back at the tunnels, and they were many in an endless maze, Drake stopped his search efforts a mile inside, calling his Nagul warriors to him. He knew they didn't have time to get as far as the zombies were running, and as far as he could tell, without being able to communicate with them, he wasn't even sure the zombies were still on the trail.

"We need to return to the place we last saw them. I will devise a plan once we are there. Do you smell them still, Captain?" Drake stopped and turned to his right.

"No, master, I do not. The smell was strongest at the stairs and the bloody platform." Captain Hunten motioned his warriors back and they did so quickly, arriving at the platform again in a few minutes' time. Captain Hunten ran back up the stairs to the city above and saw, as well as smelled, no sign of them. He turned to retreat down when he thought of a glorious idea.

Approaching his master who was standing in the middle of the platform and gazing down at a man divided into three and rubbing his goatee in curiosity, Hunten broke Drake's train of thought as he spoke. "Permission to speak, Master?"

"Go on, Captain. I have no time for formal engagements at the moment. Speak your mind without hesitation and save me time." Drake turned to his captain and waited.

"They have obviously disappeared into the walls, Master. The invisibility cloak they have would not have covered their smell and my warriors have been up and down the tunnel without picking up scent. No, I say they are hiding in the wall—"

"Of course they are, Captain! I have no doubt they are burrowing in like insects to hibernate for the winter. Tell me you have a plan to flush them out? I can't conceivably knock through these walls and NOT hurt them just to get to them, now can I?" Drake began to show his frustration, something he prided himself in not doing when he was stressed. He was always so calm and collected, but now he felt that slip away.

"But Master, if you summon him, he could—"

“Silence!” Drake yelled. The Nagul all stood still and looked over to watch their Captain bow his head quietly as he received the evil glare. “What is the matter with you, fool?! Are you that anxious to see the Dark Lord again? Are you love struck?” Drake sneered. “I assure you he will not notice you or your kind.” He then leaned in close to Hunten, whose head was still bowed. “He does not recognize your kind as worthy of his presence, Captain, not pretty enough to maintain his precious gaze. So keep that in mind as you pursue your new idol worship! He doesn’t accept you like I do! He thinks *nothing* of you.” Drake looked up as he heard the other Nagul whisper at the news he gave. Even with his head still bowed, Hunten had to look down at his master to listen to and see him. He had a sullen expression on his reptilian face as he watched Drake fume.

It was oddly emotional and not at all the Nagul way, which made Drake pause as he took it in, realizing the Dark Lord had indeed, very quickly charmed his army of powerful warriors AND he’d let his frustration make himself look like a jealous leader. He sighed and turned away to leave, only to quickly turn back to face Hunten again, putting his hands up on his captain’s shoulders and instantly improving his bad attitude; his voice softer and less annoyed as he spoke to the Nagul like children he would be reprimanding. “We will summon him when it is time. He will be disappointed if he comes now and sees the human not yet captured, do you not agree?” He watched intently as Hunten nodded his head in agreement, the others following suite as well.

He smiled at his recovery. He then straightened out Hunten’s collar and brushed invisible lint off his leather shoulder tunic while he spoke softly like a mother hen. “He thinks you and your warriors can find his property and has employed all of you to do such an important task, so I am only looking out for your best interests when I tell you to find the human first so that we can present him to the Arch Devil together. This is in the Nagul’s best interest to please the Dark Creator, for this will get your great race of warriors noticed – understand...hmm?” Drake smiled as he made eye contact with his captain, who had quickly decided that he also didn’t want to look like he couldn’t deliver on his promise to the elusive Dark Lord.

Captain Hunten puffed up his chest and snorted in agreement and new pride at Drake’s drippy compliments. The other Nagul standing around also snorted and grinned wickedly at each other in acknowledgement.

Drake let go of him and walked over to the edge of the platform, now surrounded by all of them. “Besides, if he didn’t think highly of your combined abilities to capture the little shit

then he wouldn't have requested you, now would he? So enough talk on the Dark Lord and on to smaller, more palpable souls, shall we? Right-o! We need to capture ourselves local subterranean dwellers and ask them about this so called underground hiding spot and the marked one. I'm sure we'll come across someone who knows its location or has seen the bright Yellow Wonder, so find them. Fan out and bring me back the slime who resides here. I will be waiting where I stand." Drake waved his hand outward, mimicking the Dark Lord and smiling as he did so. The Nagul disappeared with new vigor to do his bidding.

David sat at the bar next to Star and took a sip of ale as he listened to her rant about the club and her desire to maintain the lifestyle she had in the Living World. Having owned a bar and nightclub in South Beach, Florida, Star was the bar manager, PR person, occasional bartender and of course, the star entertainer. She made sure to mention to David how frequently she would fall for the male actors and singers she employed, only to throw them out when they'd disappoint her...oh, how she hated being disappointed! David thought of Jose and smiled. He so liked Jose's kind better than this flamboyant fruit cake.

Star had casually, but openly dismissed Patrick and Joel to dance and enjoy themselves while she gazed at her newest future male employee.

"You have a mark and it's slightly noticeable."

"Really? Hadn't noticed," he whispered sarcastically as he glanced at the bartender again, noticing his continued residence across from them. A couple of men came over to speak to Star but David hushed them with a few harsh words and they quickly retreated to the other side of the bar.

"My, my, my, you are a wonderful gatekeeper aren't you? I love bad guys, so harsh and physical," she paused and sighed. "So much anger - anger that could eat you up if not released." Star rubbed her chest longingly and laughed softly along with the bartender, who also smiled in agreement with her. He looked all of about thirteen in height and stature; he could easily play the lead in Charles Dickens book, Oliver, except here, he was the bartender. He also topped off the poor orphan look with overalls and a goofy gray golfer cap.

David shot him a disgusted look and was about to say something similar in kind but rated PG when she grabbed his arm and continued her inquiry.

"As I was saying about your lovely neck broche," more giggles as Star took another sip

of drink, “I wonder if there’s a connection between you being on the run and those hunting you for your mark?” She leaned in to emphasize her question as she smiled wickedly, showing David a glimpse of her intentions.

He took a drink of ale and chose not to look at her a second time, instead he glared again at the supposedly underage bartender who had stopped helping other people to stand in front of them and watch like the nosy little shit David thought he was.

“Do you need a tip?” David asked the bartender while he took another sip of his beer. He paused as Star primped herself at the bar, casually shooing the bartender away with her pearly white smile. David smirked then continued. “Good guess on the assumption I’m running from someone. He is a powerful force – do you know who I deal with?” He didn’t bother looking over at her; he knew he had her in the palm of his hand as he faked another sip of ale.

Star laughed her manly squeal and David smiled and closed his eyes to block it. “Honey, all I know is your mark sets you apart, but without it, you’d still leave a mark. I can help you stay in hiding here, but I warn you, it’ll cost you!” She giggled again as she sang the last phrase in tune then nudged his shoulder.

In response, David reached down under the counter and fiddled with something while Star watched excitedly, her face and body openly alluring as she tried to stick her chest in his face. He slapped a brown bag filled with gold coins on the counter and winked at her. She frowned as she looked at it like it was excrement.

“That’s gold, Ms. Star and a lot of it, so if you can believe some nice fella with an interesting Mohawk gave it to me back there in the tunnel out of the goodness of his heart, then we’re off to a great start.”

Star laughed forcefully in response to his sarcasm as she played with her wig.

Here we go again, David thought.

“Oh, Honey, no! Does Star look like she needs money?!” She leaned her head back and let out a pretentious laugh. “Gold is not currency I’d take willingly from you anyway, Sugar! I want something that will leave a mark – your mark - Sweetie.”

David put his glass on the counter and traced the edge of it while she watched, breathless as she gazed at his long, black, perfectly manicured fingernails. The third person reference was beginning to wear on him like acid on skin. “Go on,” he whispered, trying to refrain from reaching over and popping her neck open like a diet soda lid and spitting down her throat.

The bartender stood off to the side helping other frustrated people yet keeping an eye on David. They were beginning to get annoyed with him too as they called for drinks.

“Maybe you could follow me to my personal chambers and we can negotiate there?” Star sounded hopeful, which was in itself, very annoying.

The drumming stopped and the crowd applauded and yelled their approval. David turned and watched them all leave the stage. “Let me up there to entertain the crowd. I feel like a warm-up may be in order—“

Star squealed and clapped her hands together like a beauty queen. David glanced over at her for the first time in a while and actually smiled, thinking of Jose again and feeling slightly forgiving. Seeing David smile, the bartender dropped his glass he was filling and ducked down to pick it up in shock.

“Oh, please! I had no idea you were a performer of that genre?! Star should have known!” Star gushed as she flung back her hair again, her green eyes suddenly large and almost attractive David thought as he also almost laughed at her ‘performer’ comment. *Who the hell does this queen think I am?*

“Wait here and watch. I’ll wave from my perch.” David shot up and went to collect Joel. He found him in a corner surrounded by females of various shapes and sizes. He looked in good company, David thought as he callously pushed the girls away to get inside the circle.

Joel watched everyone back away except for Patrick, who was leaning on his shoulder and looking drunk already - or Dopey in love, with her big floppy ears sticking out and her droopy eyes - David couldn’t tell, but it was comical. “What the hell, Dave? Find your own fucking harem!” Joel tried to sound annoyed, but he looked nervous, like he was just caught in the act. The look on his face made David steam up.

The girls laughed in response to Joel’s ‘get your own whores’ comment and one of them with strawberry blonde hair and ruby red lips went over and leaned on David’s shoulder, her large breasts almost falling out of her tiny blouse as she pressed them against his arm. In an instant she let go, yelling out, “Ouch! Ow! Ow! Ow!” She shook and fanned her hands against her chest while she jumped up and down, her breasts smoking then blistering before them all as she began to cry. One of the girls watching in horror threw her drink at her and the steam rose up towards the ceiling as if from a bellow.

The young bartender glanced over at David and smiled, nodding his head in approval and

drying a glass with a towel while he watched the girl run over to his bar. He pulled out a bucket filled with ice just in time for her to shove her hands in, eliciting more steam.

David turned back to face Joel and his entourage; a few smoky wisps of air could be seen rising off his jacket. He smiled at Joel, his eyes suddenly black, while the other girls all backed away from him.

“What just happened?” Patrick whispered to Joel, who still had his eyes locked on David.

“Not cool, Dave—“

“Of course it wasn’t *cool*, Joel. It was quite the opposite—“

That was not very friendly—“

“I don’t fucking *care*.” David hissed his words and the girls all retreated even further, sensing his instability. His eyes were menacing and with his enunciating Joel’s name, a few sparks of fire shot out his lips as they turned black as well. He stretched his fingers again while he raised his hands. He felt the power course through his veins as he breathed in. He didn’t notice Joel’s face or the people around him as he continued, “Have you forgotten what is waiting for us out there?! While I’ve been negotiating our ability to stay here in Club Hell with the Queen Bee over there, you’ve been partying it up with whores!” He turned and began walking away when Joel caught up with him.

“Okay, sorry I’ve been having fun, but Dave, I mean, honestly when are we going to be in a place like this again? Try probably never! Besides, I haven’t been partying too much, I haven’t had a drink—“

“What the hell is in that glass you’re holding then?!” David grabbed it out of his hand as Joel flinched in response and before he could answer or react he watched.

David lowered the glass after sipping the water and sighed. One of the girls behind Joel giggled and David went for her. “Shut the hell up!”

Joel stopped him from getting her and they watched her scurry into the crowd of onlookers. Now everyone was watching them and the warehouse was silent. It was eerie and unnerving. Star hiccupped in the background. “Hurry up, darling! Play Star a song!” More deep, obnoxious, girlie-man laughter echoed across the joint.

David flinched then continued. “Look, I’m going on stage to sing and get the crowd up to a nice, respectable level. Are you going to join me?” He looked at Joel, then tossed the

contents of his glass, spraying the girls standing behind Joel with the water. They screamed in pleasure and relief then giggled back at him longingly.

“To play? Uh...sure...why not?” Joel sounded nervous as he stammered and spoke up to try to get David’s attention on him again, suddenly not happy his friend was teasing the girls in a friendly manner. “I played the drums in my band before my grand units rushed me off to religious training camp, so yeah, let’s go. Hey, I never knew you could play!” He reached out and grabbed David’s arm to retrieve his attention away from the crowd of people looking at him on the dance floor. He cleared his throat as his voice cracked under the scrutiny. “So, what do you play?”

“Guitar, a little piano with my brother’s help, and I sing when I’m pissed off. What was the name of your band?”

“Exodus,” Joel whispered, but the crowd heard and the word was repeated in multiple variations of unison among them. It was contagious and Joel smiled as he watched them all embrace his name. His nervousness disappeared and he breathed in confidence.

They walked toward the stage as the crowd parted and allowed them along, the numbers increasing as more and more people came trickling in from the back and the balconies to take in the duo. David noticed as he jumped onto the stage and looked around that there were passageways everywhere along the wall – multiple doors to who knew where - perhaps an unknown city – along with four second floor balconies, half-filled with people when they had arrived to the underground club, and now packed full and watching him intently. He finally heard Star clapping and squealing from her personal roost; a second floor balcony perched front and center, right above the bar and more decadent and glamorously furnished than the other stand-up only balconies.

Luckily for David, Joel knew the songs he had wanted to sing. Titled, “Sunday, Bloody Sunday,” the song was word for word a tribute to every troubled youth’s life above. And although Joel questioned the religious slant in the song, all David had to do was give him the ‘yeah, and what shit are we in right now’ look to get the message across. It suited his predicament perfectly as he thought of all the lies, deception, and continued corruption as he plowed his way through hell, trying not to care but trying too hard. *But first, a little bit of reverie and fun to get the crowd jazzed up...*

He picked up the large, yet ancient intercom devise supposedly used as a microphone and

spoke to the dead watching him; a sea of damned souls all looking up in the dark, eyes transfixed on him while he scanned the room. They were going to become extinct, probably most as soon as they decide to wander outside the safety of the club, David thought. *But that's fate, and who am I to mess with that bitch?*

“I’m going to sing two songs now and you can decide for yourselves if they warrant an encore.” His voice was loud and booming across the room, and he was taken aback by the sound of it. Everyone else was too, and silence responded to him in kind. He turned to Joel to start a drum solo; without guitars or keyboard it would have to work with just his voice and a beat, but he didn’t care; his emotion would carry the song, but first, a warm-up to awaken the crowd. Within a minute several people came up and walked along the back row to stand by the large, hanging metal banners again.

He motioned to Joel and the drum solo started; the beginning of ‘Stand and Deliver’ by Adam and the Ants was a personal favorite for both and an easy intro to rouse and involve the crowd.

David’s voice shot out at the hundreds of crammed in faces, all trying to get as close to the stage as they could to see him better. While he sang the story of the song, his voice as charming as his physical presence, the audience sang the chorus back to him, most knew the lyrics to the song as well. They stomped and screamed, hundreds of voices and pairs of feet. Several members of the audience climbed up and jumped off the stage into outstretched hands as if reliving their punk rock days of concerts past.

It was electrifying as he ran back and forth across the stage and commanded the audience with him. They lifted the room in chaotic chants; David screaming to the crowd and the crowd responding in kind. The lyrics of Ant music filled the background in tribal fashion.

Chapter Thirty Three

Bloody Sunday

The Nagul proceeded to find their captives and return them to their master while Drake stood where he remained in the middle of the platform, hands behind his back and seething as the time ticked by so slowly.

He knew they were near – he could feel it. The marked one was within his reach and yet, not accessible. The thought made him want to destroy everything near him in his rage. This hunting game was so beneath him, he thought as he rolled his eyes, still waiting and trying to avoid the screams off in the near distance as the Nagul collected their prey.

I deserve to have my title handed to me graciously but instead, I find myself groveling and chasing little humans around purgatory in these silly little shanty towns for recognition. Why Second, or Third for that matter? Why not in my world? Those little shits already know how to piss me off! They've dragged me here to this wasteland of human hell and I, in turn, have no choice but to find them, baby sit their little asses and call for assistance when I see the whites of their beady eyes! I can't even relish the slow kill and life drain I could have at my disposable when they get captured. I would enjoy the one I saw most definitely...he would be slowly consumed as I drank from him – or maybe not? Maybe I'd want to play for awhile first. I can see now why He wants him all to himself. Always picking the beautiful people...

“Master?”

“What?!” Drake yelled, not realizing he was again losing his much famed patience in the face of scrutiny.

Hunten walked over to the edge of the platform and sniffed, snorted and turned back to his master. “I smell them strong here.” He turned and started to walk along the platform.

Now that all the commotion had dissipated and he was the only Nagul there, Hunten could pinpoint and concentrate on his prey. He walked along about a quarter of a mile then stopped to back step a few feet and sniff in deeply. “Here. I smell them here.” He turned and Drake appeared, watching him intently for a second, then walking over to the wall and lightly touching it with the tips of his outstretched fingers, he walked along but didn't go far. Another two steps and he found himself staring at the wall along with Hunten as it pulled inward and repelled against his touch like live jelly; the electricity shooting from his fingertips sparked and charged the door mass, lighting it to show its perimeter while it tried to get away. They both

smiled.

“Well, well, well, it appears as though we’ve found the rabbit’s hole, Captain. Excellent - now gather your warriors and return here.”

Captain Hunten raised his horn and blew. It echoed and summoned them all to him, along with a dozen or so prisoners they’d found and brought back with them, some partially eaten and bleeding profusely in shock. The Nagul gathered and looked up at Drake from the subway tracks, waiting and grinning like mischievous children.

He gave them all a quick glance as he tried not to listen to some of the humans cry, his impatience once again an issue. He waved his hand outward in annoyance. “Kill them all, and if you eat them, make haste and do it now. I have no use for any of them and we’ve got work to do.”

The crowd erupted in a roar of approval as David and Joel finished the Adam and the Ants song. Joel stood up from his perch behind the drum set and raised his sticks in salute to the crowd. He’d taken off his tunic and undergarment earlier, always preferring to drum topless was his thing. David turned to see him and bowed to him, flashing a triumphant smile then abruptly stopping himself. He found himself staring at Joel for what appeared to be the first time, seeing him differently. Damn, Joel’s finally proven himself. *He looks...different...confident and self-assured...and...am I smiling?*

Joel stood there and held his breath. He watched and read David’s face easily, a first for him, he thought as he tried not to smile. *Too late.* He felt his face turn red and he had to sit back down to collect himself, the gaze from his idol too much for him to take in all at once.

David turned around to face the crowd, feeling overwhelmed and watched by too many people. Why he found it necessary to get on stage and parade himself around right now when he was a wanted fugitive, he couldn’t figure out, but he stood there and soaked in the glory of the moment anyway. The crowd chanted over and over, “Again! Again! Again!” Fists rose predictably and people surfed the crowd over heads like idiots.

He turned to Joel and motioned for him to start again. The next song began with the crowd quiet to hear his voice as he sang softly to them from his perch at the center of the stage – an area that extended out a few feet into the audience. This was a powerful song off an album perfectly titled for his new existence. He owned it, bought it as soon as it hit the stores three

years ago, simply for the picture of the boy on the cover with the cut lip. The image of an almost Dillon look-a-like invoked David's allegiance to the band U2. And lucky for him Joel was big on their music as well, especially the edgy drums on most of the songs. "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" was the second song David sang, but Joel sang it too with as much emotion as the crowd.^{iv}("Sunday, Bloody Sunday," music and entire lyrics by U2, War, 1983)

As David signaled Joel to begin the drum solo of the powerful song, he sang it not to the crowd, but to his future captor, the Devil himself – his betrayer. He found himself beginning to choke up with an emotional mixture of anger and grief as he started to sing the song.

The audience raised their hands up as he stepped back and began the chorus, his voice raised to a yell that screamed painful anguish mixed with a pride he'd just now discovered. The crowd responded with arms raised like he was their new messiah.

The crowd started chanting the chorus at every possible chance they could get, and Joel joined in from his perch behind David, so that the entire room swayed and moved together, some locking hands, others just transfixed themselves on David's voice and image as he commanded the stage, mesmerizing them all.

Then he saw him approach from back of the crowd, dead center. Drake smiled as he stood there beaming up at David while the drums continued and the song paused. In an instant, He was also there and he stood next to Drake and looked up to him and it was perfect, David thought, not thinking of his capture and personal end, but of the perfectly timed entrance of his serenade, or was Louis there all along?

As he finished the jab at the end of the song, David felt the emotion rip through him as he relived that moment in the hallway of Ulleren, feeling the loss of his brother and a way of life he had taken for granted. He took a deep breath as the multiples of hands reached up oblivious to what stood behind them all, swaying in wait of his next words, totally unaware.

David stepped back and motioned with the back of his hand so that Joel could see and possibly leave and hide. He then turned to the crowd and belted out a repeat of the chorus while locking eyes on both Drake and Louis again.

He yelled the last few lines as he ran across the stage and threw his hands up again in a 'come get me pose,' then, as he shot out the last phrase in defeat, he dropped to his knees and continued his look at Azmodeus, his face pleading. *He's so beautiful, and evil...I never saw the evil there before...why was I so blind?*

The crowd responded to his finished performance with chanting at first, then quickly, as the drumming abruptly ended and David remained on his knees in total exhaustion, no longer lulling and charming them with his voice, most of the audience were beginning to regain their sense of self-awareness, looking around and finally noticing the darker evil lurking there.

It took less than a minute for the crowd to back away and off to the side to leave the center of the floor empty so that there was an unobstructed view to the devils across from David.

A simple, three sounded clap from Azmodeus could be heard like thunder across the floor, spreading out like an amazing, incredibly spectacular light display, apparently pleased by the human's surprise vocal performance.

He couldn't believe he was talking or had the courage to speak, but he heard his voice and he listened to himself. "Just leave everyone else here and I'll go with you without resisting. It can be that simple..."

David watched in shock as Azmodeus only smiled, knowing he only had to touch his staff to the ground one more time, no one else knowing the set-up he'd created for them all. He finished it without even blinking. A blinding blue light shot out across the room like fire - or maybe ice - David couldn't tell, and eradicated everyone in sight, shooting up to the rafters and bouncing off the walls faster than the speed of sound to wipe out the balconies as the people all tried to retreat back, and finally getting Star as she stumbled backward and turned to run away in her tight fitting evening gown.

David breathed in deeply the cold light beam, but unlike the others it only smacked him painfully and shot through him; his head knocking backward along with his upper body, then quickly back to face his captors.

Only three of them remained in the room. It took David a millisecond to realize they were completely alone. He scrambled to his feet, staggering sideways to scan the back of the stage for Joel, finding no sign of him. He ran over to the drum set and stood behind it, tripping at one point and falling forward as he caught and balanced himself, only to run over to the other side of the stage and look out to pan the large room and bar in the background. There were no bodies lying on the floor; it was as if there was never anyone there tonight. The warehouse-turned-club was now an empty warehouse again. He could feel both of them staring at him, but he couldn't bring himself to look at either one, or the Nagul who were entering the club and slowly walking over as quietly as they could, but their grunts gave them away.

He wanted to scream, the pain was so intense. *He can't be gone! Not again!*

He didn't want to ask, but he had to, "Wh-where's Joel?! You didn't kill him too, did you?!" He yelled out in disbelief, holding his head with his hands, he was afraid it would explode. "He, he needed to be with me. I was supposed to protect..." David staggered towards the center of the stage again, suddenly grief stricken as he anxiously awaited for an answer, afraid to see the Dark Lord's brilliant face light up at the question. He didn't have to look, and he didn't until the end, for he could hear the glee and triumph fill the room in a strong, masculine English accent.

"Does that bother you? Are you sad for your loss? And I thought those tears were for our reunion? (Sigh). Well then, let's go home and chat about it, shall we? I'll let you pour me a glass of wine and we'll reminisce, for I think you know what is coming, and I do not think I need to inform you poor Joel's demise could have been prevented and possibly, even unnecessary had you given yourself over to your destiny in the first place, at-my-feet. Pity he had to play the sacrificial lamb and lose again – in both worlds now."

David began to sob as he walked around in circles on stage, hands pulled through his hair and disbelief on his face. The Dark Lord spoke to his nemesis, but didn't release his gaze on his collection.

"You will receive your title at the next lunar cycle in two days." He raised his voice slightly as he felt Drake's energy in the color of rage at having to wait. "I will present you with it as is customary for the ceremony. Yes, Drake, we Arch Devils have civilized rituals – customs set in place over several millennia to further our kind and keep with tradition. It's like eating with utensils, remember that?" Azmodeus seethed the last few words in sarcastic fashion.

Drake was accustomed to the tone of the Dark Lord's words and he nodded his head in sullen agreement silently and hastily, not bothering with a reply other than, "As you wish, my Lord." He bowed and left with the Nagul, and he was right, he thought. The Dark Lord didn't look upon his Captain or any of the others once since he had summoned him. He smirked as he walked past his warriors and saw the disappointment on their faces, especially Hunten's.

Useless fools, he thought as he rubbed his goatee and tried to get the marked one's face and that amazing voice out of his head. Drake was a creature who frequented clubs, enjoying the music and dance scene for what it always led to – orgies – but this elusive soul who had managed to elude him for so long, he was different; his voice, unmatched as he walked away thinking of a

suitable comparison, unable to match him to anyone. As he left the warehouse, Drake had to fight the urge to glance back at the human he caught, whose powerful voice in song would haunt him for days. He knew it would leave him wondering what the draw to the human was and why it affected him so.

Once Drake and the Nagul had vacated the warehouse and exited up the stairs, Azmodeus turned and walked a few steps towards the stage. “Sing me another song while you stand there for I most enjoyed the last one – so powerful and vulnerable all in three minutes time and the reference to Jesus was almost believable.” He waited as he watched David look from the exit door where the Nagul had just walked through, to the drum set behind him, then scan the balconies looking for him. He appeared to be in a state of continued shock as he purposefully chose not to look at the Arch Devil.

Azmodeus found his actions amusing and he watched for a few minutes, leaning on his staff until his patience dwindled and he noticed David wasn't singing.

“I gave you an order—“

“Why?!” David yelled as he whirled around to finally face him again, running over to the edge of the stage and balancing there. “Why would you go and kill them all?!” He threw his hands up and shook his head, pissed and fuming as he glared at a gleeful dictator. “And why Joel?! You-you lied to me to bring me here to your world with promises of all this bullshit – and *lies!* And now he's gone?!” A spark of fire shot out his mouth as he yelled the last sentence and he quickly covered it with his hand, only to casually drop it, appearing nonchalant. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he awkwardly placed them across his chest and fumed like a child, although he had far outgrown his youth and was indeed, a young man still unsure of himself.

The Dark Lord smiled as he took it all in. He's charming for sure, he decided as he scanned the room with his ears to make sure no sign of existence could be detected. He smiled again as he kept watch on David.

“Are you finished, hmmm?” He leaned forward playfully as he relished the moment of frustration and anguish on his newest victim's face. *Besides, he quickly thought, watching David try not to cry at the loss of someone he obviously cared too much for, I never forget a conversation, and our last one wasn't to my liking – the ending still bothers me just a little.*

He paused as he thought about the fire. *Interesting, I should have known he'd have the essence of demonic influence. After all, I am strongly drawn to the young man and we fit so*

perfectly. It makes incredible sense we are opposite. How predictable, yet for the first time in at least two centuries - not boring. How ironic he is also the son of a Pastor. I'll laugh on that thought later...

“I can’t believe this is happening! This can’t be happening...” David mumbled as he darted his eyes around the room, hoping to catch Joel hiding somewhere only he could see.

“So, how long has the fire embraced you?” The Dark Lord shot David a cold look, changing the tone of his voice to suddenly reflect his dominance. “What other little tricks have you discovered while touring my world unescorted and uninvited?”

David paused in his panic to stare at the brilliant creature before him. He was temporarily stunned by the devil’s monumental beauty. He was electrifying to look upon and sparks shot through him as he stood there, trying to resist the attraction. He felt immediately torn between extreme magnetism and intrigue and strong, violent hatred and aggression. He breathed out and spoke his words unsure. “I have acquired nothing during my tour here in fantasy land. I guess my powers were inside me all along—“

“Nooo, I gave you what you have, my little fire cherub. They were small insignificant gifts to persuade you down—“

“Then I guess they’ve improved upon themselves since I’ve been here!” David yelled back as he found his voice and his confidence. Joel’s face wouldn’t leave his mind and he swerved in his mindset to sudden hatred and loathing. He tried to snap out of his gaze on the Dark Lord but it wasn’t working very well. *Is he charming me? No fucking way!* He wanted to destroy Louis and it overwhelmed him.

He boldly jumped down and took a step forward to approach Azmodeus, choosing not to look him directly in the eye, for the charm spell was powerful and he felt the magnetic pull intensify the closer his physical presence to the Arch Devil. He suddenly thought of Dillon, how their combined energies would repel them apart and he remembered how he had to brace himself not to propel away from him. This time, with Azmodeus in front of him, the pull and attraction was so strong, he felt like a magnet to an overwhelmingly large piece of living, breathing metal.

He’s too strong and I’m probably putty in his hands, he thought as he felt his chest lunge forward in his direction and began to panic. Before he could look up and attack without thinking about the consequences, for they were already filling his brain with fear and doubt about his ability to inflict any lasting damage on the Dark Lord, David found himself unable to resist the

pull any longer and was quickly, helplessly sucked forward and shot several feet until he slammed into him; they both catapulted backward from the impact of their collision - even Azmodeus was knocked off guard - and were sent, bodies entwined, into the Arch Devil's portal. It closed in an electric line of sparks and dust, leaving the warehouse silent and empty.

Chapter Thirty Four

Dillon Questions the Divine

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Dillon turned around and glared at Daryl, who had walked slowly over to the doorway of the bathroom rubbing the back of his head and looking the part of the stupid, cocky jock, appearing sleepy and suspiciously content as he smiled at a few girls who were gathering outside the door and peering in at them. Daryl waved, nodded his head and pointed playfully at the forming crowd on the quad; kids were running into each other to stop and watch the two most talked about boys standing near each other in the bathroom. Why, they could easily make the front page of the school newspaper. The headline would hint strongly of a scandalous rendezvous. Of course Daryl would come off as the amazing and charming athlete of the year and Dillon, the quiet, shy and deeply disturbed pretty boy who apparently needed to cling to the superstar in idol worship from a stall in the boy’s bathroom.

Dillon thought up all these horrific thoughts then stepped back from the door. He turned to face his nemesis, annoyed and no longer afraid.

“Quit it!” He yelled. “Quit encouraging them! We’ll be the subject of rumors if you act the part, you idiot! Don’t you care about your sporty, ‘I’m the jock of the world,’ reputation?!” Before Daryl could answer, Dillon turned and walked out, the image of the cheesy grin on Daryl’s face at the accusations only pissed him off more and he needed to report to the cafeteria for detention. *At least I can rest assured Belial isn’t with him at the moment, but considering how stupid and dull his soul is, I’m sure he’ll be a walking doormat for the next several possessions. I wouldn’t be surprised if Belial invites others. They’ll all have a party in Daryl’s dopey head, and I honestly don’t think I can get them all, and worse, I wouldn’t care if they did get him...*

Afraid he’d be late for detention, Dillon hurried down the corridor and across the quad. *What would Jesus do? He wouldn’t give up! In my defense though, how could I ever be compared to JC? Nobody should be forced to endure that kind of scrutiny – that’s what David would say anyway. Is David like Belial now too?* He sighed as he walked along, slowing down from a run as David entered his mind. He wrung his hands and avoided the stares like a pro anti-socialite, but unable to block the countless whispers as he now parted the crowd.

Cleaning up in the cafeteria without Jason in the kitchen belting out old seventies hits was slightly melancholic, and Dillon sighed frequently as he wiped down the tables with much

effort; his hands hadn't stopped shaking since the encounter with Belial. He couldn't believe the power he could wield with his eyes; it was building on itself, he thought, every time he used it, he could see the invisible meter shoot even further to the right. "I am becoming someone else, and he's not who I want to be," he whispered as he paused then dropped the dish rag again for the tenth time, his hands still not working for him.

"Then give it to me – I'll take it off your hands - or your eyes as the case may be." Daryl sat on one of the newly cleaned tables across from Dillon and smiled at him. Dillon dropped the dish towel but didn't bend down to get it, locking eyes on Daryl instead and choosing not to inform him that the bleach was soaking into his designer jeans.

Daryl looked cocky again, not the 'what the hell just happened to me,' look of thirty minutes ago, but a return to the normal, annoying 'I'm the king of the world' look Dillon despised. He was secretly relieved to a small degree however, for at least 'cocky' Daryl was human and relatively harmless in a worldly sort of way. There was a slight demonic residue on his face though, and that was a source of worry. His mouth was larger than before and when he smiled, his teeth didn't look quite so perfect anymore. Dillon blinked and stared, then shook his head and picked up his wash cloth. "I d-don't think it's something we can share," he whispered in response as he picked up the bucket of bleach and water, avoiding Daryl and his intent gaze, and walked across to the last table and began wiping it down.

Daryl leaned back and watched him silently, taking in his body outline and watching the light coming in from the high windows lining both sides of the room as it lit Dillon's hair, turning it almost white and shiny. He smiled as he watched the angel clean, trying to fight the urge to pin him up against a wall again. He wanted to leave a mark this time, something permanent and personal. The cafeteria seemed to be screaming at him – or was that the voices in his head again trying to tell him what to do? He glanced around the large empty room as his excitement built upon itself. He wanted so badly to forcibly take the power; it called to him, those eyes, he wanted in his hand, and that mouth needed to be ripped open at the seams...

"Yesterday was nice. Touching and rubbing on you was like heaven—"

"Shut up! J-Just shut your mouth about that!" Dillon screamed as he shot up from the table and glared at Daryl, who appeared absolutely giddy as he faked a pose of romantic reminiscing, his body lounging back on the table in a 'come get me' pose as he stuck his tongue out and licked the air.

I can't believe I just saved your sorry ass, Dillon fumed as he felt his eyes burn.

“But your virgin body j-just screamed for me to t-take you!” Daryl mocked Dillon’s stutter with a wicked grin as he continued in his traditional sporty jock fashion again, switching roles between docile victim and predator. “It was electric to pin you down and act the part of the aggressor, ‘because you know you wanted me to force you to submit.’” Daryl rubbed the front of his pants as he panted and pretended to play the part of the victim again. “Oh, please, p-p-please stop touching me so well—“

Dillon shot him across the room before he could say another word. He slid the full length of the table he was leaning on at rocket speed head first and backward, traveling so fast, he flew an additional ten or so feet from the end of the table into the air, slamming into the nearest wall and bouncing off it, only to land perfectly inside one of the industrial size green recycle trashcans. His right leg got hooked on the edge of the container as it rocked back and forth from the added weight, with him mostly inside, cursing and yelling out obscenities.

Dillon ran over and grabbed his backpack as he headed out the door, flipping off the lights as he closed it shut, whispering softly, almost in song. “Someone needs to take the garbage out.”

Once he got across the school grounds and made his way over to the cement banner wall, Dillon hopped up and sat there looking out at the busy street before him and breathed in the polluted air. It was cool and overcast, with low lying clouds as far as the eye could see, and the air was socked in, not circulating and certainly not rising and refueling. He coughed as he felt it permeate his lungs then took another stagnating breath in. “Now I know why David smoked, who could blame him? Could the nicotine and tar be any worse than say, what I’m doing right now which is sucking on an invisible tail pipe?” He pulled his knees up and rested his chin there and zoned out. Several kids were nearby in various school uniforms, everything from sports to drill team to band members; all of them waiting for rides and overtly staring and whispering in his direction as he tried to listen to his brother’s voice in his head. “Why do I keep talking to myself? It just makes things worse.” He sighed.

“Oh, I don’t think so! I rather like the self-banter. It’s quite interesting, and mildly entertaining - from a bird’s eye view of course.” Cigarette smoke could be seen flying in front of Dillon and the smell, he breathed in as it lingered around his head.

“You’re conveniently late, as usual.” Dillon whispered sarcastically, then smiled sweetly

at a group of girls nearby who were watching him. They began giggling as they heard him speak. He sighed and looked away. “You know, this isn’t the right time, or was that your intention?”

Sebastian blew more smoke. “Was that sarcasm you just spat at moi? Ouch, didn’t see that one coming, especially from God’s Chosen One.” He laughed softly at his humor, while Dillon rolled his eyes, still not looking over at the angel lying next to him, sunbathing on the cement wall, lying stretched along, body full length, with one leg propped up and resting on the other. He scooted up closer to Dillon, so that his newly grown head of hair rested against the boy’s hip. He wiggled it back and forth on Dillon as if he were scratching the top of his head.

“Knock it off!” Dillon hissed down, then looked up and quickly away as two band mates walked by, both looking over. Laughter could be heard as they walked a few paces then sat on the grass. Dillon hid his face in his knees, lightly tapping his head a few times in frustration.

“Well, I don’t want to be the first to break the news, but it’s a little late to try to save your sanity, don’t you think? I mean, honestly, do you think the little tykes will suddenly change their minds about you even if you did manage to stop the psychotic self-babble?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter, hey, how’s it goin’?” Dillon nodded at the same girls who were laughing at him from before. One of them approached him. *They all wear drill team uniforms - cute pleated red and black skirts and nice legs. Yep, I’m fine, just fine...*

“Um, my friends and I were wondering something and uh, like, I guess I volunteered to ask - is it okay?” The leader of the drill team had the nicest pair of tan legs, a radiant smile, and long, light blond hair in a single braid down her front.

Dillon just stared up at her not knowing what she had asked about. Sebastian read his mind and laughed softly. “You’d better say something.”

“Shut up,” Dillon whispered down at his side, then smiled up at the shocked girl. “Wh-what d-did you say?” He couldn’t honestly remember what she’d asked him, and of course her beauty was simply that, and not much else.

“Who are you talking to? I’ve seen you around school and you always seem to like, talk to yourself a lot.” She began twirling her braid and glanced over at her girlfriends for support. They all nodded their heads to go on and Dillon suddenly noticed they all looked nervous. *Why would a lovely group of girls be nervous around me?*

“Because they like you sport! Geez Louise, are you blind?! Now move your head

slightly, you're blocking my heavenly light." Sebastian sounded annoyed as he raised a hand up and pushed Dillon's elbow away.

"Hello?" The girl spoke up again, turning to her friends for another nod of approval and support and getting it, although this time they all hesitated.

"Wh-who says I'm t-talking to myself?" Dillon asked as he pushed his elbow back in Sebastian's face, making him frown as he stuck his tongue up at the boy and mimicked his words.

"Who says I'm talking to myself? Blah, blah, blah..." Sebastian clicked his tongue up at Dillon.

"Um, then who are you talking to? I don't, uh, see anyone, but then again, I wasn't here earlier," the girl was beginning to sound dumber the more she talked.

Dillon grimaced up at her, then became his brother instantly, without knowing it or why, and glared at her as he spoke harshly. "Well, sometimes I talk to myself because nobody else is worth my air." He seethed his words at her then watched as her mouth dropped and she took a few steps backward as if he'd slapped her with his words.

Sebastian reached up and smacked him along the side of his head with an opened hand, sending him falling off the cement wall backward and landing on the grass. He shot up in anger to yell at the angel but he was gone.

The girls pointed at him and laughed loudly like a group of cackling hens, then turned the crushed girl around to see him as he hopped back over the four foot wall quickly, brushing the grass off his coat sleeves. They laughed even louder as the noise boomed in his ears. Others around who'd seen the mysterious falling over snickered at him and pointed as well while he walked to his family van, head down and pissed as a wet cat.

Later that night, after he'd pretended to eat his meal, Dillon excused himself from the family and the table, knowing Tommy was coming over and purposefully not in the mood for company.

He dragged his feet up the stairs to the bathroom, his now second favorite room in the house, and ran a long, repeatedly warmed, bubble bath. He leaned back against the cold tile and rested his head on the tub edge, the water steaming up around him and his mind steaming as well. He blew some of the white,, foamy bubbles off his fingers and thought of how Sebastian had mistreated him. Somehow, he had the sinking suspicion the angel purposefully chose not to

help him when he confronted the demon in the bathroom today. “Why?” He whispered as he blew more bubbles off his finger into the air. The bubble bath had just been re-warmed and re-bubbled. He reached up with his big toe and maneuvered the faucet to turn off. Suddenly thinking Sebastian might be listening, he thought his words instead of saying them out loud. *He wouldn't be here right now anyway. No, he's already made his appearance to check on the 'Angel-child.' I severely dislike his smug, childish manner. After today, I honestly don't think I need him anyway. Who needs an annoying babysitter—*

“You do, that's who. Blowing any bubbles of your own yet?” Sebastian smirked as he leaned back on the toilet, arms tightly tucked across his chest and legs stretched out. “Mind if I join you in there?” He asked matter-of-fact and casual, as if they were just sitting around having a chat in a coffee shop instead of in a bathroom. Dillon was startled at first to hear the voice come from nowhere, but now didn't bother to even look over at the angel as he answered him in perfect monotone.

“Of course I m-mind. B-b-bathing should be a solitary habit, besides,” he paused to try to calm his stutter, only to get angry instead. “I didn't think angels needed to bathe anyway,” he spat out the last word as he finished blowing the bubble off his finger. “And quit spying on me at all the WRONG TIMES!”

“Dillon? Honey, who are you talking to in there?” Mother knocked on the bathroom door impatiently.

“Crap, forgot about that—“

“You are soooo funny when you act crazy—“

“Shut-up,” Dillon whispered, his mouth a thin line and his lips barely moving.

“Dillon? Can I come in?”

“No! I mean, n-no, Mm-mother, I'm f-fff-fine. I'm j-just relaxing in the bath and talking to myself about t-today...um, that's it?” He closed his eyes and cringed as he heard himself.

“Geez, I wouldn't believe that load of—“

“Oh...okay. Can I come in anyway? I mean, we haven't talked in awhile and I've wanted to talk, you know, but you've been so quiet and upset it seems. Are you okay?” Mother sounded her usual worried self, with just a pinch of prying thrown in for good measure.

“Awkward!” Sebastian sang as he pulled out his cigarettes.

Dillon looked over at him and shot up in the tub, the water flowing over slightly as he

rose up. Sebastian immediately brought a bare foot over and tapped the very warm water. “Oooh, nice and warm!”

“Don’t you dare,” Dillon whispered harshly as he pushed the angel’s foot away from hovering purposefully near his face, then pointed at the box of cigarettes the angel was waving around above him. Sebastian grinned. “I’ll be fine Mother, okay?” Dillon looked to the door again, then back at Sebastian, but he was not sitting on the toilet anymore.

“Alright...but I worry about you. Don’t be too much longer! I want you out in five minutes tops, so finish up.”

The door was quiet again and Dillon sighed, listening to his mother retreat down the stairs. He turned his eyes away from the door, then glanced around the room until he came around almost full circle, facing forward and right at Sebastian, who was smiling back at him and striking a match on the shower tile. He lit his cigarette and paused, almost ready to say something serious.

“GET,” Dillon quickly lowered his voice while Sebastian smiled playfully back at him from the other side of the tub. “Get out of the tub – how did you? Where is the rest of you?” Dillon pulled his knees up and sat fully upright, leaning completely back against the cold tile so that Sebastian wouldn’t touch him.

Steam rose from his chest and arms as he fumed and appeared to panic. He saw what appeared to be only the angel’s upper body coming up through the bottom of the tub. He took in the scene in awe for a second, like he would a neat magic trick, then snapped out of his daze and frowned at the thought of the angel’s intrusion as he tried to hide his lower section with his hands.

Sebastian rolled his eyes and laughed softly as he read Dillon’s face. “Relax, Dillon. I am NOT interested, okay? Please! I just wanted to feel the bath water, that’s all. And it’s sooo warm!” Realizing his bathing companion was still shocked and horrified, Sebastian laughed again. “Geez! Relax! Someone’s got his head in the potty, don’t he?” He made his voice sound like Bugs Bunny and Dillon couldn’t help but half-smile at the impersonation.

Sebastian pulled his body out of the bottom of the tub from the wall below and leaned back against the opposite side of the tub, ignoring the faucet; the metallic piece of plumbing sticking through his chest as if he were a ghost, then took a drag and pulled his legs up out of the bottom of the tub like they were dangling from the ceiling below so that his feet could be in the

water next to Dillon's side. He was still fully dressed in a pale blue suit. His hair was high and tight, not purposefully so, since it was just beginning to grow in. It appeared unnaturally white and suited him well.

After breaking his gaze from the faucet sticking out of the angel's chest like a metallic, birth defect, Dillon frowned again at the repositioning and invasion of his personal space. "Move your feet!" He couldn't believe it as he fumed and thought of what to say, stunned and unable to speak too loudly his frustration at having to share his bath with a smoking angel.

"So," Sebastian ignored his comment and blew out smoke after taking an extraordinary long drag while Dillon nervously watched the disabled and always unlocked bathroom door. If his mother came in he would be done for; the room permeated with smoke. "Where do I put?" Sebastian pointed and waved his cigarette above the tub water they shared, the end beginning to collect ash. Dillon rolled his eyes and motioned to the toilet. "Oh, right-o chap!" He flicked the tip of his cigarette into the toilet bowl with an elegance that hinted at his upbringing. He took another drag and continued, remembering what Dillon had thought about before he knew the angel was listening. "I hear word around town is you don't like my smug, childish mannerisms and feel as though you don't need me, is that true? Just curious, mind you..."

"You need to stop reading my mind when I'm alone and don't know you're there—"

"But that's the problem, child. You are NEVER alone. Someone is always watching you. Besides, I could read your mind if you let me, say for instance, right now? Care to share your thoughts with me now that you know I'm here, hmmm?" Sebastian pretended to smile sweetly to lighten the tension in the room and distract from his real mission. He playfully nudged Dillon's side with a toe, but it didn't work – quite the contrary. He thought about not being able to get through Dillon's mind block, unlike all the other mortals, and it bothered him to have to catch the boy when he wasn't aware. He'll eventually catch on that I'm pumping him for information, Sebastian worried as he brushed Dillon with his toe again.

"Stop that! Stop touching me, it's, it's—"

"What? It's *what*?" Sebastian looked at Dillon curiously, his eyes opened wide as if hurt by the accusation, which baffled Dillon even more.

He is somewhat like a child, almost innocent in his play, Dillon thought as he softened his mood slightly. "It's weird, that's what. You just don't go around getting into bathtubs with people without their permission."

“But I do it all the time and nobody else seems to mind.” Sebastian took another drag and this time watched Dillon’s puzzled expression with interest.

“That’s because nobody else can see you!” Dillon relaxed his position and stretched his legs out somewhat, so that they lay next to the angel.

“Oh, sure, rub it in. You know, you’ve been rather grumpy lately and I just can’t figure out why—“

“Why weren’t you there today?!” Dillon lowered his voice as Sebastian pulled his finger up to his mouth and quieted him, then shot his eyes over to the door. Dillon continued, but lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Maybe I’m a little grumpy for a reason? How about this one? Ask me how my day went.” Dillon sat back in the tub and fumed as he waited, his face appeared indignant. He looked down to notice the bubbles had rapidly disappeared around him. He pulled up his knees and sat straight up again, looking awkward and pissed. The scene made Sebastian grin.

“Okay, I’ll play along.” He motioned for Dillon to lean forward and he did. The peppermint air lingered around his face after Sebastian blew it at him. The angel then motioned with his hands, “How was your day, dear?”

“Well, honey - thanks for asking. I woke up sore after having the crap beat out of me by Daryl and his evil twin idiots yesterday and went back to hell – I mean, school - for another fun-filled day of harassment and slow torture. I assure you, it was one hell of an education at school today. After the usual heaping dose of bullying and teasing from several hundred students, and enduring class after class after class to witness more alienation and humiliation because they all think I’m unofficially insane—“

“YES, but you do have to admit, the excessive self talk is a wee bit attention getting – not that you do it for that reason, but still. Hey, don’t look at me with those eyes! I’m just playing Devil’s advocate here, okay?” Sebastian splashed some bath water at Dillon’s chest to lighten the mood, but Dillon didn’t even flinch or blink as he stared back silently, his eyes looking melancholic and strikingly daunting. They drew the angel in, making him pause and sigh. “Fine, go on. Sorry I interrupted you, your Majesty.”

“Well, I noticed right away that Daryl was acting differently. For instance, he wasn’t bullying me or taunting me as usual, but instead, ignoring me today. So after hearing you speak of the ‘Summoning of The Three’ yesterday and only seeing two on my roof—“

“The other one got away, yes, I know this already! It happens - comes with the territory because although I’m brilliant at what I do, I can’t get them all—“

“STOP, I mean, stop interrupting me when I’m talking? Geez, do you do this to your friends above too?”

“Yeah, so what if I do? No one else complains except you! Everyone else is so sweet and kind, but with you - everything has to be about you, doesn’t it? Besides, I just get impatient, that’s all – it’s a personality flaw I choose to embrace.” Sebastian finally sounded annoyed, and Dillon paused in response, as if hearing a harsh voice was all it took to quiet him. He looked down and Sebastian took another drag and blew smoke at him as he suddenly became amused at the young one’s quick change of demeanor.

My, my, my, he’s easily manipulated, what a surprise. “Believe it or not, my time is valuable, so continue, but don’t expect me to sit back and feel privileged just to hear your sweet, improved voice give out useless, already known information.”

Dillon began to wring his hands, not knowing what to do with himself and feeling cornered. “I went into the boy’s bathroom and Daryl was in there. It was just the two of us and he, he wasn’t himself. B-Belial had p-possessed him and I spoke w-www, I-I...” Dillon couldn’t speak, his stutter suddenly back in full force and his words flying through his mind at an unnaturally fast clip; he couldn’t keep up. He shook back and forth and closed his eyes.

“Look at me and open your mouth,” Sebastian ordered. Dillon did as he was told, feeling used to the routine of Sebastian helping his speech impediment, and felt the sweet, peppermint air hit his face again, this time more forcefully. He breathed it in and slowly breathed out.

“I fought Belial and I think I sent him down one of the toilets, using the sunlight reflected by a broken piece of glass in my hand.” Dillon spoke smoothly and freely again.

“Well, that explains your cuts. Let me see your hand.” He took the boy’s hand before Dillon could extend his arm off the edge of the bathtub and lightly touched the wounds with his fingers. Dillon watched as he held his breath. The skin healed itself with a tingling sensation that shot up his arm and down his body. He pulled his hand away quickly and held it to his chest. Sebastian dumped his cigarette in the toilet and flushed it with a wiggle of his pinky finger at Dillon and a wink. He leaned back and thought of what the boy had just told him. “Well, that explains your mood and behavior today. Contrary to what you thought earlier, I did not know he was there. This Daryl character I cannot see very well, and if he’s as evil as you

claim him to be, then a demon as strong as Belial could easily hide in him for however long he wanted—“

“Can you see him if I point him out to you at school? Say tomorrow?” Dillon spoke up as he interrupted Sebastian, causing both of them to pause and smile at each other sheepishly.

“Sorry, go on.”

“No, I can’t, Dillon. Right now, for however long the honeymoon lasts, I only have eyes for you. Tell me, what did Belial say? Did he say anything about his ruler?”

Dillon paused to think, then answered. “Yeah, he said he was forced to stay up here and watch me and he couldn’t figure out why, why,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, eyes down and staring at the water. “I mean, what he, uh, Azmodeus, saw in me. I wasn’t very impressive I guess...to him.” Dillon actually looked disappointed as he spoke, and Sebastian scoffed at him.

“You’re joking right? Please tell me, that insult didn’t offend you?”

“No! Of course it didn’t, I was just, you know, shocked and stunned to see him and watch what he did—“

“Ooh! Let me guess! Let me guess!” Sebastian raised his hand as if he were in class and knew the answer to the extent of annoying everyone else. Dillon paused to let him speak. “Did it have anything to do with the toilets and an abundance of excrement? He’s a filthy pig and I’ll get him – don’t worry. He’s useless without his posse anyway. Still though, I’m interested as to how you got him to hold himself motionless during the sunbathing session, hmmm? He’s rather fast, you know, and the most powerful of The Three - well, now it’s just The One.” The angel laughed at his words.

“It’s not funny! I’m worried, and I need to get out of this tub or else I’ll look horribly wrinkled.” Dillon made a cute, girly expression with his nose, while he inspected his finger tips and frowned.

“Like eww! That would be, like, so gross!” Sebastian mocked his girly comment and shook his head, his voice returning to normal. “Sure thing, Doll. The water’s cold anyway. I was waiting for you to do that neat trick with your big toe and maneuver the faucet so well, but alas! You didn’t.”

Dillon sat there silently waiting for privacy and stared at the angel.

“Fine, I’ll see you in your room. It’s not like I care about any of that, but whatever.” Sebastian pointed at the boy’s covered midsection then pinched his nose as if getting ready to

take the plunge and leaned into the wall, disappearing through it like it was a curtain easily opened. The act shocked Dillon as he watched the angel slide his legs and kick his feet backward until all of him was gone.

The silence in the bathroom was eerie, and Dillon quickly shot out of the tub and grabbed a towel nearby, almost falling over the side as he got out.

He got dressed in the bathroom, donning a standard white tee shirt and blue boxer shorts. He breezed into his room and shut the door behind him, turning around and jumping backward as he yelled out in shock and what appeared to be fear.

“Hey Dillon, I hope you don’t mind if I’m in here? I just, like, you know, needed to lie on his bed for a second and feel him.” His sister sniffed and dabbed a tear with a tissue as she sat awkwardly on the side of David’s bed in a light pink baby doll teddy with matching robe. She had on dainty fuzzy pink slippers and she sat there with the tips of them touching each other, her ankles shot out as she held onto both sides of the bed afraid David’s ghost would try to kick her off if he were lying there. “Dillon? You okay?” Rachel whispered as she copied him and looked around the room.

Sebastian was nowhere to be found. That’s funny, Dillon thought as he walked over to the closet to check inside. *The bathroom wall he had shot himself through should have led him in here, probably in my closet.* He opened the closet door and Sebastian startled him as he stood there, inches away from the boy and leaning on the door frame.

“Hey there! Nice closet – ooooh! Who’s that?”

Dillon turned and slammed the closet door on Sebastian’s face as the angel tried to look around him to check out Rachel. “So, what pray tell, are you doing in here without permission? I can’t possibly fathom why you of all people would need to remember him, let alone have to sit on his bed.” Dillon walked over annoyed and sat opposite a now crying Rachel as he leaned forward on his bed.

She didn’t answer him, but remained sitting there as if she had a plate of upright nails under her seat. Dillon sighed as he watched her grab David’s blanket and squeeze it in her hands. “Please don’t do that and more importantly, tell me you don’t come in here when I’m not around to do exactly what you’re doing now—“

“Look Dillon! He was my brother too! I-I miss him terribly!” Rachel sobbed and blew her nose, avoiding Dillon’s face as he gave her a look of disbelief.

“You’re joking right? You and Danny boy purposefully avoided him and me – both of us – at school all the time!” He mimicked her as he spoke. “It was, like, we weren’t good enough to represent you or even associate with you and now that he’s, like, some immortal god on campus, you’ve decided he’s noteworthy and memorable!” He shook his head in disgust at her as he continued in his brother’s confident voice, “Please Rachel, no offense but you aren’t fooling me right now, and I’d like to just be alone—“

Rachel stood up and pointed a bright pink, perfectly manicured fingernail at him while she spoke. “Don’t tell me how to feel, Dillon! I loved him!” She stomped one fuzzy slipper on the floor and continued as he glared up at her, not moving from his seat. “We all loved him and we were all a part of his life – not just you! You can’t own his memory!” She turned to leave but not without hearing his reply, cold and biting. His words were a dagger in her back as she ran from the room and slammed the door behind her, sobbing loudly as she did so.

“You were never his life! He had to ask me your name all the time because he couldn’t EVER remember it!” He leaned forward as he finished yelling the last few words, then got up and reached over to fix and smooth out David’s bed to erase all evidence of his sister’s presence.

Sebastian walked through the closed closet door and strolled over to Dillon’s bed to lie down. When Dillon turned to climb back on his own bed, the image of Sebastian sprawled out on it with his hands tucked behind the pillow startled him for the third time and he threw his arms up in frustration.

“Stop doing that! Do you ever just enter a room normally?”

“Don’t change the subject, Lady Killer. You smashed her to pieces and why - because she showed interest in your deceased brother? The girl deserves a little empathy.” Sebastian glared up at him as he waited for an apology.

Dillon didn’t look phased in the least bit as he glared back. “I have to go to bed now for another life-changing, fun-filled day at school tomorrow, okay? Besides, you and I both know you were checking her out in her little peek-a-boo nightie, so don’t play Mr. Sensitive.” He didn’t know where to sit, since Sebastian was lying on his bed, so he gingerly and very carefully, sat on the edge of David’s bed.

“Well, here’s the scoop, little chap—“

“I think we can both agree, I’m not little anymore. I think I’ve pretty much shot forward into adulthood after all I’ve been through and handled and besides, if I’m little, then so are you.”

Dillon crossed his arms over his chest and looked defensive. Sebastian laughed.

“And you accuse me of interrupting?! May I continue now?” He watched as Dillon quickly nodded his head in frustration, looking away from the angel as he did so. “Great, thank you. Okay, so you have more powers I didn’t know about. Let’s hear what they are, because unlike everyone else here in mortal land, I can’t read your mind unless you allow it and believe me, it is already rather upsetting. So start talking.” He waved his hand casually in the air to start the procession of words but didn’t get the reaction he was expecting.

Dillon continued to look away as he heard the angel’s words, but he also felt no longer attached to him. He sighed and thought for a few seconds while Sebastian clicked his tongue and traced imaginary creatures on the ceiling with an outstretched finger. After a few minutes of this, the angel became annoyed.

“Did I not say my time is valuable earlier? Don’t keep me waiting—“

“Or what? You’ll leave and never return? I don’t believe it. I know what you seek, Sebastian! You need me in the game and you keep tabs on me for one simple reason: I know you want Azmodeus all to yourself and you are using me to get to him. Let’s see here, would God approve of your dangerous game or your jealousy?”

Sebastian shot up in bed and fumed, his eyes menacing as they glowed gray.

Dillon held his breath at the sight, realizing he’d said too much, yet also realizing what he’d thought of was indeed true, given the angel’s quick reaction.

“I am simply doing my job, Sweetheart! God approves of my behavior and knows all my whereabouts! I glorify Him always in my pursuits and I know for a fact, He wants that sleazy devil shot down in flames from this plane he visits, unannounced and most definitely uninvited!” He hopped up and began pacing the room angrily. “Jealousy? Please don’t be disappointed when I choose to disregard that accusation altogether in order to simply inform you I am jealous of no one! Especially a jaded, bratty, and spoiled child star such as you! I can’t even begin to fathom what He sees in you anyway! You’re a pretty face without substance! You are smug, self-righteous, self-involved and have no desire to rise above the boring and uninspired you share space with, yet you see yourself as privileged! It’s pathetic really to stand here and watch you place yourself above your fellow man because you have the gift of seeing the paranormal?! It’s sad to think you are indeed like all the others who wish for heavenly protection and security but lack the desire and discipline to earn any of it! You are a walking billboard of hopeful Christian

advertisement and believe me when I tell you this – you are instead attracting the wrong kind of attention and because you are so bright and alluring, you’ll get it all just to turn around and throw it away because you think God will catch you when you decide to fall - but what if He doesn’t? What if you succeed in throwing away everything given to you? Do you honestly think you’ll get picked up and brushed off, only to be placed right back down where you’d left before on the game board of life to be simply, hopefully, played again? I don’t think you realize you are indeed, without a shadow of a doubt, replaceable and deliverable to the bowels below should you continue to turn your back on your purpose here! This witchcraft you harness and use comes with a price, my dear! Have you not thought of that?! Do you not know witchery has to be fueled from below for it to work?! A mere mortal witch has no power unless it is given and channeled from hell! And since mortal witches are easily influenced, are given powers to pursue evil interests here in this world to do the devil’s bidding, you are no different. In fact, the painful reality as of late, is that you are actually working for him!”

“That’s not true!” Dillon shot up and Sebastian stopped pacing to look at him.

“I’m not a witch in that way, therefore I choose not to practice witchcraft for evil intent, I assure you, Sebastian. He isn’t channeling me or manipulating me in any way. He, he has no p-power over m-mme.”

The angel laughed as he listened to Dillon try to explain himself. “There you go again, making yourself seem higher, more enlightened and more privileged than all the other witches in the world! You don’t honestly think God above has given you these powers, do you? An Angelic witch? Ha! Now that’s at least original! No, no, if that were the case, you’d be the first, I assure you, since Creation to be touched that way by His Hand. He has us to do His work, and you, you’re to spread the Gospel and touch the lives of everyone you come across here in the Living World because they flock to you naturally, as I said before!” Sebastian began to calm himself down slightly as he made the mistake of looking into Dillon’s eyes again; they drew him in and lulled him to pacify his anger. He tried to look away, but it was too late. He stopped pacing and sighed, then walked over and flopped back down on Dillon’s bed and leaned forward, his tirade finally over, his voice soothing and supportive. “Tell me what it is you can do, and I’ll help you decide whose hand is actually touching you, okay?”

Chapter Thirty Five

Frozen Fire

They landed in a flash of light, shooting across the dining room to arrive just shy of the grand table and its surrounding chairs. Azmodeus shot up in a blink of an eye and dusted himself off. He turned and walked casually over to the other side of the table and sat down at the head. As he approached, the chair pulled itself out to receive him and the lights lining both sides of the room lit themselves readily.

Syrianna stuck her head out of the fire and smiled at her Master, whining and asking to come in. He waved his hand out and leaned back in his chair while his hell hound crept into the room silently and gathered by the fireplace.

Sandor entered the room as he saw the double doors open slowly to signal him, carrying his usual tray and drink. He came in and quickly walked by David, who was just coming to and shaking his head as he lay on the ground face down, dazed and feeling weak from the collision. The servant paused for a second to gaze down upon the intruder with curiosity, but Azmodeus was impatient and flicked his fingers together across the room, smacking him on the forehead to get his attention.

“I’m sorry, my Lord!” Sandor came running over, almost spilling the bottle off his tray as he tried to balance everything perfectly while he shuffled as quickly as he could.

Syrianna noticed the newest addition as well, since seeing a human intact in Nine rarely ever happened without a quick demise, followed by an eventual tossing of the bloody carcass as he finished his business; it wouldn’t take him long either, for it seemed he never enjoyed conquering his prey – his face always wore such a tired, almost disappointed expression. That probably explained why the intimate encounters always ended so harshly, she thought as she smiled.

Her brothers crept in and stopped abruptly when they saw him, then looked at each other, only to view him again, untouched and lying there in perfect form. Syrianna looked worried. He’s fire born - how interesting, but it stops there, she decided as she showed her teeth in his direction and uplifted her nose. This has to be the Master’s newest collection, she brewed, and I hate the smell of him already.

David propped himself up on his arms and saw her, panting and watching him with glowing white and conniving eyes. She sized him up in two seconds then turned away, looking

over at her Master and shaking her head in disapproval.

“Now, now, now, Syrianna, let’s not judge too quickly or too harshly. He hasn’t even shown us what he’s capable of yet.” The Dark Lord laughed softly as he took a sip of wine. He placed his glass down on the table and traced the edge with a finger, while his hounds and Sandor looked on in awe, not ever having seen the Dark One’s fingernail color switch rapidly to keep up with his emotion; the typical yellow hue was no longer the color of the day, and they all noticed it immediately.

David could hear Louis speak, but his head still felt dizzy, and he rubbed it and pulled up to sit on his back legs. I’m in a dining room and I’ve been here before, he thought as he glanced around, unable to see Louis, but locking eyes on Sandor who stood near the doorway, watching him intently in return.

“Who the fuck you looking at, Patch?” He spat out as he turned away from the servant and went to rise.

The Dark Lord shot him across the room before he could raise his head to see him, not giving him the pleasure of looking upon him. With just a play of extended fingers, he was able to manipulate the human easily, shooting him upward eight or so feet onto the back wall directly in front of him, David’s face smashed into the cold cement wall, hanging upside down and clinging there, his arms spread out trying to grab onto something but not finding it. As he glanced to the ground from his perch so high on the wall, he felt so strange suspended there like a fly on a strip of sticky paper.

Sandor watched and smiled slightly as he heard his lordship’s newest victim hit the wall with a loud, thud, and grunt with the impact.

“That will be all, Sandor. You may leave and close the door. I shall not require your services for the rest of the night - dismissed.” The Dark Lord sat back and propped his arm up on the side of his chair as he watched David slide down the wall, trying to brace his eventual fall. He smiled at the attempt and shook his head as he slammed his hand down palm first on the table.

With that quick move, David did the same, and landed doing a modified belly flop of his own on the ground, like a voodoo doll being manipulated. He felt so helpless and moaned again from the pain of impact. He pulled up his knees, quickly finding himself up on his feet and facing the wall, unwillingly prepared for more torture as he tried to push himself off the wall

without being able to budge an inch. He quickly gave up trying and sighed, still in shock over his newest predicament. *Did I honestly think Louis would welcome me in with open arms after all the lies and deceit he played on me? And my resistance - was it futile? Hell no...*

Sandor left the room smiling as he tried as best he could to watch as much of the torture as possible.

With a quick, repetitive flick of his index finger, the Dark Lord leaned back and watched as his newest toy slammed into the wall repeatedly like a rubber ball, the human trying as best as he could to turn his head to the side to lessen the impact as the Dark Lord watched mercilessly, not bothering to count the beatings.

Taking sips of wine mid-torture, he continued the game even while Esmeralda breezed in wearing all black, including her cloak. She'd just fed and her face looked brilliantly pink as she glanced over in shock at the scene; suddenly noticing David getting slammed back and forth like a basketball. She pulled down her cloak and smiled over at the Dark Lord.

“My Lord! My apologies for being late, I just couldn't tear away from my meal quickly enough apparently – my, my, is this him?” She stood there leaning against the door frame, cloak down around her shoulders and seductively pulling off her gloves as she smiled at the young man clinging to the wall with both hands outstretched and moaning, while the Dark Lord paused, his finger in the air and debating his next move. He'd hoped David would beg for him to stop, and he would have after a few more slaps, for the pleading would signal the break in his spirit. It was required, this pleading and giving in of oneself, for a companion to be suitable. But not this one, he thought as he glared at the human's back from across the room, failing to notice any sway in the spine to signify submission and defeat.

David took a deep breath and waited, cringing and wishing he could hold onto something nearby to brace himself, not realizing how little it would matter anyway. The Dark Lord saw this and smirked as he slammed him back into the wall one more time harshly, unexpectedly and forcefully, so that when he flew off, he landed on the ground and pulled up his knees to comfort his midsection and began to cough and moan from the impact.

“Yes, this is most definitely the latest addition to my collection. He's a little out of sorts at the moment. Let's introduce the two of you, shall we?” The Dark Lord took another sip of wine then extended his hand out to grab and pull up as if lifting an imaginary object by his fingers.

David shot up in response, holding onto his hair and grimacing as he was slammed back into the wall to face them both. Syrianna laughed softly as she looked on, her legs crossed in front of her.

“Play Thing, this is my vampire witch, Esmeralda. Esmeralda, this is my collectible, David. There, now you’ve met.” He pulled his invisible hand away from David’s hair and grabbed his throat firmly. David reacted by grabbing at his throat to lighten the tension there, hoping to persuade Louis to let go.

In the meantime, Esmeralda walked over and stood near him to inspect him for herself, eyeing his worldly clothes with distaste and snobbery only she could pull off and smiling as she thought of her recent kill tonight.

David glared at her, wanting to say something sinister and horrific but not sure he’d survive to see her reaction, and he couldn’t help but admire her beauty. *She’s one hell of a knock-out vamp...*

“So this is the infamous David Smith?” It only took her a vampire’s glance to take in his broad shoulders, fully grown face and developed body to realize something horrible. He was no longer a rebellious youth. To Esmeralda’s despair, this newest addition to Nine was indeed, fully grown and beautiful to look upon. “Looks like his age has given him a few more years since his decent hasn’t it? Too bad it doesn’t suit him.” She smiled in contempt, then glanced nervously at her admired, hoping he hadn’t noticed the age acceleration in the human.

Azmodeus smiled at her attempt to devalue the human. “Yes, he’s the perfect age now. Time spent in my world away from my control gave him at least a few years of a human’s age. If he’s lucky, he’ll get the pleasure of adding one more day to that number.”

“Does he know what we went through to bring him here?” She glanced back over at David and mocked him by sticking her nose in the air as if he stunk.

Okay, the bitch deserves to rot, David decided. “So, who are you supposed to be, the welcoming party, the help, or the live, after party entertainment?” He felt the hold on his throat tighten somewhat as he spat out his words. *That’s fine, just choke me and be done with it.*

She smiled sweetly as she showed her incisors. “No, I’m just one of the many to bring you here to adorn our wall, the newest trophy in His collection—“

“Oh, that’s right, I remember you now! You were that sad, little whimpering whore who lay moaning in pieces near him that night I visited! I’m surprised you’re up and around, given

the amount of blood left over on his hands that night. Add to that, all the clumps of nasty, tangled, witch hair around our feet along with the look of loathing for you still residing on His Majesty's face." His voice got louder as he felt the invisible hold of the Dark Lord's hand lessen on his throat, then disappear as he stood up and backed away from the wall cautiously, rubbing his neck. He was finally able to make eye contact with the Arch Devil.

Azmodeus smiled his approval as he reacted to the vicious comment. This will make for an interesting evening, he thought as he watched the entertainment unfold before him; his nails still a rainbow of brilliant color.

Esmeralda fumed as she turned away from David, stunned that he knew she was there that night and momentarily without a reply. She responded by turning her back to him whimsically, her hair flinging out in his direction and smacking his face. She walked over and stood behind the Dark Lord, strutting her stuff. David watched her body outline as she strolled over and quickly looked away as he noticed Louis watching him intently, the smile he wore a second ago now suddenly gone...*Oh, shit*, he thought, *he didn't like that*.

Syrianna took it all in, laughing again as she watched the witch's reaction to the stranger's insult. *This human might be worth keeping around after all, or at least until I eat her.*

"So, have you realized where you are and what your purpose is here, this night, in my presence? Speak!" Azmodeus' voice was harsh and curt, but his eyes danced in glee as he took in the nice human decoration before him. He's so much like his brother, but better, for this one resides in the flesh and completely exposed – a soul for the taking after months of wait.

David paused as he thought of an answer, trying to ignore Esmeralda's wicked smile as she positioned herself behind Louis and beckoned more verbal insults.

David was finally forced to look at him and he did; he took him in and felt instantly weak by his presence; the darkness that radiated from him was visible and probably palpable if he were close enough to reach out and fan it, and his physical beauty, his hair perfectly gathering around him, those piercing, beautiful eyes, and his black velvet suit he wore with a nobility that exuded confidence, power and sex appeal. *Was he once a King after all? Maybe...*

He knew Louis was trying to draw him in, and he also knew deep down he wouldn't submit easily. He wasn't going to be another slave like that idiot Patch, or even the vampire whore across from him, trying to hang on Louis like an article of clothing. No, he would resist Louis' charms and that would be his trademark, although the thought of the Devil's concept of

torture and pain made him flinch. *Say something Dave! Anything!*

He went to open his mouth to say something rude, but it was too late. He found himself flung backward again as his face became instantly stuck to the wall like glue on paper; the procession of mindless slapping back and forth continued until he felt he'd break in two.

"I'm afraid you may need to leave, my dear, for I think I have a long night's 'breaking in' session to attend to with this one. I'll give both you and Sandor the night off to do as you wish. I will call for you in the morning." The Dark Lord played with his finger in the air as he watched the puppet before him do his bidding. *He's way too easily manipulated, this one, and not at all the power magnet I thought he might be, having been away from me and unchecked for so long...how very, very disappointing.* He flicked his finger faster until he could hear the human cry out in agony, then he dropped him harshly to the floor and turned to Esmeralda, who had placed herself in the chair nearby to gaze upon him with pretty green eyes meant to plead and seduce him into letting her stay. They didn't do the trick, but the act annoyed him greatly.

"I don't easily, or better yet, I haven't EVER been manipulated by a charming face or pair of green eyes, my dear. So please, do not assume your ability to drip sexual appeal will sway me in any way, shape or form. I have personal matters to attend to this night, and you've known this for quite some time now. Honestly, did you think I'd catch him then free him like a small fish in a big pond, hmm?" He chose to not even glance her way as he spoke with the slightest disdain in his voice. She pouted and tried to look the part as she leaned back and let her bodice protrude forward from the shroud of her cloak.

"But my Lord, I have nothing else to do tonight but serve your wishes—"

"What is it you wish to do my dear? Watch me torture this ungrateful little fire demon?" He took another sip of wine as he kept his gaze looking straight ahead. He could tell David was quietly lying still and listening, trying not to be noticed. "Get up and stand before me, slave. Before I can indoctrinate you into Nine, you'll need to jump when I call, now move, or greet the wall again."

Esmeralda sat quietly as well, trying and hoping he'd forgotten she was still there, not attempting to leave yet. He smirked as he chose to ignore her for the time being; the pretty human toy before him was more of a draw at the moment.

David slowly turned from his side to look across the floor under the table. He met Syrianna's eyes again, and he could tell by looking at her what she was saying.

Go ahead and stay down, fool! A really strong human would stay on the ground and cower in fear. You'd be an idiot if you stood up to him now. He'll only knock you down.

Syrianna glanced up at her Master after she gave her advice.

David shook his head, thinking he was screwed either way. *No thanks. I'll stand up and meet him face to face and take my chances.*

Suite yourself, Sweetheart, it's your party. She smiled at him and lay down on her front paws to watch the scene unfold.

David stood up, although hesitantly, and looked at Louis, who quickly placed his wine glass down on the table and smacked him from across the room without looking at him, knocking him back down to fall below the visible line of the table.

David held his jaw as he sprawled back out on the floor; afraid it would fall off if he'd let go, while he heard Syrianna panting in the background. *Okay, I felt that pain and that one will leave a mark...*

Azmodeus stood up and leaned against the table for a few seconds, then spoke firmly to his witch, who was breathless with excitement as she watched the scene and all the hostility unfold in a passionate electrical showcase. Was she excited over the interchange between these two? She couldn't believe it, but the response it was giving her was almost uncontrollable. She instinctively crossed her legs.

“Leave me, witch, or suffer the consequences – NOW.” He watched as she rose quietly, not arguing back, and leaving the room, lingering near the door as she walked slowly by the human, hoping he'd look up at her. He didn't give her the thrill. She left and closed the door behind her.

The Dark Lord walked around the table and observed David still lying face down, not wanting to rise. “Get up to your knees, back to me. That is what you are allowed to show me. You'll have to earn the right to face me and eventually, to be able to face me standing.”

David found his breathing heavy as the anger pulsed through his veins. He couldn't believe how cruel Louis was acting. Was his behavior at their last meeting worth this kind of retribution? He thought about it, thought about how he'd woken up before Louis had finished his yelling. *He must not have a sense of humor and I already know after this little introduction that he also isn't one for more than a few second's hesitation when he speaks. Great! So he's the serious, impatient, not the type to take a joke, kinda Devil – just my unholy luck.*

He slowly rose to his knees, his back to the Dark Lord as he felt his eyes burn in hatred. He thought of Joel's face and felt the sadness flood his heart again. *Joel can't be gone; this can't be happening...this just can't be my existence...wall decoration? Did that witch say I would be wall décor?*

The irony would destroy him, he was sure of it, as he knelt there and thought of what he would most likely become if Louis was successful – arm candy. *I used to make fun of the beautiful human trophies at school all the time! This more than blows...*

The Dark Lord began his speech as he paced back and forth behind a kneeling David. “You will refer to me as ‘Master’ when you speak to me. You will also ask permission to speak before expressing your humble little thoughts. When you earn the privilege to use your legs and stand upright, you will walk behind me half a step to a full step anywhere we go – consider yourself my shadow should that happen. I have personal servants to serve food and pour my drink, however if the situation presents itself, you will jump at the opportunity to serve me and if you do not, your face will meet my hand, and much, much more, I assure you. Any questions?” He stopped pacing and faced David's back.

If you're going to act, do it now, he thought as he tried to convince himself while kneeling there. He needed to do something, for he would never be taken subdued.

David tucked himself in and rolled forward, away from the Dark Lord, to land on his feet, throwing his left hand out and shooting a flame of fire at his adversary.

The Dark Lord, staff lowered and not engaged, had to rely on his natural abilities, but the element of surprise David had hoped for didn't make a difference. Azmodeus was aware of his newest captive's probable defiance, however he still wasn't prepared to receive the fire. It shot him backward for a split second, trying to break through the invisible shield of magic that surrounded him constantly, being in the protective embrace of Nine. He shielded himself and returned a cold stream, his hand out to project his own soul. The two powers met in the middle of the room, an arch of powerful magic; ice on fire. David's eyes were black and enraged as he forced all his being at the Dark Lord.

Syrianna was there, along with the other two hell hounds, but their master called them off with a shake of his head. They retreated behind David in waiting, ready to pounce should the command request them to, all three of them breathing out fire in the anticipation.

Azmodeus smiled as he felt the human's energy and hatred. “Nice - you've improved

greatly during my absence, I see, but my dear sweet soul, you are, in no way shape or form, a match for me. I think you need to, how is it you young, hip humans say it? ‘Cool off?’ Right, that’s it! You need to cool OFF!” He forced his hand forward slightly, then forcefully as he suddenly realized David was stronger than he had expected.

The force of ice, mixed with a little frustration at the human’s strength, shot through David quickly. Gasping, he fell to his knees, his arm still extended as he watched ice creep up it and down through his body, stiffening up his limbs and keeping him permanently placed on his knees. His eyes were the last to freeze, cracking and splintering his vision as he tried to stare straight forward.

The cold also crept up the Dark Lord’s arm. He smiled and flexed his frozen fingers, his knuckles audibly cracking and popping under the natural state of his being.

With the duel lasting only a few seconds, he walked over and knelt down slightly to see the young man up close, inspecting his beautifully frozen face and body outline. As he watched the ice devil approach, David tried to close his eyes unsuccessfully. Azmodeus laughed loudly at the failed attempt. He blew cold, frigid air in David’s face and watched as his eyes finally glazed over. They were frozen open and fixed looking in the direction of Azmodeus’ lower mid-section.

As if seeing what he was forced to see, Azmodeus whispered sarcastically, “That will have to wait till later, although I am flattered you would gaze upon it so soon after we’ve been reunited. Truly, you flatter me.” He laughed heartily as he stood up and grabbed David’s hair in one hand, digging his nails in the frozen mat of iced hair, then began to walk out the dining room to the adjoining room, whistling a song David was all too familiar with as he was dragged along on his knees, trying not to grimace as his hair pulled upward off his scalp and his face began to crack under the pressure of what was suddenly felt as Nine’s pain.

- i "Suburbia," Song and lyrics by Pet Shop Boys, Please, 1986.

- ii "Lies," music by the Thompson Twins, Quick step and side kick, 1983

- iii "I'm Your Man," music by Wham! Music From The Edge Of Heaven, 1985

- iv "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," music and entire lyrics by U2, War, 1983.