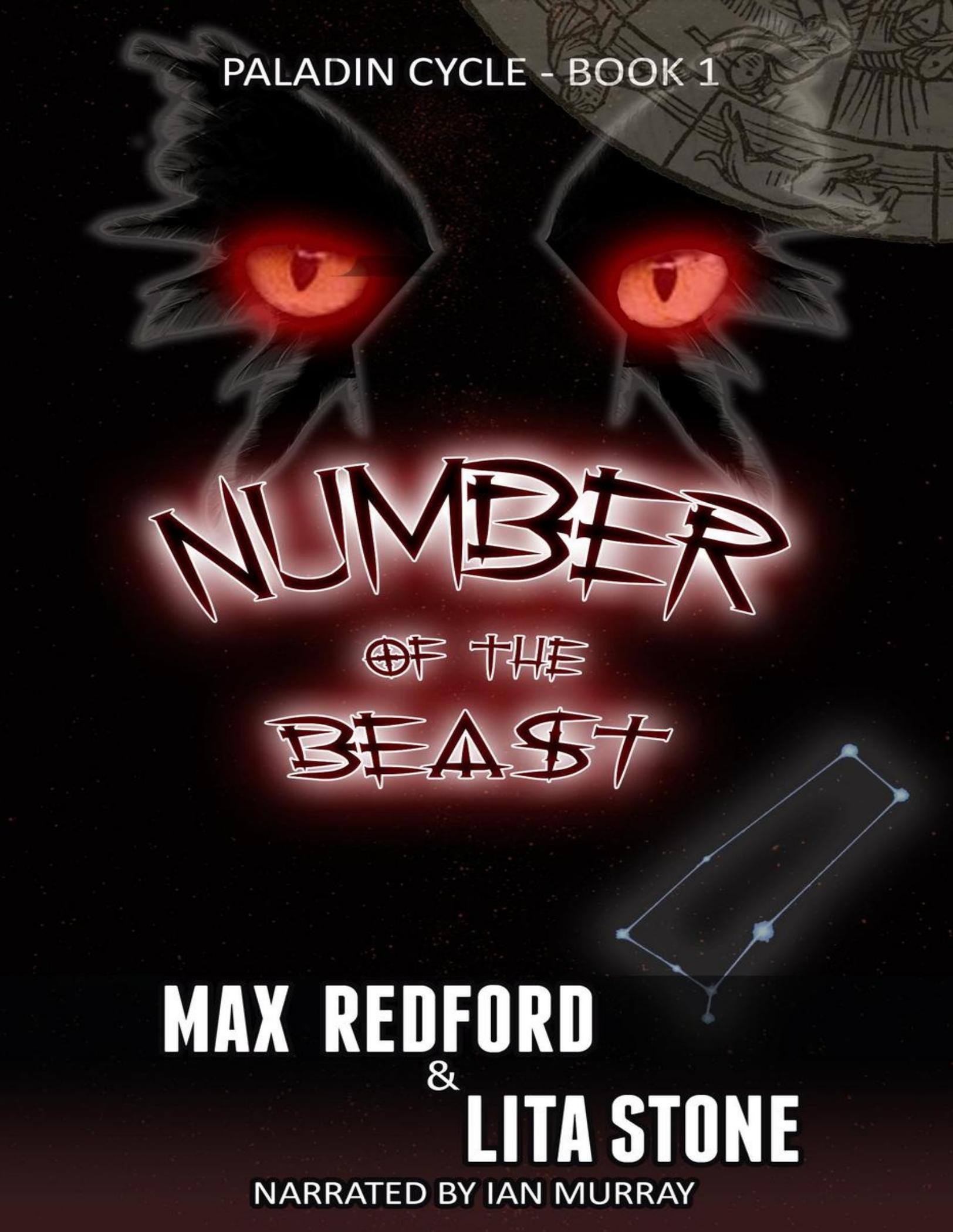


PALADIN CYCLE - BOOK 1



NUMBER
OF THE
BEAST

MAX REDFORD

&

LITA STONE

NARRATED BY IAN MURRAY

Number of the Beast

Paladin Cycle

Book One

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Foreword

In the summer of 2011, my then fiancé and aspiring romance writer Lita Stone and I began weaving a tale of modern fantasy with a strong theme of romance. Embracing the classic “Love Conquers All” theme, we gave birth to the characters Shane Baker, Amy Rae Wintry, and the Geminus aka “the Beast”.

Within that first summer, we also crafted a vast mythos involving multiverses and cosmic beings and alternate histories, along with an ensemble cast comprised of both everyday folk and supernatural beings inspired by the Zodiac. Throughout the initial drafting of this first book NUMBER OF THE BEAST—we aimed to capture the atmosphere, tone and drama found in such things as True Blood and Friday Night Lights, coupled with a healthy dose of the literature that Lita and I enjoy reading—from fantasy erotic-romance to Lovecraftian mythos and Edward Lee’s graphic horror.

And so all readers should be warned that the Dark Fantasy series you are about to embark upon extends the borders of multiple genres and is very much intended for a mature audience who are not sensitive to adult language, sexual content and graphic horror.

If these things offend then proceed with caution.

Also by Max Redford

Life Lessons

[Can I Play With Madness?](#)

Paladin Cycle

[Number of the Beast: Paladin Cycle](#)
[Reckoning of the Beast: Paladin Cycle](#)

Wolfe Brothers

[Rest., Rest In Peace](#)

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A Word from God



HEY, IT'S ME, GOD. See them there crates in the back of my pickup? Full of guns and computers they are. See that there settlement on the distant horizon? That twelve-foot rock wall surrounds a secret compound. It's where I'm delivering these here supplies.

Why is God delivering guns and computers to some holy cloister in the middle of the New Mexico desert you ask?

Because there amongst the mud brick buildings resides one of our heroes, Atticus. He's been training for all of his seventeen years to be a mighty champion to oppose the evil hordes that constantly threaten this particular Earth.

Why am I telling you this story? Why should you care? Well, I'm glad you asked.

You see I have a message so listen closely. Ready?

Three things will stand the test of time—faith, hope and love—and the greatest of these is...that's right! Love.

You're rolling your eyes.

That's just fine 'cause I'm used to it. Lots of folks get leery when God starts talking to them directly. The ones who don't get fidgety are the ones who talk to me on a regular basis.

But hey, I'm not one to judge.

Or maybe I am.

But whether you believe in me or not is irrelevant to this particular story. This story is not about me, but if you care to read more about me then you know where to look, right?

That's precisely what I thought.

But you didn't pick up this book—or download it to your fancy e-Reader to get preached to by someone driving a pickup, so let us get on with the good stuff.

You're about to meet a lot of interesting folks. Some from Texas and some from alternate places along the space-time continuum and from far off exotic worlds that I don't travel to very often. You could say those places are God-forsaken.

Some of you more discerning readers may be asking that age old question: If I really am God then why ain't I doing anything more than hauling weapons and computers to these holy warriors?

Well, I'm sure you've heard the debate about free-will and all that.

All I can do other than supply them with some useful tools is offer words of encouragement to my good boy Atticus and his future allies.

Speaking of allies, let's talk Shane Baker. You see he's another important soldier in the coming war. He just hasn't figured it out yet.

Come now, watch and see how they fair.

Godspeed!



Chapter One



CHIHUAHUAN DESERT - May 20th

The best of the best of the best. A legend at the mere age of seventeen. A master swordsman and marksman and the fastest runner in the compound. Though Atticus' arcane techniques were lacking he could hold his own against any skilled mage. But who needed magic when you possess physical prowess that a tiger would envy?

Yes, he was the best of the best of the best.

Yet they still put him on guard duty at the front gate, standing with his spear in hand. A crummy spear!

All the years he'd guarded this front gate he couldn't recall a single moment where any nefarious intruder had stormed across the desert sands of New Mexico in a mad dash to invade the compound.

But there he stood guarding it with his life. Him and his trusty spear with the staff carved from hickory and a granite stone sharpened to a semi-lethal bluntness.

He straightened the green bandana around his head. Kneeling on one knee, Atticus tied the cord on his knee-high moccasin boot. He jumped to his feet and raised his spear. Like it was a mighty sword, he swung. His long red hair fluttered as he sliced his spear through the air, decapitating his invisible foe.

If any of those nefarious cosmic monsters did decide to rush the gates he prayed the bars would hold long enough for him to beat the miscreants to death with his dastardly spear. Though he'd probably be better off cracking the shaft so he could stab them with the pointy end of the stick. Paladins were, after all, taught to utilize any means necessary to defeat evil. And pointy sticks made for superb devil-slaying weapons.

Perhaps the Elders were teaching him a lesson in humility by giving him three consecutive nights of gate duty. But for gibbering goblins' sake! He was one of the prophesied warriors! Did he need humility? What purpose did it serve a warrior meant to slay an unearthly Beast?

Clanking and thudding sounded from old Mueller's barn a hundred yards inside the gate. More thudding. A shadow danced in the window of the barn's loft. The fiery desert sun forced him to shield his eyes to get a clearer look.

When Atticus saw the rainwater blue tunic hanging on a nail outside the barn his cheeks puffed and his loins tingled.

Just yesterday morning Venora and he had skipped off to Red Bluff Canyon a couple miles south of the compound for some Horny Toad Popping. Atticus had recently finished crafting his newest slingshot, fastening the sling from carefully cured baby lamb hide and carving the Y from fossilized desert wood.

Venora had followed him outside the gates wearing that long blue tunic with a fashionable headdress. Soon as they stepped foot into the canyon that tunic and that headdress found their way onto the sand.

He had seen Venora in her under garments before, yet each and every time it reminded him of why the Order was so strict on women's attire. If all the women chose to stroll around in their undergarments, then none of the warriors would get anything done ever again. Thank the Almighty she had the sense to use discretion and only disrobe inside the canyon where none could see. And sometimes within the confines of old cobweb-infested barns.

He swore she wore her makeshift undergarments—homemade from nothing more than thin strips of leather covering her bosom and nether regions—on their outings so to get the advantage. As if his natural lack of focus and her natural feminine wiles weren't enough of a disadvantage.

One thing about Nora that both attracted and repelled him was her undeniable need for victory over any endeavor she undertook. And that included Horny Toad Popping. She had knocked five fat toads into the sand before Atticus felled his first.

But he wasn't going to complain because he quite enjoyed his vantage point, purposefully positioning himself behind Venora. When she took a steadying stance to aim her shots, it was impossible to miss her taut muscles clenching. Her buttocks hardened like beautifully carved stone. The sweat on her legs glistened like oil on well-polished steel.

More clamoring came from the barn's loft.

Atticus summoned his fellow guardsman over. "Peter! Come at once."

Peter jumped from his tower and hurried toward Atticus. "Sir?"

"I need you to guard the gate alone for a short time while I investigate a situation."

"What situation do you speak of, Sir Atticus?"

"A matter of a most sensitive nature."

From the corner of his eye, Atticus spotted a red pickup speeding toward them, its rear tires spitting the sand of the Chihuahuan desert in its wake.

Atticus groaned. Venora would have to wait.

The vehicle rolled to a stop at the wrought iron gate. The driver, a middle-aged man with a gray bowler hat rolled down the window. Plumes of sweet smoke billowed from within. A strange music vibrated from the vehicle's

speakers; a mix of bass, drums with an accented singer sounding strangely like Cadet Jamal.

“Just God again. Bringing more school supplies.” Atticus gripped his spear, bracing it against his chest, and stepped next to the truck. “It’s only Gawd. Lower your weapons.” He signaled the sentinels in the stone watch towers on either side of the gate as well.

Peter pushed Atticus aside and leaned in Gawd’s driver’s window. “Wait here for inspection.”

“But he’s just a senile old delivery man,” Atticus said. “We swat gnats more harmful than him.”

“Protocols state that we must review all incoming persons and their cargo before entry through the gates. And it is not as though we have any other pressing matters to attend to.”

Atticus stared longingly at the barn.

Peter checked the bed of the truck. Several wooden boxes with Apple logos. He pried one of the boxes open to confirm they were laptops.

Gawd leaned out the window. “You can trust in God. I won’t lead you astray.”

Atticus came up beside Peter. He grinned at the 9mm, .357, 5.56 and shotgun ammunition.

With a wave of his arm, Peter said, “All clear. Open the gate.”

“Righteous,” said the driver as he drove forward.

Atticus wiped his hands on his olive tunic. He couldn’t wait to try out the new FN SCAR-L. No one knew where that strange guy got all the supplies, but he always brought the best provisions. Never used or broken, only the top of the line tech that the compound didn’t have the resources to craft themselves.

More rattling came from the barn. Atticus grinned. As Gawd’s truck rounded the corner to the warehouse, Atticus clapped Peter on the shoulder. “I’ll be seeing to that serious matter now.”



Chapter Two



BUCKEYE, TEXAS—MAY 20th

Amy'd only been to Sherry's house a few hundred times...this year. So her four cylinder Escort should be able to find it on its own. But somehow she missed the driveway. She swung a U-turn on FM 2025 and turned down Sherry's long windy drive. Weeping willows lined both sides. Drooping branches swept across Amy's car as if to say hello.

In front of the trailer, Sherry reclined in a red and beige lawn chair. Pink floral pajama pants and a white tank hung loose on her emaciated body. Her dark, long hair clashed with her pale skin and sunken cheeks. She bounced Jennie, her two-year-old, on one knee. The toddler giggled while grasping at a broken piece of plaid webbing that had separated from the plastic frame of the chair.

As Amy traversed the lumpy yard, Sherry waved, a joint between her fingers.

From the back of the trailer, five Rottweiler's rounded the corner. Barking, foaming at the mouth, Rusty, Dusty, Busty, Mutton and Puff-daddy surrounded Amy. She patted each one on the head before pushing her way through, careful to avoid the craters the dogs had dug into the dirt, dirt that probably once hosted a lush, green lawn.

"How goes the potty training?" Amy asked.

Sherry rolled her eyes. "Sucks."

"She's only two. Give it time."

Sherry shrugged. "You're looking better."

"Ten days. Ten whole days." No more night terrors. No more sleepless nights. No more zombie medications.

No more tears.

Sherry put her joint out on the plastic arm of the chair. "Then why are you here?"

"I got to be sure."

Sherry scooped up her daughter and headed toward the trailer. The screen door squeaked in protest and Amy followed her inside. Sherry buckled Jennie into a high chair. With her daughter entertained by a handful of Cheerios scattered on the tray, Sherry sat in one of the metal folding chairs surrounding the table.

Amy sat across from her and offered her hand, palm up. The sticky table-top nearly glued her arm down.

Cold, slender fingers grasped Amy's wrist. The fingers of other hand traced along Amy's palm. Slowly. Meticulously. Amy remained motionless, holding her breath, and prayed that Sherry would find no bad vibes in her reading.

But the slow frown curling Sherry's lips caused Amy's heart to sink. Sherry's brows lowered and a look of bewilderment seized her face. With a gasp, she let go of Amy, snatching her hand away. She cradled it against her chest as if she'd been burned. "Go!"

"Goodness! Is it that bad?"

"Leave and don't ever come here again."

"I don't understand." But Amy stood.

Sherry plucked her daughter from the highchair. She stepped backward, toward the living room. "I said leave."

Amy dug into her purse for her wallet.

"Keep your twenty bucks," Sherry screamed, "and get the hell out!"

When Amy refused to leave Sherry's trailer without an explanation, Sherry had spilled all. She called 'It' demonic and extremely powerful. 'It' had given Amy the night terrors that fateful week only ten days ago and 'It' was not gone.

Amy stood at her kitchen sink, refilled her glass with water and guzzled it empty.

The 'It' that had given her the night terrors for seven straight days, the night terrors that she thought had ended ten days ago, the night terrors that had made her violently ill to her stomach, the night terrors that stole sleep from her night after night after night, for seven darn days.

The visions had disturbed her rest in vague segments: a pair of panthers tore flesh from some helpless creature. A giant scorpion poisoned thousands of faceless children with its lethal stinger. A demon-witch, who kept men chained to a cave wall, cast spells, bringing chaos and destruction. Tornados several miles wide accompanied by a catastrophic earthquake crumbled the Earth like a rotten pecan. Fire consumed ancient woodlands. Ice, thick as the trunk of a century-old elm, buried the earth's deserts.

At least Shane, her live-in boyfriend of four years, had been home and not hundreds of miles away on the rig in Pecos.

First night of the nightmares Amy had woken four times, bawling and crying into her pillow. Shane had dragged her from the bed and cooked her favorite, homemade mac 'n' cheese. In the early hours of the morning they had finished eating and she was beginning to feel calmer. Shane teased about screwing the nightmares from her pretty head.

And that was exactly what he'd done.

Amy smiled at the memory. Her face flushed, but this time not from the Texas heat.

She leaned over the sink and dribbled water on the back of her head.

Maybe everybody in town was right about Sherry. She was a fake and a liar. After all, it had been ten whole days since the nightmares and she didn't feel any presence around her, dark or otherwise. Sherry just wanted Amy's money.

But Sherry had refused Amy's twenty spot.

Damn.

Amy shook her long, blond strands and straightened. She scooped her wet hair and draped it down her back. Flipping around, she lifted her chin and glanced at the refrigerator. Stuck to the center of the door was a picture of her and Shane at Galveston beach.

Shane wasn't due home for days but maybe he could come home early. Amy pushed off the sink. She took a step toward her purse hanging on the back of the chair. She'd call and explain what happened at Sherry's. He'd have to understand.

That's when she saw the rodent. Right smack dab in the middle of her tiled kitchen floor.

Dead.

Bloody.

Headless.

Freya! That darn cat.

Hands on her cheeks, she closed her eyes. Sherry was right. A very dark energy had latched onto her. Bad things were happening. No wonder Sherry wanted her to leave so badly, so quickly.

Amy was no good to be around. She was a menace. This poor rodent gruesomely, senselessly murdered. Oh this wretched spirit. Why wouldn't it leave her alone?

What was the 'It' that was haunting her? And what had she done to deserve it?

She snatched the spray bottle from under the sink. Two parts water, one part lemon juice. One big fat onion marinating at the bottom. Dashing down her hall, she sprayed the walls, around the bathroom door, bedroom door, linen closet and the wood floors.

Amy sprayed the curtains in the living room, the sofa and the recliner.

Returning to the kitchen, she set the bottle on the table. She grabbed a thick stack of paper towels and scooped up the rat.

The rodent's spirit would haunt her. She'd read about it many times. People and animals with untimely deaths haunted their place of demise.

The poor rat would need a proper burial. Buried whole. With its head.

She stood on her porch and scanned the grass for any sign of the missing head.

Sacred Oaks forest bordered the property. The spooky woods seemed unnaturally quiet.

The woodland reserve harbored many secrets that some believed to be ancient evils. Others, like Shane, swore the stories were nothing more than rumors that lonely, old biddies cooked up.

At twenty-three, Amy was too young to call herself an old biddy but she believed those tales to be a lot more than folklore. Her heart told her so and if she learned anything from her aunt it was to trust her own instincts.

A quiet voice inside her head told her she was being irrational and maybe even a bit looney. Her Aunt Carol had drilled craziness into her head since she was a little bitty girl. For over a decade, Aunt Carol had been a permanent resident of El Paso Psychiatric Center. And for a whole year, Amy had lived in a neighboring wing.

While most fourteen-year-old girls spent their time gossiping and painting their nails, Amy spent her time talking to ghosts. She was fourteen when she started hearing Vicky's voice in her head...three years after Vicky's death. And by seventeen, Amy's mom had had enough. So she booked Amy a room at the psych ward...with her aunt.

Some families had to deal with hereditary diabetes or high blood pressure, but Amy had inherited the crazy bug.

Amy was released five years ago, deemed sane and fit to return to normal society. And she was determined never to return. She wasn't crazy.

Not crazy.

A mantra she repeated daily. If only to convince herself, if nobody else.



PECOS, TEXAS

Three hot as fuck, long-ass days into his two-week stint in the oilfield and Shane was already saddled with the worst part of his job as a derrick hand. Confined on the rooster board and laying pipe and changing bits sucked but was a fuck load better than casualty collecting in the Iraqi desert.

Instead of eating MRE's on the daily, for two weeks of every month, he lived and worked hundreds of miles from his home, which was a lot better than living in a war-ravaged shithole across the sea.

But two weeks out of the month he was without Amy. A man shouldn't have to be away from his woman so damn much.

Shane pushed through the double doors into the rec room. Stale coffee, blue collar musk and sweet chewing tobacco always lingered. As he approached the vending machine “Thrown Out of the Bar” by *Hank Williams III* sounded from his pocket. He scrubbed his filthy hands on an even filthier rag before answering his phone.

“Sweetheart, hold up a sec,” he said. Raking his free hand over his grimy forehead and standing impatiently against the steel cage surrounding the vending machine, he said, “I can’t do anything when I’m five-hundred miles away.” He listened to Amy’s frantic voice as she wailed on about her search for a rodent’s head. “Did you look under the porch?” Despite not giving a shitpie about the rat’s head, his stomach knotted from hearing how stressed Amy’s silly superstitions had made her. He recalled that age-old expression about a nervous cat on a hot tin roof and chuckled at the visual. “What about in Alamo’s doghouse?”

Tall and lanky Birch, his closest bud and co-worker, waltzed into the rec room.

“Maybe you could give the rat a burial without its head,” Shane said. That response warranted him an exaggerated huff from the other end of the phone.

Birch circled his finger at the side of his head while mouthing ‘loco’.

Shane flipped him off, and turned his back toward Birch. “Call Carmen. I don’t want you being alone tonight.” Birch’s laughter grated on his eardrums and Shane shook his head. “Me too. Bye.”

Shane dropped coins in the vending machine. After popping the tab on the Dr. Pepper he guzzled the can half empty. When he took a seat, he began shuffling a deck of Iraqi Most Wanted playing cards. He caught a glimpse of Amir Rashid Muhammad's fucking smirk and big goddamn nose.

Blood, bullets and bombs. Air raid sirens. Wipe 'em all off the fucking planet and let God sort it all out.

Birch tapped the white tabletop. Shane jerked a glance at Birch just as he opened his mouth to speak, but Shane held up a hand. “You say anything about Amy or that phone call and I’ll put my boot up your sparkly clean ass.”

In his unstained jeans and shirt, Birch gawked, mouth agape, before grinning and grabbing a broom from the corner. He held the black broom extended then swiped it through the air like some goofy Jedi-janitor.

“Rise of The Mages III is going to own the box office this weekend,” Birch said. “And we’re stuck in BFE.”

“I think I’ll manage.”

The rec door swung open, letting in a gust of hot Texas air. Kevin stumbled into the room, blue Solo cup in hand. His clumsy swagger and bloodshot eyes suggested he'd either just finished a twenty-four hour shift or was infected with the latest zombie virus.

Shane shuffled the cards while watching Kevin take a seat at the table behind them.

Birch exhaled a deep breath as he popped his knuckles.

"Tough shift?" Shane asked without looking away from the cards he spread on the table. Ali Hassan al-Majid. King of Spades. One of the dead motherfuckers.

"Had to write an operations manual for the new submersible pumping system. The sections code under the federal—"

"Look Jamie-boy," Shane said, taunting Birch with his real name, a name Birch had loathed since kindergarten. "Next time I ask how your day went just say 'fine' and forgo all the techno-babble bullshit."

Birch bought cheese crackers from the vending machine and took a seat in the folding chair across from him. "The Army turned you into an ass."

"No. It didn't." Ace of Spades. Camp Justice. God bless America.

"You're right," Birch said. "You were always an ass."

It had been a year since Shane's dishonorable discharge, but it wasn't Uncle Sam that turned him into the asshole everyone had said he was. He wasn't afflicted with PTSD, at least not from the war anyway. He loved being a soldier. Gun in hand, boots laced tight, order and protocols, those were all the things befitting him.

Shane began dealing the cards. "You in or out?"

"Certainly," Birch said. "Considering my winning streak last night, I think Lady Luck has a crush on me."

"Hope she does you better than that diva you call a wife." Shane dealt cards across the table.

With a teasing grin, Birch spoke around a mouthful of crackers. "At least Bridget is sane."

When Kevin groaned, Shane glanced over his shoulder. Kevin sipped his drink, giving Shane a half smile and nod.

Shane turned back to Birch. "Don't call Amy crazy."

"She's the only chick I know that organizes her cabinets according to the alignment of the stars."

Or invokes orgasms by the placement of her shoes under the bed, Shane thought. "She's cute."

“Looking for a rat’s head at sunset is cute?” Birch’s face contorted into an exaggerated frown. “It’s a little bit loco, chief.”

Kevin let out a huff. He stumbled from his table and took a seat on the other side of Shane. “Wait until the little woman climbs up your ass about leaving the twist tie off the bread. Of course that pales in comparison to when your dog takes a shit on the new carpet. And the fireworks don’t really crack until she kicks you out of bed for coming home smelling like cigarettes and beer, asking the name of the whore you’d been fucking. Then you’ll know you’re officially in the ninth circle of Hell and married to the Devil’s own succubus.”

Birch snickered. “Nah. Baker here is in love. Puppy dogs and sunshine.”

Shane ignored Birch, instead glancing at Kevin. “How’s Rachel and the baby? She must be ready to pop. What is she, nine and a half months along?”

Kevin leaned forward. “Fuck you, Baker.”

The pungent scent of whiskey assailed Shane’s nostrils. “Jesus Kev! Are you drinking? We could all get fired.” He shook his head. “At least put it into a coffee mug, you dumb fuck.” Shane reached for the plastic cup, but Kevin dumped it on Shane’s head and pitched it to the floor. “Prove it, asshole.”

Gripping the rim of the table, willing himself to stay seated, Shane counted from ten. *Nine. Eight.*

Birch whispered in his left ear. “Don’t. Overreact, man.”

Kevin whispered in his right ear. “Tell your flaming, bum chum lover to fuck off.”

Seven.

“I know plan A’s looking mighty fine,” Birch said, “but last time plan A landed us naked in a Mexican jail.”

Six. Plan A was Shane’s simple go-to plan in a tight spot that involved little more than beating a man to a bloody lump.

With a demon in one ear and an angel in the other, Shane felt his blood pressure rise, his face get hot, and his hands shake. One more write-up for fighting on the rig and he’d surely get fired.

Five.

Kevin was hardly a saint, but this behavior seemed over-the-top, even for him. Must be the alcohol flapping his gums.

“Think of Amy,” Birch said. “He’s not worth it. Walk away.”

“Yeah,” Kevin whispered, his pungent breath wafting across Shane’s face like the steam from a sewer pipe. “Think of Amy and how she might be served better by a real man.”

Four.

“He’s just rattling your chain. Don’t let him bait you,” Birch whispered.

“Yeah, Baker, I’m just rattling your fuckin’ chain.” Kevin leaned back in his chair and cackled like a rabid bastard. He straightened and pointed. “Tell that country slut that when she’s done sucking on your southern fried dick where to come find a real cowboy and not some white trash redneck.” Kevin’s mouth unleashed a thunderous belch.

Three...two...

“Fuck it.” Shane’s chair rattled as he shot to his feet. Fists clenched.

Birch darted between Kevin and Shane, and held his palms up to Shane while keeping at arm’s length. “I got an idea,” the lanky bastard said. “A good ol’ plan H.”

“Fuck your Plan H.” Shane shoved Birch to the floor before he grabbed Kevin. Birch scrambled from the fray to avoid getting trampled as Shane and Kevin grappled.

From behind, Shane locked his arm around Kevin’s neck while Kevin’s feet scrambled for traction on the floor. He thrust his fist into Kevin’s chest, knocking the wind from his lungs. “You stupid sunuvabitch! You swore you’d quit drinking when Rachel got pregnant.” With his mouth close to Kevin’s ear, Shane gritted, “You’re gonna end up in jail, jobless and fuck up your wife’s life and your unborn kid’s.”

Standing to the side, Birch clapped Shane on the shoulder. “Let him go. You don’t need any more trouble.”

With a sneer, Shane shoved Kevin against the wall. “I’m going with plan A.”

“Is an ass-kicking your solution to every problem?” Birch asked, his tone one of indifference.

Shane nodded. “Damn straight.” He shook Kevin, but Kevin jerked away, and lost his balance, tumbling into the coffee table. The glass pot crashed to the floor and its black contents pooled at their feet.

Kevin never threw a punch.

Shane gripped the collar of Kevin’s shirt and heaved him against the wall. “What the fuck you thinking? This is bullshit.”

“Just kick my ass.” Kevin’s blank stare rolled to the black puddle on the floor.

Shane loosened his grip. Something didn’t sit right about all this. No man in a right state of mind ever asked for his ass to be kicked, not even a drunk one. “Did something happen? Is Rachel and the baby alright?”

Tears welled in Kevin’s red eyes. He slumped to the floor and sat in the cold black puddle of old coffee, like a gut shot buck felled in its own entrails. “Six years we tried. Six fucking years. And it happened. God willing it happened.” Hugging his knees, he buried his face between his legs.

Shane watched a grown man weep.

“They said he wouldn’t make it.” Kevin’s head dropped, gaze lowered to the floor. “God blessed us with a child and now He’s taking him from us.”

Shane’s fists unclenched. He knelt in front of Kevin and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

Kevin’s tear-stained face lifted and a ghastly deadpan gaze caught Shane.

“My son’s gonna die.”



WITH THE RAT'S BLOODY body resting in a shallow grave, Amy had spent the last hour patting the dry, yellowed grass, scouring for the rodent’s missing head.

She sat back on her haunches and blew a strand of blond hair from her flushed face. Muck clung to her sweaty forehead.

Alamo, a black and tan mongrel with about as much worth as a bushel of rotten peas, slept near the foot of the wooden porch. After spotting Freya, the feline scoundrel, Amy chased the blasted cat with a yard broom around the porch until the guilty cat had escaped under the trailer. Alamo perked one ear, slightly raising his head, but quickly went back to napping.

Amy returned to her knees and continued raking her fingers through the parched lawn and gold weeds while silently cursing Freya.

Behind her, Alamo put his nose to the ground. He sniffed along an unseen zig-zag line that led to the mound of wheat-colored grass trimmings. Within spitting distance of the heap, the dog excitedly began to dig through the mulch with his front paws.

Freya sprung from under the porch, stopping shy of Alamo. Hissing. Spine arched.

Alamo barked and growled but the nutty feline didn’t take the hint.

When Freya slashed Alamo across the snout, he fled to seek refuge inside his doghouse. Freya meowed triumphantly.

With a dainty stride, the cat nosed inside the patch of grass and surfaced with a furry head in her mouth. Freya snaked around and in between Amy’s legs before dropping the gooey head at Amy’s feet.

“Heavens!” She plucked the head by a half-chewed ear and plopped it into the hole with the rest of its remains.

Her palms packed the cool soil over the grave as she grumbled at Alamo. Course he couldn’t hear her from his doghouse across the yard. “How could you?”

To further ward off any vengeful spirits courtesy of the dead rodent, she strolled to the edge of the woods to pick some wild blueberries to put on the grave. An old Indian trick to keep the dead at peace. Nervous tremors took hold of her fingers while she carefully plucked the berries, making sure not to pop any. It was crucial she take ample care in pleasing the poor rodent's soul, especially if it was the dreadful portent Sherry had foresaw earlier.

Returning to the grave, she sprinkled the berries atop it. Mental checklist: Found head. Buried head. Covered with berries.

Then Amy made the sign of the cross, her hand moving from the right shoulder to left. "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen." She never recalled her pastor giving sermons on appeasing wronged spirits but she'd also been raised Baptist, so she hoped her pseudo-Catholicism was good enough.

Another thought jolted her to her feet and she ran to the side of the trailer. There she turned on the faucet to fill Alamo's dirty water dish before returning once more to the burial site.

She looked at the mucky water in the metal bowl. "God, please bless this water and make it Holy."

She dipped two fingers in the bowl and drizzled the grave.

"Please don't haunt me. I really do like all animals. It's just my dumb dog...or cat don't know any better. I hope you understand." She sprinkled more water on the grave. "Rest in peace, my furry friend."

Thunder rolled in the distance. Amy sniffed the air. There hadn't been any storms forecasted for tonight, but she sure could smell the rain. And the breeze carried an odious foreboding aroma.

A bright light geysered from deep within the dense forest of ash and oaks. A banshee howl bellowed from the doghouse and Alamo burst free, racing into the woods.

"Alamo!" Amy shouted but the cur was already gone.

Freya stalked the edge of the gloomy forest, swiping the air.

Maybe she saw an intruder visible only to her, Amy thought as dread seized her. Cats were able to look into alternate dimensions where the wicked wights and spirits capered.

And cats who ran in circles weren't just chasing their tails. They were chasing those otherworldly specters who hailed from the underworld. Felines kept tabs on the devils and wights that trespassed into the world of the living. Aunt Carol had taught her the way of cats. Aunt Carol would know 'cause she had thirty-nine of them before she went nuts.

Another crash of thunder rolled. This one a lot closer.

“Dear Lord.”

Never once had Alamo ventured into Sacred Oaks. He’d only bark his ever-loving head off. Even a dumb mutt like him could probably sense the perilous secrets inhabiting those woods. But today the forest conjured him the way a witch summoned her familiar.

Nervously, Amy crept closer to the largest acacia tree along the edge of the forest. The shadow of the bushy branches swept over a large portion of the yard where it grew. In all the many years she’d lived in the trailer she’d kept a self-made promise to never go beyond that tree after the sun had set. With caution foremost in her mind, she reached out slowly to touch the tree, believing that if she acted too recklessly the forest would swallow her soul. Not even Freya dared to get too close to the tree. Beyond the ancient acacia were swarms of parched brown vines that skirted the other trees. The forest grew thorny bushes to serve as a more threatening defense for those who boldly passed the large acacia.

Realizing that she heard no crickets, insects or even a single hooting owl or distant coyote caused more anxiety to coil inside her stomach. For years, she’d heard the creepy tales about the Sacred Oaks forest that happened to thrive right next to where she lived, and now she might actually get to experience the spookiness in real time all by herself.

Behind her ribcage, her heart hammered. When she stepped forward her legs became the consistency of swamp goo. But she forced herself into the woods because Shane would wring her neck if she didn’t fetch Alamo.

Branches and long grass scratched her bare arms and legs as she shambled into the accursed woods.



Chapter Three



ISAAC, IN HIS NUDE human state, sloshed from the murky pond onto the marshy bank. The Narkush stone embedded in his chest flickered from its usual vibrant crimson to a pale gray. It obviously did not liken to the polluted atmosphere.

A black cloud of gnats and mosquitoes, along with a canine greeted him. Isaac knelt on one knee, sinking several inches into the mushy ground. A square piece of metal hung from the animal's neck. It read: Alamo 204-6701. He gently removed the collar and tossed it into the water.

You are freed. Take leave of me. He silently spoke to the canine, using their native tongue, but the small beast only cocked its head, ears perked, as if it hadn't understood his command.

Had this creature forgotten the native tongue of Beast?

Bearing his own teeth, Isaac growled. From the tops of trees, roosting birds squawked and took flight.

The pitiful creature whimpered, tucked his tail and scampered back into the woods from whence he had come. Such a deplorable sight to behold. If by chance Isaac should cross paths with the mortal who had enslaved the animal, he would revel in the pleasure of returning the sentiment.

He shrugged the swamp vegetation from his shoulders and black hair. More gray-green algae clung to his genitals. He picked the herbage from his person and flung it aside. "I despise this ill-begotten land already."

Anxious to complete his Mother's bidding and return to his home realm, he fell on all fours and morphed into Geminus, a lean, jet-black panther. Launching into a sprint, he arrowed through the thick forest. At the edge of the woods, Isaac unfurled his razor-edged crescent wings, wings that rivaled the span of an Eldritch gargoyle. With one final cursory glance at the enslaved canine, he soared toward the horizon well above the forest canopy.

Roaring, he announced his arrival to the creatures of this kingdom called Texas.



Chapter Four



FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS Atticus had been raised and trained in the compound of the Order of Abel—just one of the many sacred and hidden cloisters of modern day knights known as Paladins. Descendants of the ancient warriors who'd slew the evils of the world since the fall of Sodom.

Atticus and his prophetic brother, Rourn, birthed on the same day under the Geminus sign and on a night where the Sun, Mercury and Earth lined up in a supposed rare cosmic occurrence. They were the Twin warriors prophesied to be the only beings capable of defeating a supernatural Beast from beyond the extra-dimensional stars, prophesied to come within Atticus' and Rourn's mortal lifetime.

For an ancient Order of modern day knights purporting to be the protectors of the modern world, the Elders and High Templars liked too much to trust in the ravings of divine seers long dead and buried in forgotten catacombs.

So until that unlikely star-born Beast appeared on Earth, Atticus was going to seize any opportunity he could find to enjoy the beauties life had to offer. And at seventeen, raised in a cloister of strict discipline where every day's motto was *See no evil. Hear no evil. Do no evil*, he still could not curb hormonal desires.

And Venora was the most desirable girl he'd ever met.

He entered the barn but the ruckus he heard earlier had already ceased. Silence prevailed save for the occasional neighing of a fidgety mare. He tapped on the stall doors as he passed.

When he reached the weathered wooden ladder extending into the loft, he announced, "I'm coming for you, Nora."

Slowly, he climbed.

Nothing but stacks of golden hay, five bales high, two dozen across. Cobwebs clung to the rafters. Strands of old straw and poofs of gray dust balls were caught in the webs. A small leather-bound journal lay on a solitary bale of hay closest to the loft's window.

Many Paladins, men and women, kept journals as it was encouraged by the Elders. Once upon a time Atticus had kept one, but he'd lost interest long ago. Writing about emotions and his intellectual interests gave him no thrill.

But Venora gave him a thrill. He crept toward the journal. Curiosity stirred like mystic spices inside a gypsy's brew.

He couldn't read Nora's journal. Or could he?

His hand reached out.

A yell echoed from behind. He spun.

Venora swung from a rope. Her slender legs wrapped around his waist like double serpents. As she released the rope, he attempted to escape her grapple. A dainty foot hooked his left knee. He fell forward as she scurried away.

Venora, a self-taught assassin, never missed an opportunity to prove herself worthy of such a title. Standing a few feet away, her stance wide, she brushed her hands together, as if finishing a lengthy chore. "A Twin is defeated. Defeated by a maiden no less."

Atticus sprung to his feet. He lunged for her. She flipped backwards, landing on the top of a haystack. From between the bales she recovered a wooden training sword.

Feisty she-devil! Atticus had no fear of a girl, sword or no sword.

Placing the sword between her teeth, Venora leapt to the rafter boards and, like a monkey, hand-over-hand scaled over him before dropping herself in front of the loft window directly behind him. The sword immediately returned to her hand. Atticus no longer saw a playful young maiden, but a fatalistic predator. Venora knew what he was seeing because she licked her lips before hurling her sword.

Atticus ducked. The sword sped overhead.

"I have you now," he said.

Venora smirked.

A small force tapped his spine. Atticus whirled to witness the wooden sword floating in mid-air, wavering like a taunting finger, before it fell to the hay-strewn floor.

Venora wasn't just a self-trained assassin. She possessed a spark of the arcane. Indeed, one day she'd make a formidable foe. And perhaps an even more formidable wife for some unfortunate man.

She sat onto the haystack, her legs draped over the side, heels kicking at the dried needles. "I want to leave the compound."

Atticus climbed and sat beside her. His gaze moved over her smooth, tan skin where only strips of crisscrossed leather covered her breasts and nether regions.

"I'm sure many of us do," Atticus said.

"I want to someday be a member of the Circle of the Ark so that I can see the sea. Instead of miles and miles of desert sand there will be miles and miles of refreshing water...out on the exotic briny like the dashing pirates of yore!"

Smiling, he gave a quick peck to her sweaty cheek. "Perhaps you will get the chance someday. But isn't piracy a sinful thing?"

“Only if you’re a bad pirate,” she said. “I’ll be the Robin Hood of the seven seas.”

“Then perhaps that would be all right,” Atticus said.

Venora sprawled on her back across the hay and stared dreamily up at the dark wooden rafters. Beads of sweat full of temptation rolled away from her bare shoulder and arms. “The Order of Grey Griffins in Romania train women Paladins to be lethal assassins. Their women wear the shadows like second skins; they can strike a man dead in a flash of smoke without ever being detected.”

“There are duties for you here. Things you could be doing now to better serve *our* Order.”

“I do not have any desire to be a wet nurse or a pastry chef. I have skills like you and Rourn. Someday, soon I hope, to be valued by the Paladins for more than my aptness at working dough.” She squirmed a bit and turned toward him. “And aren’t you one to speak about better serving the Order. Shouldn’t you be spending every waking moment training for the arrival of the Beast?”

Atticus chuckled. “You and I both know that the prophecy is only lore.”

“I don’t know any such thing,” Venora replied. “What if it shall come to be and you are not prepared?”

Atticus turned to his side, their faces breaths apart. “It is not as though it will happen anytime soon. And even if it did occur, I am prepared as adequately as Rourn to deal with the foul little Beast.”

“I pray to God that you know yourself as well as you believe so. And believe me when I say that the Order of Abel oppresses my desires. One day soon, Atticus, I will break the cage and soar away from here. Soar far, far away.” She spread her arms like a valiant hawk.

An ache twisted in Atticus’ gut. The compound without Nora? “But I intend to come to you one night and wisp you to the chapel where I will make you my wife. We’ll get drunk on brandy and make love beneath the desert sky.” Winking, he elbowed her. “You will give your maidenhood to that of a mighty, powerful and deadly Twin warrior.” Atticus jumped to his feet. He struck a pose, flexing his arm muscles.

Venora laughed, the sound bringing a smile to his face and a twitch to his erect manhood. He sat back down. “You will be revered as royalty. Will you stay then?”

Venora scowled. “Has the Order stopped teaching the art of chivalry? You’re a barbaric man, Atticus.” She got to her feet, stretching her arms above. “But alas, I cannot promise you my hand in marriage since I aim to leave soon.”

Venora's dreams sometimes frightened him. She could not accept her lot as a woman who was expected to do womanly tasks. She needed a warrior like him to tame that wild spirit and seal her wicked tongue with a righteous kiss.

"Your dreams reach farther than the coyote's howl," he said. "But someday I know you will desire my husbandry."

The smile she cast was forced. "In my heart of hearts I know that someday you shall come to understand my dreams."

Atticus stood and headed for the ladder. "I have to return to my post."

Venora stepped toward him. Her lips formed into that trademark smirk that could charm a vulture into eating figs. "If you don't believe the Beast will show itself then come with me when I leave." She wrapped her arms around him. Her naked lips touched his.

Was Elder Cai's brandy this sweet and intoxicating?

He firmly pushed her to arm's length. "Calm yourself, Nora. We cannot allow our carnal wants to cloud our judgments. We must continue to court as we are now, until I turn of proper age to wed you in holy matrimony."

Though he spoke the words like a true gentleman who had mastered the elusive art of chivalry, he secretly wanted nothing more than to bed her right there in the haystack. To see the light of dusk bathe over her naked flesh would have been sheer bliss.

Venora turned and fetched her training sword from the straw-covered wooden floor. "I do not belong here. This world needs me somewhere else that is not New Mexico—that is not the Order of Abel."

The explicit sorrow in her tone brought a shiver to Atticus. "Venora, please." He crossed the loft and reached for her bare shoulder. But she darted away and with one swift motion leaped through the aperture.

"Blasted maiden!" One of these days she would be his undoing.



Chapter Five



A BRIGHT LIGHT SPIRALED from somewhere deeper inside the forest and in the direction that Alamo had run. Just past the Hangman’s tree, named for its thick horizontal branch, Amy paused to catch her breath. Dizziness blurred her vision. A violent pain skewed her gut forcing her to clutch her stomach. Hot vomit seared her throat as she puked on a wad of tangled roots and vines. With her forearm, she wiped remnants of the puke from her mouth. Heat flashed through her body. What the heck was wrong with her?

Female. Hear me!

Amy glanced back, searching for the source of the strange and deep voice, but she saw nothing unusual. Years had passed since the last time she heard a voice in her head, and this one didn’t sound familiar, nor friendly.

With the bottom of her tank top she wiped flecks of blood from arm that had been spawned by bothersome briar bushes.

She had no time for psychosis right now, and chose to ignore the unbridled voice. “Alamo! Come back here you stupid mutt!”

The dang no-see-um buzzing her ear was the only response to her plea.

If she wasn’t a good Christian woman, she’d love to spout some choice words. Instead she bit her lower lip and flung herself through more briars and bramble. “Alamo!”

Heed these callings. The Beast’s hour comes near.

Stumbling, Amy took a hard dive to the ground. She scanned her surroundings. Nothing but overgrowth and the stretching darkness that gloomed the woods.

Forsake the mongrel. Return now to your abode.

Amy slapped hands over her ears, trying to drown the voice echoing in her mind.

The voice seethed in coarse, throaty animalistic tones.

Was this it? Was this the moment that she’d go off the deep end, never to return from the brink of sanity? Move over Aunt Carol.

Hear me, female.

“Female is my gender,” she hissed, submitting to her derangement. “Not my name.”

I come to thwart the end of all worlds.

“The only thing you’re thwarting is my grip on reality.” Amy shook her head.

Vicki, Shane’s dead sister, was the last voice she’d heard, having landed her in the looney bin. Whatever...whoever this voice was, she wanted no part of it. Her past had taught her that strange voices only led to an asylum and she very much liked living in Buckeye...with Shane...not under lock and key...and definitely not doped up on Seroquel.

“You’re not real.” Her legs trembled as she hugged her knees into her chest. Rocking on the ground, she repeated, “You’re not real.”

For several moments an eerie quietness held the forest still. She reluctantly got to her feet, wishing more than anything to be back in the trailer safe and sound.

A firm, bony hand gripped her shoulder. Screaming, she swung wildly at whatever had her in its clutches. Her long hair flung about her head, strands sticking to her sweaty face. Squeezing her eyes shut, she kicked and shook, but two hands restrained her flailing arms.

“What you doing out here all alone, *cher*?”

She calmed at the sound of Abe’s familiar and calm voice. Opening her eyes, stilling herself, she turned around and flung her arms around him. Shaky arms snaked around his neck. Salty tears dampened his black T-shirt and fatigues.

His waist-length silver hair, usually tied into a ponytail, now hung loose over his shoulders. Some joked that Abe looked like Jesus. Only if Jesus wore military fatigues and had a tattoo of a serpent curled around his neck and chest, the beady serpentine eyes visible between the V of his shirt.

With one calloused thumb, he wiped a tear from her cheek. “What’s got you so spooked?”

Amy hiccupped and pointed. “A light. A voice. And Alamo is lost.” The tone of her own frantic voice unnerved her.

Another eruption echoed off the darkened trees. The light continued spiraling toward the sky.

Abe’s brows lowered as he peered in the direction of the strange light and sound. “Go home, *cher*. Now.”

“I think it came from Sera’s Pond.”

“Don’t be so *coo-yôn*! Goin’ near dat there pond or house ain’t no good thing. You be smart, *cher* and stay away. Let me see to the matter.” Shadows framed his hard stoic face.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Poaching. Now go home.”

Normally she found Abe's protective nature comforting, but for some reason the harshness in his tone annoyed her. "Yeah, right. You're out here 'cause you know something. What is it? Spill."

"Excuse Abe's manners." He threw up his hands. "But I got colon polyps older than you, *mon amie*, which means I ain't got to tell you nothin'."

Amy scowled, but knew it was futile to try reasoning with the coonass. His past as a U.S. Marine combined with his Wichita and Cajun heritage made him one ornery old geezer. He was a survivalist who lived off the land. The blood in his veins made him more obstinate than a two-headed rattlesnake, each head vying for the same prey.

Abe retrieved an item from his pocket and offered Amy a small glass vial. "You be a sweet girl now and go home. You don't go worrying your pretty self over no sounds and lights in these here woods."

Amy smiled as she took the vial. He'd been giving her the serum since forever. She never asked what it was made of. Didn't want to know, because if she found out it contained snake urine and frog guts she wouldn't be able to stomach it. And she didn't want to give it up. The effects of the mysterious concoction calmed her like Earl Grey on steroids.

Though she hadn't found Alamo, Amy didn't like ignoring Abe's warnings to return home. She turned to leave but hesitated. "Abe?"

"*Cher?*"

"Be careful."

He gave her a nod and disappeared into the dark woods.

Amy hurried toward the trailer with the vial clutched protectively in her fist. She pushed the rude, somewhat scary voice from her mind, concentrating only on getting home.

As she broke from the vine-entangled shrubbery, she spotted the acacia. A comforting warmth washed over her. Freya still remained at her post, patrolling the edge of the woods.

Amy scooped her up. "I sure hope you aren't seeing any wicked things in those cursed woods."

Hissing toward the forest, Freya pushed higher into her arms, wrapping herself around Amy's neck.

Standing at the far end of the front yard was Alamo. He'd come home. Thank goodness. The dog ran toward her. Something furry was in his mouth. As he neared, she noticed the rat's defiled grave. The head was gone.

Fighting the urge to beat the dog senseless, she knelt on her knees and held out her hand, palm up.

With a wagging tail, Alamo crunched the head and swallowed.

“No!”

Fear not the vermin, boomed the harsh male voice in her head. *Beware the Beast.*



AFTER PROMISING TO cover his shift, Shane convinced Kevin to sleep off his drunkenness. As Birch and Shane cleaned the last of the spilled whiskey off the floor, Gary, the rig supervisor entered the rec room.

Running a paper towel over his head, Shane said, “Kevin’s not feeling well. I’ll take his shift.”

Gary nodded his bald head. Tall and built like a semi, Gary was an intimidating man to most. But Shane found his blunt and crass attitude refreshing.

“Why do you reek of whiskey, Baker?” Gary leaned closer. “You been drinking, son?”

Shane shrugged. “Mouthwash.” He used the paper towel to pat his shirt. “Guess I missed.”

“Mouthwash my ass,” Gary said.

“Do a fucking piss test.”

Gary rubbed his ten o’clock shadow. He waved a scolding finger. “You think the safety meetings are a joke? I’m reporting this. You two don’t return to work until I know whether you’re still on the crew.”

“You’re firing us?” Birch asked.

“Depends on what the big wigs say, but I’d suggest having your crap packed.” He shook his head. “Shit. We’re already running short-handed thanks to five of you assholes failing the last drug test.”

With a grimace, Shane said, “I didn’t fail that drug test and I won’t fail it now.”

Gary shrugged. “Out of my hands.” He left the room.

Birch slammed a palm on the coffee table. “Thanks a lot, asshole.”

Shane frowned. “Kevin has enough to deal with.”

“And ‘cause of you so do we,” Birch said. “I don’t know about you but I got an electric bill that’s three months overdue, a car that needs a new transmission and my AC just crapped the bed. I can’t afford this, man. I need this job.”

In two large strides, Shane closed the short distance between him and Birch. “Look, dickhead, it ain’t my goddamn problem that your brat wife is bankrupting you, but I ain’t gonna turn on Kevin.”

“Fucking hypocrite,” Birch said. “You were about to thrash him and now you’re sacrificing yours and my job out of some distorted moral dilemma.”

“We’ll pass the piss test in the morning. Everything will be okay.”

Without looking back, Birch opened the door and paused in the threshold.

“They find out about Kevin, we’ll be fired for covering for him.”

“They won’t find out. He’s going to sleep it off and be good to go by morning.”

“Right.” Birch opened the door.

“Wait a damn moment.” He grabbed Birch by the shoulder. “I’ll take full blame for getting us into this shitpie.” It wouldn’t be the first or the last time he had dragged his friends into his fuckups. But this was different than them getting hog tied and left naked on the side of a Colorado road. They could, and had laughed about that one. “I fucked up again. I’m sorry.”

With a shrug, Birch pulled away. “You always are.”



Chapter Six



WHEN ROURN FAILED TO show at the evening feast, Atticus assumed he was still training. From his sleeping quarters, Atticus traded his spear for his short sword and went to find Rourn.

His boots scuffed the ebony steps spiraling up the Tower of Tribulation's twenty stories. He had made the stair run twice a day for as long as he could walk.

This was the third time today.

Cresting the top, he adjusted the dark green bandana keeping his long red hair from his eyes. Across the battlement, he spotted Rourn, head down, hands clasped in prayer. A similar green bandana circled Rourn's head. His black hair hung to his waist.

"Forgive me, God," Rourn whispered.

Rourn had the most beloved soul of the Order. Why would he need to ask for repentance? Had he disappointed one of the Elders?

Rourn palmed the parapet, glancing across the vast desert.

An acrid scent hung in the air. Twilight brushed over the compound and darkened sands flowed endlessly around the settlement. A buzzard circled overhead while an ornery jackass fussed below in the barnyard.

"You missed the last feast, brother," Atticus said.

Sighing, Rourn folded his arms over the stone wall. "I am not hungry."

"Are you ill?"

Silence.

Atticus clapped Rourn on the back. "Elder Cai made a trip to Red Rock Bluff and saw Old Lady Ebben again. When he got back he was drunk as a crow in the agave garden. I say we sneak into his room and steal us a bottle. Are you with me?"

"That rancid stuff is akin to iguana bile left in the desert sun. Awful concoction."

Atticus rested his rump on the parapet. He leaned back on his hands. "When the Sacred Inauguration is over I intend to fetch a bottle, with or without you."

A familiar look of disapproval crossed Rourn's face. "You best not tempt the brandy. As a Paladin knight you must always remain alert. This is especially true for you."

“Relax, my brother. A little brandy does little harm. Besides, after all our effort we deserve to live like rogues for a night.”

“We are Paladins. Not reckless scoundrels.”

Atticus, attempting to lead the discussion elsewhere, said, “Rosemary finished seaming that peach dress she’s been working on.” He waggled his brows. “It fits quite nicely, if I may say so.”

Rourn huffed. “You must take your training more seriously. You failed greatly today at your letinyasa technique.”

“That technique is more of a folk dance than a tactical maneuver. I don’t see its practicality in the throes of battle.”

Rourn spun to face him, a strange ornamental dagger in his hand. Fragmented sunlight glinted off its blade. He glared at Atticus then lifted the dagger over his head and stared skyward.

Atticus grimaced. “Bat heads, brother. You are mad.”

With his free hand, Rourn drew his sword. A deep snarl on his twisted lips. “I bring a grave message that you must heed.”

Atticus stepped backwards. “We have trained enough for today. The feast hall will close soon. You need to eat.”

Rourn scowled. He charged.

Atticus drew his saber, deflected Rourn’s blade and parried the next thrusting strike. Swords crossed with a clatter of steel.

Atticus pushed forward, boots gripping the stone, eyes squinting. “Blazing ghosts! What foolishness plagues you?”

“I know you possess more.” Rourn shoved, causing Atticus to stumble backwards. With one long stride, Rourn approached him. “You are but one of the great chosen who can defeat the Beast. You must all be prepared for the Reckoning.”

Blades crossed with another shattering clang. Atticus’ arms trembled from the exertion of holding back Rourn’s broadsword. Searing webs of pain burned his wrists and shot up the muscles of his arms.

What if Atticus could defeat Rourn? The thought evoked a smile.

Atticus charged.

Blades sparked and sang with clamor.

Rourn uttered an incantation, his blade flashed blue and a coil of electricity surged through Atticus’ sword and into his hands and arms.

Atticus jolted backward. He scowled at his the burnt hair on his forearm. “Groveling ghouls! You hurt me!”

“So I did.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not who you think I am.” Rourn shook his head, sheathed his sword and set the strange dagger on the wall. An expression of sadness reached his eyes. “Perhaps it’s only obvious to me and I need to confide in you.”

In frustration, Atticus exhaled. “Confide what?”

“You are as complacent as a fat bullfrog floating on a sea of gnats. Unless you train in earnest, your speed will slow, your agility will succumb to clumsiness and your wit will dull with inadequacy. The sea of gnats will consume the plump frog.”

“I don’t understand where any of this is coming from?”

Rourn stepped toward the tower’s ledge. The last rays of sunlight shone upon him. A bleak expression contorted his stoic face. “Despite your ineptness, I envy you. You will graduate and go on to great and honorable feats. They will send you somewhere exotic where you will encounter new people of friend and foe. There you will face the grand Beast—who is far greater than the villains we imagined as children.”

“I will not be alone in this slaying. We will draw swords against the Beast together.” Atticus cupped a hand over his eyes, shading his vision from the descending sunlight.

The buzzard that had been circling the tower had descended closer.

Rourn leaned over the ledge. “I would have preferred you not sought me here this evening.”

Atticus looked over the ledge. The ground loomed two-hundred feet below. He gave Rourn a sidelong glance. “Why?”

The shrieking buzzard’s black feathers were cast in twilight’s glow.

“Ortho’s vision of my future is not what it seems,” Rourn said. “The ancient mage is a fool. I am not destined as one of the Twins you and the Order believe me to be. There is yet another path I must pursue.”

“You speak madness!”

“I would have been happier as a healer, or a teacher—not a fighter.”

Rourn a teacher? Atticus would’ve laughed if he wasn’t so distraught. “You are a Twin warrior! It is prophesized. You have believed this to be so since you were of sword-wielding age.” Sighing, he gripped Rourn’s shoulder. “What has brought this affliction of melancholy into your soul?”

Rourn sat upon the wall, his thighs straddled on either side. The dagger lay between his legs. “I now see that which has been blind to me until recently.”

Atticus’ gut twisted while he tried to make sense of Rourn’s rantings. For the first time he felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Perhaps it was because many were training in the tower or at the rec hall for the last meal of the day; or

perhaps because Rourn, his brother-in-arms since childhood, was—at the least—entrapped in a shroud of sorrow and—at the worst—plagued by lunacy.

Atticus pushed from the wall and took a defensive stance, brandishing his sword. “Battle with me. I will prove I am prepared.”

“You have nothing to prove, at least not to me.”

Atticus lowered his sword. “What must I do or say to save you from this state of sorrow?”

“I will do my part to save all from the coming Beast and I ask you do the same. Take not your duty as a Twin nor your role as a Paladin warrior lightly.”

“You need not ask. I am loyal to the Order. I will offer my life for—”

Rourn held up a hand, silencing Atticus. “I have knowledge of the future, of your future and it is not as their puppet. They make mistakes. Do not offer your life to the whims of the Order, no matter the propaganda they preach.” His voice lowered, eyes darkened. “Promise me.”

Atticus had sworn his allegiance to the Order long ago and he thought Rourn had done the same. Was his Twin a traitor?

“Promise me,” Rourn repeated.

“My loyalty isn’t to myself or you.” Atticus shook his head. “My sword belongs to the Order of Abel and will do so until I take my final breath. I’m sorry, but I must follow my heart.”

“And I must follow mine.” Rourn tossed his other leg over the wall and disappeared.

Atticus stared unblinking at the spot where his blood-brother had sat. “I find no humor in this magic. What kind of trickery is this?”

The mysterious dagger shimmered on the tower’s ebony ledge. Atticus reached for it but it suddenly vanished like a wind-blown mist.

He glanced around the top of the tower. “Elder Cai? Is this a sorcerer’s folly? A test?”

Silence.

With careful steps, he neared the ledge and glanced over.

Rourn lay face down in the sand far below.

Atticus’ body shuddered. His chest ground against the stone, his head spun. Vertigo gripped him.

The world slipped sideways.

Then upward.

And the buzzard’s funereal shrills pierced his soul.

A hand latched onto the back of his shoulder and tugged. “Damnation, Atticus. Come away!”

Tears blurred his vision. Atticus stumbled from the ledge, collapsing into the arms of his teacher and trainer, Elder Cai. He gripped the elder's black robe. "It's Rourn. Summon Healer Merrick!"

The Elder grimaced. "It's too late, my son. It's too late. He's in destiny's hands."



Chapter Seven



AFTER WORKING THE MORNING shift at Roxy's, and then all afternoon on her family's chicken farm, Carmen longed for liquor, nicotine and sex—not necessarily in that order.

Well, nicotine had to be first, for hers and everyone else's sake, because at the moment she had a strong urge to smash a claw hammer through someone's face.

Outside the last chicken house, she had stripped her smelly overalls off, grabbed the water hose—that was curled around a big heap of chicken shit speckled with white feathers—and sprayed herself down.

No time to waste. Noche Diablo was scheduled to play at the Rising Bull and she wasn't about to miss that killer set. Thoughts of seeing the front man Bishop Lane in his gothabilly cowboy getup made Carmen tingle. Too bad he was married.

After tossing the filthy overalls into the backseat of her '96 Camaro, she jumped behind the wheel wearing nothing but a wet bra and panties, both crimson red. An oversized shirt that her on-and-off fuckbuddy Derrick had left in the glove box served as a temporary gown until she could change into her costume of the night.

Living in a small town, a girl had to devise ingenious schemes to keep things fun. For the past few years Carmen had played the "Guess My Costume" game with all the young—and sometimes not-so-young—men at the local nightspot. Any fortunate potential lover boy who could not only guess her costume of the evening, but also answer a few predetermined trivia questions would win...her.

Bastian, the marionette her mother handcrafted for her sixth birthday, rode shotgun. A painted red smile brightened Bastian's otherwise gloomy face, his expression caught somewhere between a demented mime and a sad prince.

When she'd first received Bastian, she'd flung him across the room much to her mother's chagrin. But her mother told her that Bastian would be her *anjo sonhar*—dream angel. Carmen kept the creepy guy around and eventually he grew on her.

Smiling, she straightened his brown robe. "Hey sweetness."

He peered at her through sorrowful eyes, eyes circled by blackness. Rosy dots blushed his cheeks. He held a red carnation in a stained wooden hand.

Carmen stopped singing with the radio to thank her lucky stars that the Reap's general store parking lot was vacant. She raced inside with a plastic Wal-Mart bag containing her fresh clothes.

Reap's was the local family-owned gas station, general store, liquor store and fried food haven of Buckeye and was only a few blocks from the Bull. Without so much as a cursory glance at Paul Reap, Carmen knew his eyeballs were bulged, as they always were when she made a bat-out-of-hell dash to the bathroom wearing nothing but a long shirt. Paul would overlook the *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service* sign every time.

Moments later, she exited wearing a black strapless sequin mini-dress, rimmed-glasses and a black cowboy hat plus her mainstay gold hoop earrings. Approaching Paul, she placed a six-pack of Bud down. She clicked her credit card on the countertop while Paul took his time on the register. It was an old-fashioned metal box circa nineteen-fucking-twenty-something.

"What's it tonight?" Paul asked. "Disco diva?"

Smudges from his chubby fingers spotted his glasses. His amber, scraggly hair was coated in grease. Probably from the deep fried fish, potato skins, taquitos and whatever else they disguised as food.

"I'm Betty Boop, you idiot," Carmen said.

Paul loomed over the counter, a heated glance up and down her body. "Betty Boop doesn't wear a cowboy hat or glasses."

Carmen sneered. "Tonight she does. A pack of wine, wood-tipped Black and Milds, too."

Paul reached behind. "My shift is over in ten. Want to catch the midnight showing of *Rise of The Mages*?"

"Sure thing, Paul. Just let me check outside and see if there's any pigs roosting in the trees." She gave him a playful wink and silently admired his determination as she left the store.

Outside, Carmen shoved the beer in the backseat next to her overalls and red high heels. In the front seat, she cracked into the thin cigars as she drove from the parking lot. Her phone rang. Carmen glanced at the display. *Shane*.

She put the phone to her ear. "What's up, cockbrain?"

"Suck it, bubbletits."

She let out a clipped laugh between an unlit cigar. With the phone tucked in the crook of her neck, steering with her knee she fished a Zippo from her purse.

"Love you too."

Part of her did love the jerk, loved him like that annoying brother who knew how to press her buttons. Shane was the only hot man in her life she didn't want to sleep with.

“I need a favor,” Shane said.

Holy shit, the man had a super sexy voice. Too bad they were just best buds; a dead canary and a rotten squash had more chemistry. Carmen shuddered at the memory of their one and only kiss back when they were both crazed juniors at Buck High. Skid Row on the radio, pot in the air, and a hot sweaty Texas night near a riverbed.

“Lemme guess,” she said. “Amy’s having another meltdown?”

“I think she’s seriously spooked this time. Drop by and check on her.”

A sigh. “But I was just about to hit the Bull.”

“Take Amy with you. Don’t let her sit around the trailer by herself.”

“You do realize the type of guys who go to the Bull, right?” Carmen tapped the cherry into the car’s ashtray.

From the beginning, she had warned Amy to steer clear of Shane. But that was years ago and, as far as anyone knew, Shane had been true, proving Carmen and most everyone else in town wrong. But sometimes Carmen had her doubts. The man was a hopeless flirt.

“That’s why you’re not going to take your eyes off her.” A threatening edge lined Shane’s tone.

“Don’t trust her, huh?”

“I trust her. I don’t trust them. Do it and I’ll owe you big time.”

She took a drag and blew smoke from the corner of her mouth. “What do you have that I could possibly want?”

“Next time they call you into the farm, I’ll take your spot.”

Carmen scanned for police, saw none and whipped a U-turn. “Fine.”

“One more thing, slut.” Shane made obnoxious masturbatory grunts into the phone. “Eat my nuts.”

“Sure assburgular, but not before chewing ‘em like jerky and swallowing hard.”



Chapter Eight



AMY SAT ON THE FRONT porch stoop, head hung low. Squeezing her eyes shut and covering her ears, she pictured herself on a beach in some tropical locale.

No headless rat spirits looking for vengeance.

No rude voices in her head.

No strange lights and sounds in the woods.

Just the sound of warm waves splashing on a sunny shore. In her mind's eye, she held a Mojito in one hand and pair of sunglasses in the other. Those sunglasses with the sparkly frames.

The sound of a distant crunching broke her reverie. Carmen's Camaro rolled up the gravel driveway.

Amy dried her sweaty palms on her shorts and faked a smile before approaching the driver's side.

The window lowered with a hum. A gust of frigid air and punk music greeted Amy with Carmen's face hidden behind a cloud of smoke.

Carmen draped an arm over the open window and tipped her cowboy hat up. "Mami?"

Her dress barely concealed her well-endowed chest and shapely legs. Loop earrings—large enough to toss a baseball through—hung from her lobes. Her body was curved in all the right spots where Amy's was flat as Uncle's Steve's fedora after three-hundred-pound Aunt Susan had accidentally sat on it.

"Shane sent you," Amy said.

"Shocker. I know."

Hands on her hips, Amy frowned. "I can take care of myself."

"Sure you can, chickie." Sighing, Carmen gave her a sidelong look. "What's it this time?"

"Another dead rat."

"So, bury it. Thought you said that's all it'd take to keep the bad mojo away?"

Amy rolled her eyes. "Not that easy. I got to bury it whole. Alamo ate the dang head."

"Let's blow the stink off you and hit The Bull tonight."

Amy pulled a leaf from her hair. "I'm a mess."

“Well, roll on some deodorant, wash your face, throw your hair in a ponytail and sprinkle powder in your panties. Good to go. Ten minutes. I’ll wait.”

Amy looked back at the dug up rat’s grave.

Sighing, Carmen shifted the car into gear. “So be it. You and the rat have fun. I’m going to the Bull.”

“I’ve got bad mojo. You don’t want to be around me right now. It might be catchy.”

“I’ll take my chances.” She waved her away. “Go get ready.”

Amy let out a breath and vanished into the trailer.

She followed Carmen’s instructions right down to the sprinkle of powder in her panties. Clean tank. Clean shorts. Pausing by Carmen’s car, she looked at her reflection in the passenger window. Was she dressed appropriately? Maybe she should fetch one of Shane’s western shirts to wear over the tank. She spun to reenter the trailer but Carmen pounded the horn.

“Okay, fine.” Amy got in the car. Carmen was hanging her sidekick doll from the rearview mirror. Bastian flashed a Joker-smile, as if to say, *You’re in for a crazy night.*

“I don’t know why he calls me hunny bunny,” Amy thought aloud.

“Better than what he calls me...sour dumpling.”

As Carmen shifted to drive, Amy opened the vial Abe had given her and sipped the dark liquid. The bitter taste used to make her gag, but she coped by imagining it was a drop full of vanilla-scented sunshine. Even if it smelled and tasted like liquid road kill with pulp, she’d never give it up.

Carmen turned onto FM 1085. “Do you even know what’s in that?”

“I’ve been drinking it for years with no side effects.”

“Right,” Carmen said, dragging the word out in a sarcastic whine. “Abe probably has you chugging possum piss and fish shit.”

“I bet it’s something he learned from his Wichita kinfolk.”

“It’s not the Indian side that worries me; it’s the Cajun. Those backward swamp rats got a thing for spice...and those nasty mud bugs and sausage stuffed with pig guts. Probably’d season a deep fried boot full of turds and cayenne pepper.” Carmen shuddered. “And serve it up for Sunday dinner.”

“Would you stop?”

Smoke seeped from the corner of Carmen’s mouth. “We all have our vices.”



Chapter Nine



ELDER CAI RIGHTED ATTICUS, gripping his shoulders and steadying him. “Son?”

Desert night wind warmed Atticus’ face. A distant coyote bayed. Somewhere down below the tower the buzzard’s cawing could still be heard. He forced himself to look at his mentor. “Master.”

Elder Cai held his gaze. “Do you understand the gravity of what has happened?”

“Rourn would not abandon us to the fate of the coming Beast.” He pulled away and gave Elder Cai his back. His voice cracked into a broken whisper. “He would not.”

“Things are not as they seem.”

“Rourn is dead.” Atticus whirled to face the Elder. “It seems very clear.”

Elder Cai reached inside his robe and retrieved a black leather-bound book.

Atticus took it and opened the cover. An inscription:

Where I go, you shall not come.

Where I lead, you will follow.

~Rourn

The leather felt cold in Atticus’ hands. With a slam, he snapped the book closed. “Rourn’s journal?”

Elder Cai nodded.

“You carry this on your person?” Atticus glanced at the last spot Rourn had stood and back at his mentor. “What prompted you here at this hour?”

“Isn’t the answer obvious?”

Heart racing, Atticus gripped the journal tightly in one hand and balled his other hand into a trembling fist. “I don’t understand any of this!”

“I knew of Rourn’s plan,” Elder Cai said in a matter-of-fact tone. “That is why I am here now. To council you.”

Rourn had betrayed the Order and so had Elder Cai. Atticus tilted his head back. His gaze challenged the stars above until he fell to his knees. As if he’d summoned ancient powers, Atticus unleashed a thunderous roar that echoed across the vast desert.

Even the buzzard shrieked and fled on tilted wings.

The Elder gripped Atticus’ arm and helped him to his feet. He nodded at the journal in Atticus’ hand. “Seek wisdom in its pages.” He sipped from a canteen

hung from his neck, the source from which his mentor often sought wisdom.

“What could the words of a dead man offer?”

“Rourn’s death was unfortunate, but necessary. Soon, you too shall learn the fate of us all hinges upon his sacrifice.”

With a scoff, Atticus said, “And what of the much revered adage of the High Templars, *Alone you shall ascend, together we shall fall*? If Rourn is to perish then should I as well?” He set a foot onto the ledge and stared down at Rourn’s body. His twin...one of the great warriors had jumped without a moment’s hesitation.

Could I do the same? I swore to follow my brother to the end of the worlds and into Hell.

Elder Cai clicked his hornbeam staff on the stone tile. “Cease this foolishness!”

A gust of wind tossed Atticus’ long red hair into a flurry. The wind heaved his boots from beneath him. Atticus fell with his face planted on the stone battlement. Gritty sediment bit at his lips.

Elder Cai stood over him, his staff pressed in the middle of Atticus’ back. “Do not be selfish. It is unbecoming of a Paladin knight, especially of a Twin.”

Atticus pushed off the ground, into a kneeling position. He leaned back on his haunches and sighed.

Elder Cai said, “The ancient adage you speak of is nothing more than a tale given to naive cadets and jaded knights.”

Atticus looked up at him. “Nothing but a farce?”

“Being a warrior of the Order of Abel is not as glorious as some would have future knights to believe. You are due to graduate and become a Selector in the ranks of great warriors. The time for meaningless slogans is long past.”

Atticus stood. Absently, he brushed grit from his robe. He bowed his head. “What must I do?”

Elder Cai turned. His robe fluttered as he strode toward the mechanical lift. “Preparations are to be made. Midnight oil is to be burned.” He opened the brass door and beckoned Atticus inside.

The lift smelled dry and musky, like a tomb ripe with a most recent death.

From his flask, Elder Cai gulped more brandy. He extended his hand, offering the spirit to Atticus.

Atticus exhaled and took the canteen. The pungent liquid burned a stringent trail from his tongue to his abdomen. He spat on the floor of the lift and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “Blazing ghost! It does take like sun-roasted bile.”

“That is the freshest muscadine brandy Old Lady Ebben has to offer.”

“How can you be so indifferent about Rourn’s death?” Atticus spat the words just as he had the brandy. “Are you without heart?”

Had a curse diseased the entire compound? Was it that vile gypsy Ebben who had soured the mind and heart of all? When the lift reached the ground would he discover that he was the only Paladin who maintained any semblance of lucidity?

“In due time, my young pupil, the mysteries of this universe will reveal the answers you seek.”

Atticus stared unblinking at the copper walls, listening to the rhythmic clang of the steel chain. He felt a thousand miles from all life, floating in a vast emptiness, a quiet void.

As junior cadets, he and Rourn had chased imaginary goblins. During the heat of one July, with wooden swords, they had slayed the ice dragon, M’nastacarra of the Chilltalon Brood. That same summer they had taken a swim in Gypsy Creek where Atticus became smitten by a pretty laundry maiden. Rourn had torn him from the brink of hormone-driven madness. It was the season Rourn taught him a skill that all young men must master.

The lift clamored to a stop.

Around the curve of the stone tower, Rourn’s lifeless corpse awaited them. A woman knelt by his head and gently turned Rourn onto his back.

Atticus caught a glimpse of the bloody mask upon his face. Body tangled. Eyes wide open. Lips split and busted. Crimson blood oozed from his nose and parted mouth. Rourn did not wear death well.

Atticus looked to the left where Prefect Cauldrick strode toward them, his gait wide and swift.

When the Prefect stopped before them, Elder Cai and Atticus gave a half bow.

“What insanity is this!” Cauldrick bellowed. “A demonic creature has defeated a Twin?” He narrowed eyes at Elder Cai. “What do you know of this?”

“I am deeply saddened by the loss of a mighty warrior and friend.”

“Not a mighty warrior,” Cauldrick screeched. “The mighty Satican Prince. A Twin warrior, prophesied to save us all. And he’s not lost. He is dead! Rayden Cai, you miserable drunk, he is dead!”

Elder Cai shook his head. “One Twin remains.” He lifted his chin at Atticus.

Prefect Cauldrick threw up his hands and looked at Atticus, as if to ask if he followed this logic.

Atticus glanced over his shoulder at Rourn’s body and back at Prefect Cauldrick. Unable to find words, he deadpanned at Elder Cai.

“What good is only one Twin? The duality has been shattered. We have lost this great battle before it has even begun!”

Elder Cai firmly planted his staff on the ground, narrowing his eyes at the Prefect. “Rourn was no Twin.”

“You blaspheme?” Cauldrick gritted his teeth. “I shall have your status of Elder revoked! And cast you out into the Pit of Punishment for such an atrocious declaration.”

Elder Cai kept his silence.

“And what do you have to say about Ortho’s prophecies?” Cauldrick asked. “Atticus cannot defeat the Beast alone.”

“He will not face the Beast alone.” A bitter smile curled Elder Cai’s thin lips. “And with regards to the ancient mage, it saddens me greatly that anyone would take heed with regard to anything the mage professes. He is ripe with senility and has been for a decade.” Cai tapped his staff on the ground. Sparks skipped from the tip and along the desert sand. “Fools of the Templar Court! Lift the ignorant veil that is so proficient at blinding you to the blatant.” With his staff, he gestured toward Atticus. “Alive and well is your precious Twin and you all will come to know soon that he is not to carry this burden alone.”

“Madness!” Prefect Cauldrick’s face flushed with crimson. “How could you know such things without having consorted with devils?”

“The other genuine Twin will be revealed...in short time.”

Four healers rushed past, robes red as blood. They knelt around Rourn, checking vitals, as if they had not already concluded the Twin was no more.

“On what authority do you proclaim this lunacy?” Cauldrick asked.

With the hook of his staff dangling from his wrist, and his arms over his head, Cai cast his wide-open eyes skyward and proclaimed, “By the authority of the Dark Trinity!”



Chapter Ten



CONCEALED AMONGST A flock of blackbirds, Isaac soared across the evening sky. Obeying the call of his Mother's shrine that served like a lighthouse, he flew westward until he reached a gated community near the province of Houston.

A modest four-story mansion sprawled over a twenty acre estate. In the center was an open stone courtyard. Galmoria's sculpture glowed with a purple mist.

Still masked by the birds, he alighted and set down on the circle drive. Now that Isaac morphed into humanoid form, the flock of escorts returned to the sky.

He entered the front door and stepped into a foyer large enough to serve as a banquet hall. His loyal wraith servant Ira had furnished the interior with his treasures from kingdoms and realms across the stars, using her inherit wraith powers to pull inanimate objects through the voids. Several slender white snake-like skins of yagh-yahts hung like wall art. And an enormous gorgon rat's skull was mounted above the corridor's threshold. The ashen skull blended spectacularly with the dark marble walls rimmed with almond trim.

Isaac admired the mounted rat skull as he recalled the last time he had encountered one of the ancient beasts from the barren lands on Pelodrimch—a fierce beast whose acid saliva had nearly cost Isaac his face, leaving behind a splotchy scar along his right cheek. But the meat of a gorgon rat was more succulent than a human's first born child.

The wraith Isaac had acquired nearly two centuries ago floated toward him. Her nude silhouette hovered above the stone floor. "Evening, Master."

"Food."

"Of course."

Isaac followed her down another long corridor and into a spacious dining area. When she disappeared into a neighboring room, he ran a finger along the long cherry wood table which he had acquired from the last king of a Brimstrahdt clan nearly a century ago, days before the king's assassination by the Reingar Legions, the king's own nephew's army.

Ira returned, rolling a dinner cart with a raw female child strapped to it. The child's tongue had been removed which pleased Isaac. The small girl could only protest with wordless utterances. Otherwise, her pathetic pleading would grow tiresome and sour his stomach.

Chandelier light reflected off Ira's scalp as she stood beside the table. "I have stocked the freezer with the freshest of meats. The master bedroom's closet is full with plenty of garments of this world and era." She gestured to a stack of neatly folded clothes on the edge of the table.

Clothes. A temporary annoyance he would be forced to endure before returning to his lair.

Isaac's gaze slid down Ira's naked body. His finger traced her inner thigh until it stopped at her hairless groin. "Continue."

"Your private sanctuary has been prepared as you instructed: third floor, west wing, fourth door on the right. Your Mother's altar has been constructed. It is located in the courtyard."

"You have done well," Isaac said.

"This was once my home world. I am very pleased to have returned."

"Turn around."

"Yes, Master." Ira turned and braced her palms on the wall.

He positioned himself behind her and pressed his erect penis against her naked backside. He gripped her hips, steadying her as he thrust into lithe folds. The black specks in his Narkush stone turned ruby once again as he shoved inside her phantom but corporal sex. She eternally smelled of fresh lavender and felt like silk petals, unappealing. But she was tighter than any living creature he had ever fucked, so he tolerated the lack of primal aspects.

Claws grew from his fingers. Pools of frothy saliva oozed from his snarling lips.

Ira dipped her head to the side, opening herself for him. She panted and whimpered, squealing like a helpless hare.

His teeth bit into her cold, spongy shoulder. His body shook when his seed exploded into her phantom womb. Claw marks were left etched into the wood walls.

Isaac tore away from his wraith and turned toward the child on the serving tray. He bore his canines and licked her tear-stained cheek. But she did not move. Not so much as a flinch. *Pathetic.*

How he longed for the hunt and detested being fed like a caged animal.

A light knock resounded from the foyer.

Isaac snorted and snatched slacks from the table. Claws retracted as he stepped into the pants. He strode down the long hallway. Ira followed. Isaac opened the front door and was greeted by a slender human female with dark hair and glasses standing on his doorstep. "I'm Waverly, head of the subdivision management committee." She extended her tiny manicured hand.

Isaac waited.

The woman nodded and let her hand fall to the side. Her gaze drifted past him and found Ira. Naked. Smiling. Recently fucked.

The human's complexion flushed red. She played with the hem of her white shorts, diverting her attention back to him. "Just stopped by to welcome you and your wife to the neighborhood."

Isaac said, "Ira is my oath bound servant."

Waverly grimaced. "I see. Yes, well, I'm not one to judge. This is a friendly community and we welcome all kinds and accept all lifestyles."

Isaac waited.

She shuffled her feet and fidgeted with her bare arm. "I hate to trouble you any more than I already have, but have you seen my little girl? Her name's Madeline."

A low growl vibrated in his throat. "No."

"Well, if you see her will you please tell her to hurry home? She's got black hair, blue eyes—"

Isaac slammed the door.

With a crooked finger, he motioned Ira closer. When she neared, he slipped his finger under her chin, lifting her head. He looked into her pale face. "You have done well."

Ira smiled. It was the same sincere gesture she had always given after receiving praise. His attention returned to the child on the cart. "Take it to Sacred Oaks and release it so that I may hunt it."

"As you command, Master Isaac."



Chapter Eleven



THE RISING BULL WAS a square warehouse of a building nestled right off the highway. A wooden corral surrounded the side and a large gateway led to the parking lot. Mounted above the gateway was a big red longhorn skull with heavy duty chains wrapped around the horns. One eye socket was a bright yellow bulb and the other remained hollow. Sick 'em, the Rising Bull's mascot, glowed against the darkened sky, enchanting all who met his gaze. And Carmen was bewitched every time she saw him.

The place was slap full, so Carmen parked in the back. She patted Amy on the knee and said, "Time to cut loose." Without waiting for a response, she stepped from the car and shimmied her short black dress down her thighs. Cowgirl hat straightened, she cupped her breasts, giving the girls a quick lift. And for the final primp, she ran her fingers through her black hair and fluffed.

As Amy rounded the front of the car, Carmen entwined her arm with Amy's. She just needed to get a few drinks in the girl and maybe Amy's bad day would be a distant memory. Arm-in-arm, they headed toward the bar's entrance.

"Get ready to put yourself two sheets to the wind and drink your worries away," Carmen said.

With a small smile, Amy nodded.

Carmen stopped and twirled Amy to face her. She stomped her heel on the gravel lot.

Amy shrugged. "What?"

"You better not let that damn rat ruin the whole night."

"I've been thinking..."

Carmen pointed a red fingernail at the building where a caricature of Sick 'em was painted on the side. A silver horseshoe hung from its nostrils and ammo belts wrapped around its horns. "This is a bar," she said in a mother-to-child tone. "No thinking allowed."

"But maybe that week I had all those terrible nightmares, maybe it didn't have anything to do with the dead rat I had found back then."

"Brilliant revelation. Now let's go." Carmen's heels clicked as she strutted toward the bar's front door.

Amy caught up to her. "Maybe the rat from today won't haunt my dreams. Could be last time I was fighting off a cold or something?"

“Exactly.” Carmen tugged Amy’s arm once more. “Cold meds can give you some trippy dreams.”

Carmen spotted Derrick standing at the entrance. She let go of Amy’s arm.

But damn, he looked good. He wore a black muscle shirt with tight black jeans that showed his lean but muscular legs, and those rugged steel toe work boots.

Derrick was heavy into conversation, his hands animate. Last time she’d seen him, a week and two days ago, he’d gone home with Miss Suzy Slutbags from Whorelane. Long legs. Blonde hair. Big breasts. How fucking original.

“You and Derrick on the fritz again?” Amy asked.

“No,” Carmen lied and stopped to light a cigar.

Where had he been this time? Rock climbing? Skydiving? Running with the fucking bulls? She watched Derrick until he ducked inside the club then continued walking.

“Who was Derrick talking to?” Amy asked.

“Cinder. He’s been a regular at the Bull for a few months now.”

Amy hesitated before asking, “Have you—”

“No.” Carmen shot Amy a stern glance. “I think he likes the poles.”

Cinder wore a blue rhinestone suit and yellow suede shoes. In one well-manicured hand he held a large cigar and in the other, a moon pie that he’d already taken a bite from. Cinder had to be the second most exotic dresser who frequented The Bull.

“How fares this splendid eve for Lady Carmen and her consort?”

Carmen took a drag of her cigarette. And she’d give him the number one slot for being the most eccentric talker. “Just dandy.”

“May I offer a guess?”

The guy always got her costume right but she never took it further. He seemed harmless enough, but she had zero attraction for him and she sensed he had even less for her.

Her game of ‘*guess the costume and answer the trivia = get laid*’ was a bit juvenile but entirely entertaining. And in this podunk, backasswards town, a little excitement could curb a strong desire to tie oneself to a train track.

She nodded.

“A sexy cartoon madam with poodle-like hair and nose...with a bit of a western spice.”

She shook her head. “How do you do that?”

Cinder winked. “I have traveled stars beyond dreams; your eyes make me quiver still.”

Carmen nodded indifferently. “Cinder, sweetheart, you need more Daniels and less Cummings.”

“Your Daniels I have known, but your Cummings is much a bore.” He moved his face close to Carmen. “But she walks in beauty like the night; of cloudless climes and starry skies; And all that’s best of dark and bright.”

Carmen laughed and placed a light kiss on Cinder’s cheek. “Byron. Now that’s more my style.”

Cinder took another bite of the moon pie and looked into the sky. “Tis a night of a thousand stars and destinies aligned that we find ourselves one day afar, but it will never forsake whom we are.” He leaned to look around Carmen where Amy stood. From his minty cigar, Cinder swirled a cloud of icy white smoke. “I must know the name of your lady friend.”

“I’m Amy.” She gave a wave. “What will never forsake who we are?”

“Our sign from the stars that we are eternally aligned.” Cinder’s face scrunched. “Such unorthodox vibes pour forth this moment in time. Is it too forward to ask of your sorrows and pains?”

Amy’s eyes grew wide, gawking at Cinder as if he were some sort of celebrity.

Carmen snatched her by the wrist. “Her day’s been awesome. Catch you later.” She dragged Amy through the door as Cinder gave his verbose farewell.

Just inside, surrounded by country music, drunken chatter, cigarette smoke and dim lighting, she pulled Amy to the side. Carmen fished through her own purse. “I have something for you.” She found the purple vibrator, still in the package. “Meet Bastet.”

Amy scowled. “Put that away. What would Shane think?”

“It was his idea.”

A short brunette with pigtails and shorty shorts leaned over Amy’s shoulder. “I have that exact one, ‘cept mine’s pink. You’ll love it.” She disappeared into the crowd.

Amy snatched the vibrator and shoved it in her purse. Her arms crossed over her chest, she glared at Carmen. “You gave it a name?”

Carmen mimicked Amy’s angry expression and body posture, but with a touch of exaggeration. “I name all my playthings.”

“I can’t believe Shane would ask you to buy me a...toy. What was he thinking?”

“He wasn’t thinking. He’s got a penis and he’s breathing. But the brute is in love with you on a diehard level, so take the gift and be grateful.” When Amy only glared at her, she added, “Probably worried about leaving you alone so much.”

Watching Amy's face redden, Carmen struggled with an uncontrollable urge to laugh her fuckin' head off. Again, she dug into her giant purse and grabbed her cosmetic bag. She forced it into Amy's hand. "Put some war paint on that pretty face and loosen up, girl."

"Why?"

The urge to laughter faded, replaced by frustration. "Because the mopey-pouty, woe-is-me is tiresome and I refuse to babysit. Besides, I need to dance, get drunk and maybe even score myself a man, but your negative nancy vibes are going to be a super buzzkill." She lifted her chin, gesturing to the ladies room. "Bury the damn rat already. Forego the mournful widow, Plain Jane look and put some damn makeup on."

When Amy's posture drooped and her frown deepened, Carmen wanted a do-over. If only she could take back all the shit she had just yammered.

Amy took the cosmetic bag. "I'm sorry I've been such a downer."

Relieved and shocked Amy took her run-down so well, Carmen shrugged. "If you keep thinking bad things are going to happen then they will."



Chapter Twelve



ISAAC KNELT AT THE marble foundation which served as an altar to Galmoria. Violet glow misted off the purified water, rising and dissipating. Onyx statues carved to depict three images of Galmoria, The Winged Priestess, guarded the fountain. One pose was of her squatting, her delicate hands flat on the ground between her bent legs; the second depicted her about to leap, black fangs over stone seductive lips and curved talons on her long fingertips. The third statue captured his demigod-mother in mid-flight with a giant scorpion draped along her back between raven wings; the scorpion's curled tail appeared as if it belonged to both insect and demoness.

"Mother, I demand to know why I have been sent here." Pacing, he waited as dew from the humid air covered his skin.

From the third statue flashed emerald green eyes, entrancing Isaac.

"Answer now! Why have I been sent to this wretched world?" Isaac peered into the glowing orbs. Galmoria's seductive lips and deadly fangs were a breath away from his own. "Damn you, Mother!"

Two green streaks shot from the eyes and struck his face like iron balls. Isaac collapsed backwards onto the stone patio.

"How dare you speak to me with such a vile tongue." Galmoria's voice pierced the quiet courtyard.

Isaac gathered himself up and shook dirt from his bare chest and slacks. "I offer no apologies. Now, tell me why I am here."

"To fetch a Paladin child who will serve as a great general for you and your queen's armies." His Mother's voice was distant, but clear.

"My queen?" Isaac knelt before the statue. "Am I to be a king?"

"You will be King of the Tribes, and Lord of the Beasts."

"If that is your wish."

"I have knowledge of an ultimate power; a power of such rarity that it cannot be neglected. But it shall not remain hidden from our enemies. We must move quickly. You are to seek out The Beloved in Buckeye for she is the vessel of the child."

"Am I to kill this 'Beloved'?"

"Do not harm her. She is the future of our race."

"As you wish."



Chapter Thirteen



CARMEN PUSHED TOWARD the bar as Amy disappeared into the lady's room. After plunking her purse on the burnished copper bar top, Carmen slid out a mahogany beech wood stool. At the other end of the counter Mike poured two tall drafts.

Instead of his usual overalls, he wore a bright red corduroy shirt and crisp jeans, of which his ever-expanding beer gut crept over.

Mike set the drafts in front of two frat guys a few stools away, then strolled to Carmen, drying his hands on a rag. "What's it tonight? Calamity Jane in Vegas?"

With a quirked brow, Carmen shot him a pistol-signal with her hand. "Nope, but that's a brilliant idea. Give me a rum and Coke on the rocks, but hold the Coke. And the ice."

Mike reached for a bottle of Morgan. "The usual then."

"Hey, Carmen!" a voice called from behind.

Carmen grinned. *And so the game begins.*



AMY DROPPED THE COSMETIC bag on the rim of the sink. The reflection in the mirror gawked at her and she promptly shook her head. Maybe Carmen was right. All she needed was to get pretty and loosen herself up.

But Carmen hadn't been through the day she had. Even ignoring the deep, rude voice in her head and the defiled rat grave, there was still that weird light in the woods, and Abe creeping around Sacred Oaks like a guerilla in his own personal mission. He knew dang well what was going on out there. Classic Abe. That old coot would take more secrets to the grave than Jimmy Hoffa.

Amy fished through the makeup bag and pulled out mascara, eyeliner and four different hues of lipstick, shades ranging from hot red to freaky purple and ghoulish black. A sense of envy for Carmen fumed inside her. That girl could shape shift herself into anyone with nothing more than a bag of makeup and a closet full of thrift store specials.

Amy decided to go with the bright red instead of her usual pale pink. Tonight she would be sassy and vibrant, instead of timid and boring. If she could step away from herself for even a few hours then maybe the unfinished rat business,

creepy voice and the spooky Sacred Oaks phenomena would let loose of her psyche. No wonder Sherry freaked out. She wanted no part of all this bad mojo.

Amy had just finished applying the lipstick when the bathroom door opened and a large guy wearing a football jersey lurched his drunk-self right into the lady's room.

"What did Mike do with the urinals?" Twice, the guy turned in a complete circle. "And when the hell did he put doors on the stalls?"

"I think you're looking for the men's room." Amy scooped the makeup back into the bag as she kept her eyes focused on the hulking guy who staggered about next to the sink.

The man looked at Amy, seemingly surprised by the sound of her voice and by her presence. When she caught a clear glimpse of his face an unnerving sense of familiarity alarmed her.

She dropped the cosmetic bag into her purse and shuffled closer to the door, but he put himself between her and the exit. She stepped back. Her heart hiccupped.

Worst day. Ever.

"You're Shane Baker's little woman. Used to be in the Kettle with that dickhead. You know, a Vulture. I played defense." He leaned into her, driving her deeper into the restroom and further from the exit. A sinister smile showcased a missing front tooth. Grin widened, he burped in her face.

Fumes of regurgitated stale beer and fried mushrooms made her gag.

"Me and Shane go way back. Back to the good ol' glory days. Pussy. Pussy. Pussy. All the fucking time."

The Kettle, she recalled, was what the all-star football players called themselves when they'd party on the town. Shane had told her a hundred stories of all the wild times they'd had doing mostly harmless things.

Mostly.

A dry knot inched down her throat. "Excuse me," she said, but her voice was quieter than she'd intended. "I have to get back to my friend."

His hand grabbed her wrist. "I ain't had a good piece of tail in over a year. Not since I got the fucking clap down in Austin."



CARMEN WATCHED THE roadies trek on and off the stage, connecting and testing equipment while the jukebox played a twisted mix of obscure outlaw country and psychobilly rock 'n roll. The sawdust dance floor was sparse and tame. After dark, all the guys and gals would be reborn as two-step dosey-do kings and queens with a nice dose of punk rock in their sway.

Derrick stood in the center of a gaggle of giddy sorority bimbos. With a cocky grin and waving arms, he was probably telling them about his thrill-seeking exploits or, maybe, he was trying to charm his way into their pants with the recaps of his latest victory in the amateur boxing circuit. Hearing their girly ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’, and seeing their glasses full of brightly colored fruity drinks, Carmen chugged the dark contents of her Collins.

Amateur. Vapid. Idiotic. Brainless...whores.

She peered through the crowd toward the restroom. What the hell was taking Amy so long?

Carmen smelled his spicy after shave, before she felt his arm come around from behind.

Jeff tucked his head beside Carmen’s. “Hey sweet child o’ mine.” He still wore his black Buckeye Police Department uniform which brought a little tingle to Carmen.

She turned on her stool and smiled. Two months ago he’d guessed both her themed costume and trivia question of the eve and got a ticket to her bed. They spent one very hot night together and he’d been a haunt ever since. It really was a shame too that he hadn’t been able to duplicate his luck. But she had standards.

“How are you?” she asked, only mildly interested in the answer.

Jeff shrugged. “I’ve been better.” He looked Carmen up and down, pausing on her breasts. Lifting his gaze higher, he seemed to focus on her face and glasses. He snapped his fingers. “I got it. Country bumpkin who just moved to the city and needs to turn tricks to afford college.”

A corner of Carmen’s mouth twitched with amusement. She clucked her tongue. “Sorry. Better luck next time.”

“Come on, babe, give me a second chance. I’m just warming up.”

Carmen laughed. “I don’t do warm-ups.”

“How ‘bout I just arrest you for resisting an officer’s charms and lock you in my bedroom for a night?”

A deep laughter sounded behind Officer Jeff. Derrick slapped a hand on Jeff’s back. “I’m already warmed up.”



“YOU WERE ON THE FOOTBALL team?” Amy thumped her forehead with the heel of her trembling hand. “I’m terrible with faces.” If she kept small talk up then maybe the creep would lose interest and go away.

He slapped both hands on the wall on either side of her, trapping her head between his meaty arms. He inched his face closer and sniffed her neck.

Closing her eyes, Amy turned her head.

The guy pulled back. As his gaze rolled down her body, he said, “Chris Dewalt. Played defense. Didn’t I say that already?”

She snapped her fingers. “Of course. Now, I remember. Chris Dewalt who played defense for the Vultures with Shane.”

“Bull fuckin’ shit.”

Spittle sprinkled her face. Shoulders hunched, she recoiled her head backward and thumped against the rutted cement wall.

Chris laughed. More stringent breath billowed about her face.

Amy ignored the pounding in her skull. “I’ll tell Shane you said hello.” She ducked under his arm, but he grabbed and shoved her back against the wall. Hard. A drumming ache in her shoulders matched the migraine bashing the back of her skull. And hot tears poured from her squinted eyes.

“You ain’t forgot about my pal Boone have you?” A sneer quirked one side of his mouth.

At the sound of that lunatic’s name, a chill crawled down her spine.

“How is he?” *Locked up and the key thrown away. Hopefully.*

Chris cocked his head, silent. Smile gone. Finally, he spoke. “You remember him? He was a like a brother to me.”

Amy nodded. *Hard to forget someone who kept you locked in a closet with dead animals for seven hours and fourteen minutes.*

Chris backed away. “He offed himself in that nuthouse they shipped him off to. All thanks to you and that prick Shane.”

Feeling somewhat relieved to have distance between him and her, she said, “I’m sorry to hear about that.” She wanted to add that Boon was already a basket case when she met him at the Buckeye Behavioral Clinic. She’d taken to him the way some people take to a sweet stray dog. Good Lord she had been a fool. The freak had turned out to be a rabid monster.

Chris stared at the floor, seemingly entranced by the paisley design in the ivory tile. “Don’t act like you give a shit. You convinced everyone in town he was a psycho. But I know you made all that shit up ‘cause you’re fucking schizophrenic just like your crazy ass aunt.”

“I didn’t,” she said, but knew it was futile to argue.

“And your punkass outlaw of a boyfriend cost him twelve grand in medical bills which I had to loan him.” His face contorted with disgust. “Boone never got a chance to pay me back.”

“I really have to get going.” Amy made for the door but he grabbed her by the shoulders and tossed her to the floor. She lifted herself to her hands and knees. With a ratty, smelly sneaker, he flipped her onto her back.

“I bet that cunt and asshole of yours is worth about half what’s owed to me.”

Bloodshot eyes bore into her abdomen where her tank had ridden up, baring her midsection.

Amy slid her tank to her waist and forced herself to look at him. “Go to hell.” If only her voice hadn’t trembled so damn much.

Chris knelt over her, knees straddling her stomach. She twisted but her efforts were humorous against his three hundred or so pounds. Holding her breath, trying not to smell his stench, she jerked her knee into his groin.

“Stupid bitch!”

An open-hand slammed the side of her head. A dull pain rattled through her skull before a burst of white light with black spots speckled her vision. And the earlier migraine erupted into brain-splitting agony. She cried out loudly. “God, please...I’m so sorry about Boone.”

He looked up and past her toward the sink, eyes wide. Scrambling off of her, he shot to his feet. “What the fuck!”

Following his gaze, she saw a mist of gray swirled in the mirror. Orbs of red throbbled and streamed down the glass. Carnivorous crocodile teeth appeared and a wall-quaking roar cracked the mirror. A jagged line ran diagonally from the top left corner to the bottom right.

Chris looked at her and back at the mirror. “I swear I’ll never drop acid again!”

A knock on the door.

“Greetings there,” Cinder’s voice resounded from the other side. “May I be allowed inside the lady’s chambers?”

The door opened and Chris bull-rushed past Cinder and out of the bathroom.

Cinder looked down at Amy where she still knelt on the dirty tile floor. He gave a slight bow at the waist. “All is occupied in my brethren’s chambers and my goblet is near to overflow, thus it must receive a proper receptacle.”



WHILE DERRICK STOOD in all his smugness, flashing his pearly whites, Jeff shook his head and pushed his way toward the dance floor.

Mike set her second round down.

Carmen turned on her stool toward the bar. She tapped the glass before swallowing it in one go. With her back toward Derrick, she asked, “What’s your guess?”

Derrick turned her stool until she faced him. With a finger under her chin, he lifted her head and planted a long, wet, telling kiss. His expert tongue possessed her mouth with promise and confidence. Her traitorous body slid off the stool

and brought her to her feet. Fingers with a mind of their own snaked through his hair. Her hips pushed into his prominent erection.

Carmen felt a tap on her shoulder. Without breaking from the kiss, she waved the irritant away.

“Betty Boop crossed with a nerdy cowgirl,” Beckett said.

Fuck.

She broke from the kiss, but hesitated, breathing in Derrick’s beer-flavored hot breath against her swollen lips. Holy fuck she needed him inside her. She straightened and turned on her heel.

Beckett wore his usual letterman jacket and the copious amounts of mousse in his blond hair. With a smirk, she said, “That’s the first part. Now you have to get the question.”

“Let’s get to it then.”

“First female cartoon character not to show interest in any of the male characters?”

Frowning, Beckett’s shoulders slumped.

Carmen couldn’t keep from smiling. As she opened her mouth to tell him to fuck off, his eyes lit up.

“Wilma Flintstone.”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “She was married to Fred, you dumbass.”

Beckett smirked. “I know lots of people who have no ‘interest’ in their significant other.”

She dropped her head and laughed, knocking her glasses off her nose and clear to the floor. With her back to Derrick, she slowly knelt, making sure her dress slid nearly to her waist. On her hands and knees, she faked blindness as she patted the dirty hardwood floor for her glasses, her ass in the air, her panties hopefully only visible to Derrick.

And he wouldn’t be able to miss the pink slip of paper tucked under the lace of her thong.

Derrick lowered himself behind Carmen. “Let me help you, babe.” He reached over her and grabbed her glasses, while his other calloused hand caressed her ass cheek before finding her slit.

And when his fingertips probed her opening she arched her back and grinned, bearing teeth like a damn tomcat in heat.

Carmen clenched her teeth and held her position until she felt the slip of paper being slid from her panties. When she was certain Derrick had the treasure, she stood.

He brought the paper to his face and breathed it in. “And for the grand prize...the correct answer is: Velma.”



“JESUS.” STILL SITTING on the floor, Amy palmed her head.

“Cinder.”

“Jesus.”

“Cinder.”

“Jesus.”

“I am Cin derrrr.”

Amy spat a nervous laughter. “Y-yes you are.” She glanced at the cracked mirror but the grotesque image had vanished.

Cinder waved his hands around her as if outlining an invisible silhouette. “Something dire has shifted your karmic emanations. Even as I stood at my post outside this edifice the vibes beckoned my immediate attention.”

“A monster.” With a shaky finger, she pointed. “In that mirror.”

“Indeed.” Cinder took her hand and helped her to her feet.

His hand felt...cold. Very cold. Unnaturally cold.

She clapped a hand over her gaped mouth. “Dear Lord. You aren’t f-from here, are y-you?”

“From beyond the starry planes I hail.”

“A vampire,” the accusation throaty.

“Absolutely not.”

“What are you? Where are you from?”

“A place you know not of. A colorful and icy planet that dwells on a distant plane.” He bowed at the waist. Straightening, he said, “I am Sagarion.”

Hands behind her back, she gripped the rim of the sink and steadied herself.

For decades, strange stories had existed about Buckeye. Stories that would’ve made Robert Ripley ecstatic. Like the Chupacabra, ancient aliens, and the Mothman, some were believers and others skeptics.

For Amy, Cinder was all those years of speculation come to a certainty. Maybe Buckeye really was a hotspot for fantastic phenomenon.

Amy felt the breath leave her lungs. So many questions should have been on her mind, but only one made it out of her mouth. “Why are you here?”

“A war is to manifest in this town. I arrived early to get a grand spectator’s view.”

“War? In Buckeye?” She frowned. “You came to help us fight?”

“Absolutely not.” Cinder shook his head. “My kind do not partake in cosmic politics. Life and love are our shelter and weapon. I come, as I said, to watch the performers.”

Amy shivered and scowled. “You come to watch, as if war is some kind of television mini-series?”

“That, m’lady, is a grossly inaccurate presumption. This war will be much more marvelous than any magic television can cast.” Cinder bent at the waist and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“The night is still young and the wine calls forth my name. May your karma be realigned by dawn.”



WHILE DERRICK’S GRAY eyes stared down at her, she recalled the last time they fucked.

Willie Nelson’s “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” played on the jukebox. Swaying on the dance floor, with Derrick’s arm around her waist, Carmen grabbed the bottle of beer from his hand. She held it high and tipped her hat so she could see him. “Here’s to Velma.”

She recalled their last hot evening together. The feel of his lips trailing kisses down her abdomen...her inner thighs. The tender suckling of her clit.

“You want me and I want you,” Derrick said. “No games. Not tonight.”

“What’s it matter? You got the question right.”

“Because you gave me the answer.”

Carmen shrugged. She looked over Derrick’s shoulder toward the restroom. Scowling, she shook her head. Was Amy bathing in the damn sink?

Derrick leaned down, his lips close to hers. “This may be a dance floor and we may be dancing, but I don’t dance. Not for anyone. Not even you.”

With a beer bottle in one hand, she pushed at his shoulder with the other. “Fuck you.”

His body stilled as his hand gripped her face. Forcing her to look at him, he said, “We’re fucking tonight but not because I know shit about Velma.”



NOT WANTING TO FACE Chris or the monster in the mirror again, Amy hurried from the restroom. A poster of a western-style goth band plastered the wall. A local band called The Undead Revolvers. Amy smiled and wondered if they were uncanny supernaturals, too. How many eccentric people had she met in her life who weren’t even from this world?

Leaning against the wall, ignoring the loud music and the near-toxic scent of women’s perfume mixed with cigarette smoke, she concentrated on clearing her mind.

But what of that creepy monster in the mirror. The voice in her head! She really was losing her mind. Good grief. But that mirror was cracked, no denying that.

Not only had she met some sort of alien, but he had warned, or rather raved, about an interstellar war, a war claiming Buckeye, Texas as ground zero. Nobody would believe her and she wouldn't blame them one bit. Hell, she hardly believed it herself.

And what of the attack? Should she file a complaint? What would Shane do if he found out?

He would kill Chris.

She pictured Shane nude and in a Mexican jail. The man had no qualms about doing stupid things because of some miscalibrated moral compass. It was better she not tell anyone about the almost-rape.

And Cinder had implied it was all happening because of her karma being out of whack. Was he saying that she deserved it? Had her screwed up karma directed Chris into the lady's room?

She shook her head. Chris was an ass and karma was not to blame.

But what had thrown her karma so far off kilter?

So much for clearing her mind.

Amy pushed off the wall and through the crowd of nearly naked bodies. She bee lined for the bar, where she intended to drink as if tonight marked the eve of the end of the world. Out loud, she laughed. If Cinder was right then it might actually be the final countdown. The eve of WW III.

Screw beer. Time for the hard stuff. Amy sat on a stool and plopped her purse on the bar top.

Mike approached and set a glass of iced tea down.

Amy slid the beverage to the side. "Jack and Diet and keep 'em coming."



HEART RACING, ABDOMEN clenched, Carmen drew a slow breath. With her body melted against his, barely moving on the dance floor, she forced a smile and asked, "How's Susan?"

With a bitter laugh, Derrick said, "I said dick about Jeff, so why you giving me shit?" When Carmen grimaced, he said, "If you recall, that night I didn't answer the question correctly. So I made other arrangements."

When they met two years ago, Carmen had made it clear she wasn't the settling-down type. Derrick had done the same.

She fucked who she wanted.

And so did he.

So why was she giving him shit? She struggled for a quip and clever rebuke but her mind was frustratingly blank.

Derrick's tight lips stretched into a smile. He kissed her forehead. "If it makes you feel better, I had to pull over half way home so she could puke. I dropped her off at her house and spent the rest of the night on my couch watching the Discovery channel. Being Shark Week and all."

Thank fuck. Carmen resisted the urge to jump into his arms, wrap her legs around his waist and squeal like a school girl with a celebrity crush. Disgusted by her pathetic urge, she'd simply play it cool.

Carmen sipped the beer and tipped it to his mouth. When the amber liquid dripped down his chin, she rose to her tiptoes and licked it off his skin.

Toby Keith's "Should've been a Cowboy" began playing. Derrick twirled Carmen and pulled her close. "No games."

He kissed her. Long and slow. As their tongues played hide and seek, the smell of beer and rum from their breaths mixed in white hot passion. Moisture dripped down her inner thighs.

There were good fucks.

There were bad fucks.

And there was Derrick.

He was the only man she slept with who not only respected her but knew where he stood in her world. Derrick knew she would never love him, not like a woman should love her man; but she also knew he'd never love her. They redefined 'friends with benefits'.

"Let's get out of here," Carmen said, her head on his shoulder.

With an arm around her waist, he held her tight against him. With his other hand, he held the bottle of beer. Derrick looked up at the stage where the mechanical bull waited. "I was going to ride Sick 'em tonight." He sipped his beer and looked down at her, eyes heavy with promise. "But I can last a lot longer than eight seconds on you."

Her fingers wrapped around Derrick's wrist and she led him toward the exit.

Once outside, Derrick swung her against the brick wall. Desperate kisses pulled at her lips. With rhythmic tugs, she suckled his roaming and persistent tongue.

Derrick pulled from the kiss, his breaths coming in pants, heavy with lust. He took her hand and dragged her toward the parking lot.

Concealed in the shadow of the building and near the corral fence, Derrick's silver Ford truck conveniently offered privacy for what Carmen was sure would be a quick, hard fuck. Holy hell, her panties were soaked from anticipation.

Derrick set his bottle inside the bed of his pickup and with a swoop, he lifted her off her feet. She plopped onto a mattress while he peeled his shirt over his head and swung himself over the tailgate.

Her cowgirl hat sailed over the side to join his shirt. Impatiently, she shimmied her dress up.

On her knees, she leaned forward and sucked on his chest. When he moaned, she gently bit his nipple, sucking the erect tip. Derrick grabbed his Bud. After a long chug he passed it to her. Carmen drank it empty and he flashed her a devilish grin.

She pulled aside the dainty strip of her wet panties and pushed the narrow end of the glass bottle inside of her. A husky sigh escaped as she gyrated her hips. Eyes closed, mouth slightly open, she licked her bottom lip seductively as she worked the bottle into her dripping pussy.

She heard his jeans fall and opened her eyes. Carmen shook her head. "Back boy."

Derrick grimaced but obeyed. He stepped out of his jeans and gripped his hard on. "You like watching, don't you baby?"

He nodded.

"Say it." She inched the bottle deeper. God she was ready for him.

"I love watching you, baby." Jerking himself faster, he inched closer until his cock hovered near her face.

Keeping the longneck inside, she arched her back and licked the tip of his erection. The sweet nectar of his precum trailed sparks across her tongue.

Carmen flung herself back on the mattress and chucked the bottle over the side onto the cement.

Derrick lunged onto her. Lying between her thighs, his erection grazed her burning slit.

Throatily, she hissed, "Fuck me."

A flash of white light beamed in his face.

Derrick and Carmen gawked at the shadowy figure moving closer. When the mysterious figure leaned over the tailgate, a familiar face came into view. Sheriff Bowden stood dressed in a white shirt and checkered sleep pants. He propped the Maglite on the edge of the truck bed.

Derrick jumped up and scrambled for his jeans. "Son of a bitch."

Carmen grabbed his wrist. "Don't you stop goddamnit!"

Derrick frowned and pulled from her grasp. He slid his jeans over his damn fine ass.

With a tilt of his head, Bowden gestured to his police car. "Fun's over. Let's go." He turned his back, giving Carmen some privacy. She slid her dress down

and smoothed it to cover her lady bits.

Foregoing the handcuffs, Sheriff put them in the back of his car. Bowden circled the vehicle and paused in its headlights. He waved at the two-story house beside the Rising Bull. “Thanks Ruth Anne! I’ll make sure these outlaws never see the light of day.”

Carmen gave the bird to the old Pentecostal woman.

Ruth Anne opened her window and leaned out. With a wave at the Sheriff, she said, “It’s disgusting what these young people do these days.”

Sheriff Bowden got in and cranked the car. “Crazy old bat.” He took a swig from a large paper cup and turned to face them. “Evenin’.”

Carmen grumbled. “I swear to God, Sheriff, I’m gonna start a drug ring in this fucking town just to give you something better to do with your time.”

“Mighty kind of you, Miss Valles.” Bowden shifted to drive and pulled from the parking lot.

“How long had you been standing by the truck anyway?”

Bowden set his drink in the console cup holder. He flicked his blinker and pulled onto FM 1085. “I gotta admit I’m more of a Miller man myself.”

“Just throw me under the jail and lose the key.” Carmen slumped against the door. “So what’s the deal, Sheriff? You going to drop us off somewhere and let this slide?”

“No ma’am. You two just earned an all-expense paid night in the drunk tank.”

“We’re not even drunk!”

“I missed the last half-hour of American Idol ‘cause of you two, so if my night’s ruined, so is yours.”

Carmen plucked her phone from her purse and dialed Mike. Hopefully he could keep an eye on Amy and maybe even give her a ride home.



MIKE WRAPPED HIS LONG arms around Amy as he led the way from his truck to the trailer’s front door. She stumbled on the first step and giggled.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll go straight to bed and sleep this off,” Mike said as he opened her front door. The television in the living room blared.

Amy threw her arms around Mike. “I love you. I don’t know what we would’ve done if you hadn’t brought you home tonight.” She nestled her face into his shoulder. Then she burst into laughter. “I mean brought me home today.”

Mike said goodbye and hurried off the wooden deck. From the front door, Amy waved him farewell. “Thanks Mike! Love you!” After the taillights

vanished she stumbled into the living room.

Shane's brother Scooter was sprawled on the couch watching an animated show.

She wobbled toward the edge of the sofa cushion.

"Futurama." The gangly teen peered at her. "How was your night?"

She plopped beside him. "I can honestly tell you that it was perfectly and absolutely out of this world." Covering her mouth with her fist, she quietly burped. "Should you be up this late?"

"For God's sake, I'm seventeen. According to the experts I only need five hours of sleep to be functional as long as I sleep in on the weekend to recharge."

"Is it wise to stay up late on a school night?"

With a scoff, he eyed her. "Is it wise to be drunk on a work night?"

Giggling, she swatted his leg. The room suddenly spun. *Crap.* "You can put all the blame for that on Aunt Carmen."

"Aunt Carmen?"

"You know what I mean. Don't be giving me so much sassafras." The room tilted sideways and she gripped the cushion. At least her right hand gripped the couch, her left hand accidentally clasped Scooter's thigh. When the room leveled she snatched her hand back, but already a gleam filled Scooter's eyes.

His hand covered hers. Scooter sat up, positioning himself closer to her. Too close.

Amy cleared her throat. She pulled her hand from beneath his and stood. "I need sleep."

He jumped to his feet and caught her wrist. Yanking, he twirled her to face him. Now the room was *really* spinning. *Crap. Crap. Crap.*

"What do you see in him?" he asked.

This conversation had been a long time coming, Amy knew. And it was a conversation that desperately needed to be had, but not while she was drunk as hell.

"I love him," she simply said. "And that's all you need to know."

"Well, he doesn't love you. Shane's too stupid to know what love is."

Amy shook her head. "And I suppose you know what love is?"

"Yes. I do. Because I love you. Want to know why I love you?"

Amy swallowed a bitter bubble of whiskey. "No."

Like every other seventeen-year-old boy, he was confusing love with lust. He didn't love her. He wanted to have sex with her.

If she didn't love the kid so much, she'd have lost it on him long ago and told him off, called him out for his wildly inappropriate advances. Called him a snake!

But he was like a brother to her. She'd raised him for the past five years.

Besides, it wasn't all his fault. If grown men couldn't help but let hormones rule their brains, what chance did a hormonal teenager have at controlling their primal urges?

What Scooter felt for her would pass with time and life experience. And if it didn't, God help him. Because she couldn't keep his advances on her a secret from Shane much longer. Eventually, no matter how careful she or Scooter was, Shane was bound to eventually clue in.

Then he'd beat Scooter unconscious.

A wave of nausea made her blink. She palmed her rumbling stomach. *Crap.*

"Because you're smart and sexy," Scooter said. "And loyal to your friends. A heart of gold, even good to animals. You appreciate good hygiene..."

"Love isn't something you can define. It's not something you can make a bulleted list of; if you can name it then that's not love. And that's what you don't get. And that's why you'll never get..." She thumbed herself, jabbing at her chest. "Me." With those final words Amy turned and hurried down the hall.

"At least I've always been here for you!" Scooter called out.

Inside the master bedroom, she locked the door before entering the adjacent bathroom. She closed the door. Hung over the shower rod was her flimsy cheetah night gown, but the pair of matching panties were missing.

"Dammit, Scooter," she mumbled. She stripped her liquor-and-smoke infused clothes off and slipped the nightie on.

Amy copped a squat on the porcelain throne, as Shane would have put it. Her mind reeled and yo-yoed from the alcoholic stupor. She was already regretting the night. She fished through her purse on the counter and found the vial. Desperate to ward off what was sure to be a hell of a hangover, she drained the tube nearly empty. The syrupy potion didn't taste half bad after...however many drinks she'd consumed.

Female! You must cease this drunkenness at once!

Amy jumped to her feet, ignoring the pee trickling down her legs. Stumbling to the sink, she wagged a finger at her reflection. "We gotta set up some ground rules."

A deafening roar erupted inside her foggy head. She covered her ears, and winced at the return of the excruciating throbbing from the manhandling she'd received earlier thanks to that Neanderthal Chris.

He dare touch the Beloved mother!"

A malevolent growl hissed inside of her mind, slithering wickedly through her body like an invading serpentine spirit, leaving chills in its wake.

I will kill him!

Amy cleared her throat. She closed her eyes and burped, swallowing the last Cosmopolitan she'd drank all over again. She shook a finger at her reflection. "Ground rules...we w-were about to d-discuss ground rules. And stop shouting!"

A deep sigh echoed inside her head. *I am unclear to your meaning of 'ground rules', Female.*

She growled her frustration. "Rule One. You are to respect my privacy during..." She widened her eyes at her reflection. "You know."

Speak not in rhyme. I lack time and patience.

"When I'm on the toilet I don't want to hear a strange man yelling at me." Amy waited but the voice remained silent. She let out a huff. "Okay?"

I am no stranger.

"Now who's talking in rhyme?" She glared. "Will you respect my privacy?"

I will abide by your ground rule, as you call it, but I have a stipulation. I came to protect you. If your safety is at risk, I will forsake your ground rule.

"Fair enough," Amy said. "Rule Two. No communicating with me when—"

Enough Female! I will abide by no more of your absurd rules. Have you no idea of the being that speaks to you now? If you knew of my powers, you would not quote moronic rules. You would fear me, and you would be wise to do so.

In the mirror, a ghostly image of a young man's face replaced her own: rugged tanned complexion framed by wild coal colored hair, jawline lean, cheek bones strong. The visage was familiar but also unknown.

Fear me, Female and heed my warnings. The Beast will come. And thou cannot reckon with the Beast without my protection.

Either she had lost her ever loving mind or was really, really, really insanely drunk. Perhaps both. Regardless, she refused to be bullied by her own psyche. Straightening, Amy said, "Rule Three." The room spun. She gripped the rim of the sink, steadying herself before continuing. "I would appreciate a little courtesy. Does your mother approve of how you speak to women?"

I sense not. The voice hesitated. What is this courtesy you speak of?

"Instead of barking orders, I would appreciate a 'thank you' or a 'please'. And you will not address me as female. My name is Amy or you can simply refer to me as ma'am."

Silence.

"Are we clear?"

Yes.

Amy cupped her ear. "I'm sorry. What'd ya say?" She heard a sigh.

Thou are the most ornery Fem-, Ma'am, I have encountered in all my seasons.

“Rule Four. You will not speak to me when I’m being...intimate with my boyfriend Shane.”

It is grossly improper to speak of such things! To say the least with your...this rule I will certainly follow, as long as your safety is not at risk.

“Good. We just might be able to coexist. Now answer me just one dang question. Who the heck are you?”

The image in the mirror wavered like frail branches in the wind and an animalistic mask covered the young boy’s rugged face. *Behold, I am the Dark Trinity!*



Chapter Fourteen



A BANG ON THE FIRST-floor door startled Shane awake. Fisting his eyes open, he shoved the thin sheet aside and staggered down the metal stairs. Akron Oil had upgraded their shitty rundown FEMA trailers from Katrina to brand new stackable modular buildings. Too bad, only four months later they looked and smelled like a boys' high school locker room.

Shane kicked a pair of whitey-tighties from the bottom stair before opening the door.

"Mornin' shithead," the shift supervisor, Lawdry said. Wearing a navy dress jacket and matching slacks, he looked ready for Easter Sunday service, if only Easter could fall on a Wednesday.

Shane looked at the blue LCD clock on the nearby counter: 5:15 AM.

"What's the deal?"

"Pack your things, Baker. You're outta here."

"What about the piss test?"

Lawdry opened his mouth but hesitated. He glanced around the room and lifted his gaze toward the second floor. "Anybody else awake?"

Shane shook his head.

Steve Lawry said, "Rig's shutting down. There's been a situation. Kevin Deeks was found dead on the platform this morning. Asphyxiated on his own vomit."

Shane leaned against the wall, hands on his thighs and blew out a breath. "Shit."

"Deep shit is more like it," Lawdry said. "OSHA is capping us off 'til an official investigation can be completed. An autopsy is scheduled to test for blood alcohol levels. We'll contact you when you should report back—that is if we're even authorized to reopen operations."

"I understand."

"I can tell a straight shooter when I see one," Lawdry said. "Did you know anything about Kevin drinking on the site, Baker?"

Shane's face tightened. "No, sir."

Lawdry nodded. The supervisor glanced at the second floor again. "Let the rest of the guys know for me, will ya?"

"Yeah," Shane said.

"You and your buddy Birch need bus tickets home?"

“We’ll just drive the Jalopy back to Buckeye this time.”

“Buckeye, huh? I took my nephew there a couple years back to do some hunting. Some coonass at a bait shop tried to sell us silver bullets and a wooden cross. We decided to get our bait and beer at K-mart.” Steve shook his head. “Didn’t see a damn thing the whole time we were out there.”

Fucking Abe.

Lawdry left and Shane went upstairs. When he sat on the edge of Birch’s mattress, the sleeping beauty stirred and frowned.

“We’re going home,” Shane said.

Birch raised up, and rubbed his eyes. “So much for taking a piss test and everything being hunky-fucking-dory, huh?”

“Not my fault this time. But I wish it were.”



TRYING TO IGNORE THE pounding behind her eyes, the grand-mama of all migraines, Amy pushed through the double doors of Roxy’s Bus Stop Depot.

The diner opened at five every morning and Amy was hardly ever late for her shift. But the digital clock by the old grill read 5:34. God, the smell of bacon grease and fried eggs made her want to puke all over the wood floors.

She poured herself a Diet Coke and glanced around for Carmen. Her car was not in the lot but she could’ve hitched a ride with Derrick. Unless she was still behind bars?

Amy sipped her coke while sitting at the counter, a long beige breakfast bar with rounded edges and chipped borders. Roxy eyed her from the grill where the nauseating bacon and egg fumes originated.

“Don’t just sit there like a bump on a log.” Roxy waved a metal spatula. “Need some breakfast to help get the lead out?”

Amy gagged. “No ma’am.” She slipped the vial from the pocket of her apron and sipped from it.

Sheriff Bowden held open the door. Carmen stalked into the diner.

Still dressed in her Betty Boop costume from last night, mascara smudged, hair a mess, she walked past the Sheriff without making eye contact. Her uniform balled in her hands, Carmen strode to the bathroom. Silent all the way.

The sheriff set his black drab hat on the counter and took a seat on a stool.

After tying her apron, Amy poured a mug of coffee for the good sheriff. “You didn’t make Carmen spend the night in jail, did you?”

The sheriff narrowed his eyes then tipped the mug to his cracked lips. All the answer she’d get from him ‘til he finished his coffee.

Female, hear me.

Not again. Amy ignored the arrogant voice. *The voice isn't real.* She repeated the mantra silently as she wiped down the stainless steel around the coffee station.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted her mother entering the diner.

Amy groaned. What a day for her to visit. Somehow she had to keep her struggle with her sanity a secret. That woman wouldn't hesitate to have her committed again, just like she'd tossed her own sister Carol into the asylum. She poured another mug of coffee and set it at the opposite end of the breakfast bar.

A bitter scent singed her nostrils and her stomach rolled. Bile crept into her throat. She closed her eyes and swallowed while her head pounded, a rhythmic drum behind her eyes.

"Something ain't right," she said. "I should've stayed home today."

Amy's mother took a seat at the counter where Amy had set the coffee. "Remember me? I birthed you. What was it? Twenty-five years ago?"

Amy sighed. "Twenty-three."

So she hadn't called her mother in over a month, but the woman was more like a stranger, not to mention a diva and a snob. Amy snatched a menu from under the counter and dropped it next to her mother's manicured hands.

Amy!

The monster in the mirror at the Bull flashed in her mind.

I abide by your rules yet you refuse my callings.

From behind, a hand gripped her shoulder. "You alright, *mami*?" Dressed in black shorts and a white T-shirt, Carmen gave her a concerned look.

"I'm not a female!" Amy pushed through the double doors, past the grill and into the storage closet.

Standing at the far end, face pressed against a carton of to-go cups, Amy heard the door open. She looked at Carmen standing in the threshold. "If I tell you something, can you promise to keep it a secret?"

Carmen said, "You even have to ask?"

Amy released a deep sigh. She slumped to the floor with her back against the metal rack stacked with paper goods. "I keep hearing a voice in my head and that's not the worst of it. I think I'm going crazy."

Carmen sat on a crate of condiments across from Amy. "When aren't you?"

Amy smiled at the sardonic grin on Carmen's face.

So what if everybody thought she was crazy. Maybe she was, but what should have felt like a scarlet letter, felt more like a badge of honor.

Despite not caring what anybody thought of her, she didn't want to be locked up again. Never again.

"What about Aunt Carol?" Amy asked.

“You are not her and I don’t believe a word of that ‘it runs-in-the-family’ nonsense.”

“It’s not just that. I’m nauseous and dizzy.” Amy hung her head between her knees. “I met a real life alien. Right here in Buckeye.” She looked at Carmen. “You think I’m crazy?”

“You. Are. Not. Crazy.” Carmen grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet. “Come on, chickie, let’s go get your mother outta here before she sprouts horns and starts ordering new born children.”

As Amy and Carmen returned, her mom slapped the menu down. “Don’t you serve English muffins or anything that isn’t saturated in grease or made from dead animals?”

Amy gave Carmen’s hand a reassuring squeeze and mouthed *thank you* before crossing the dining room toward her mother. “We serve the same food we did last time you were here.”

“Listen, dear, I went to the galleria with Debra Vanderhort in Houston yesterday and she says her son, Thad, just got accepted into veterinary school at LSU.”

“That’s nice.” Amy grabbed the pot and refilled Sheriff Bowden’s coffee. He looked up at her. “She made me miss American Idol.”

Grimacing, Amy backed through the swinging door to the kitchen. She gave Charlie, the cook, a nod.

“You sick?” Charlie asked. The old black man always wore long sleeve shirts while cooking so his face was constantly shimmering with sweat. How in tarnation could he stand the heat?

“If by sick, you mean hung over, then yes, I’m very, very sick.”

Charlie chuckled, deep and from the belly. He slipped a cooking apron over his gray-haired head. “I remember those days. Chug-a-lugging all night and yuking all day long. Thank the good Lord above he straightened me out real good.”

“Got any Ibuprofen?” Amy asked.

Carmen popped through the doors and tossed Amy a packet of Alka-Seltzer. “Take two now and keep away from children.” She tossed a dirty coffee mug into the soapy sink. “Amateur.”

Amy dropped the tabs into the glass and drank the rancid fizzy concoction. She put on her happy face and went back out to the dinner room. Approaching her mother, full of resolve not to be bullied by yet another deranged creature. The one in her head was more than enough.

Her mother said, “So, you could be available if I tell Thad to give you a ring, right?”

“I’m seeing and living with Shane and you know it.”

Her mom sipped her coffee and slid a lock of her golden hair behind her ears. “He’s a bit of a troublemaker and he won’t ever add up to much. You deserve a promising young man like Thad. Don’t you want to get out of Buckeye and see the world like your sister?”

“Vanessa isn’t seeing the world, Mom. She’s in Houston working as a hair stylist.”

“Well, she’s more cultured than you, dear. She’s currently seeing a pre-med student. You would know that if you ever gave her a call.”

“Cultured? How do you figure? She’s a hair stylist, a vegan, and constantly gripes about how everyone in Texas are cow-loving morons.”

“Better than being a waitress in this dive for the rest of your life. You are just like your father was, content with living a boring life in Hicksville.”

Amy clenched her teeth. Her hand wrapped around her Diet Coke. She could feel the heat surging into her cheeks. *Damn her mother!*

“Mami?” Carmen ushered Amy toward the drink station. “Could you stock ice?”

“Sure.” Amy pressed through the swinging doors and back into the kitchen.

I’d love to smack the snob with ice! She leaned her ear against the closed door and listened.

“Mrs. Wintry,” Carmen said.

“Hello dear,” her mother said. “How are you?”

“I mean this in the nicest possible way,” Carmen sneered. “But shut the fuck up or I kick your ass out.”

Amy imagined her mother’s face contorting in annoyance. She stifled a laugh.

“Always a pleasure,” her mother said.

“How goes it, spending your dead husband’s money?”

“I hear your mother has fallen ill. Fortunately, you were able to get her across the border. Mexican medicine is not nearly as advanced as the States.”

“I’m Puerto Rican, you stupid bitch. And my mother was born here and so was I.”

Amy sucked in a breath.

“I’ve never met a Hispanic who says otherwise,” Amy’s mother said. “But that’s neither here nor there.”

“My family’s owned chicken farms here since 1935. My family’s richer than you’re sorry white ass. Put a million dollar perfume on a turd and it’s still just a piece of shit.”

“It’s really too bad they never caught that awful maniac who dismembered all those people on your family’s farm back in ‘82. Were you even born then?”

Amy pushed through the double doors. “Please leave.”

Amy’s mother slipped her purse over her shoulder. “They serve better breakfast and coffee at Denny’s. And they don’t have sassy foreigners working there, either.”

Amy held the door open. “Today’s not a good day. I’ll call you later.”

“No you won’t, but it’s sweet of you to say so.”

As her mother left the diner, Amy darted an apologetic look at Carmen.

“One of these days you’re going to tell that woman to fuck off and I hope I have a front row seat.” Carmen shook her head. “I’ll stock glasses.” She disappeared behind the double doors.

Amy’s phone dinged twice: a text from Shane.

On my way home. I’ll text when I get closer. No reception in BFE.

Amy smiled and forced herself to ignore the churning in her stomach and the banging in her brain. She grabbed a rag and spray bottle and began wiping tables.

Maybe Carmen was right and it was just all in her head. Think positive, she told herself.

“We’re open,” Roxy yelled from behind the line. She straightened the netting over her tightly permed white hair. “Get this place in order. We need ice tea brewed, ketchup bottles refilled and on the tables, and dinner salads brought forward from the walk-in. This ain’t a family reunion, girls, so stop looking like this is your first rodeo and get the lead out.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Amy walked to the bathroom to pee and freshen up. When she finished her business, she lathered her hands and rinsed them under warm water.

Female.

Amy glanced up. Instead of seeing her reflection, she saw the blurred face of the young boy, the trespasser of her mind and her mirrors. “I asked you not to call me that.”

Do not doubt your sanity or my existence.

Amy hung her head, clutching her stomach, as hysterical laughter overwhelmed her body.

She regained her composure and looked into the mirror. “Bathroom time is off limits. We discussed this.”

I was uncertain you would recall our communication last eve.

“I’m not drunk now and I’m telling you that bathroom time is not permitted.”

I wish to validate my existence. What must I do?

“You’re telling me you’re real? Start by telling me who are you, where you’re from and why me? And bypass the cryptic ‘dark trinity’ stuff.”

I come from a time not of yours, nor of your world or of your universe.

“Oh, that’s so much more helpful.”

I do not understand your tone, but neither do I care. The Beast has chosen you because something most special is within you.

“So this Beast wishes to eat me? Is it a tiger? A bear?” She covered her mouth. “Oh my.”

He is Geminus, king of all beasts, neither tiger nor bear, for they are his servants as are the hounds and serpents. It is life within you that he was sent to claim.

Amy hesitated.

You will know him when he comes, for he will wear the Narkush stone, a powerful gem that only the Geminus possess. It is the vessel of their souls.

A nervous laughter escaped her. “I’ll play along. What does this gem look like? What does this Beast or Geminus, as you say, look like?”

I cannot say what the Geminus will look like as I have not beheld his face in over a decade. The stone will gleam a thousand shades of ruby and the Beast will hold it near his flesh.

“How do you know so much about this Beast?”

That is a long story and I must depart soon.

“Wait. Could you at least tell me your real name?”

My given name is Tobias.

Amy brought her face closer to the mirror. “Will you be there when the Beast comes, Tobias?”

The voice never replied.

“Have mercy.” She swatted the counter with an open palm. Ice tea needed to be brewed. Roxy wasn’t paying her to carry on absurd conversations with the people in her head.



ABE STOOD FROM THE old army cot positioned in the corner of Fort Chimera, his home and man cave residence. He’d built the structure from scrap metal, junkyard parts, and wood right before bulldozing his house down.

Course, when he’d sobered up he felt like the biggest jackass for knocking down his own goddamn house. Thankfully, he didn’t too much mind living entirely inside Fort Chimera and the wood from his house had made an amazing bonfire last Fourth of July.

He needed to wake and open the tackle shop, but an ominous presence lured him outside. Trapped in a self-aware subconscious state, Abe made his way to the camo-painted door, which had originally belonged on a Caterpillar dump truck.

A sepia tone colored his front yard and his truck parked on the dirt driveway. The heap of ashy debris that was his former house was miraculously smoking again.

Abe descended the metal stairs toward an obvious path cut through the new woodlands that were not part of Sacred Oaks, and he knew every inch of Sacred Oaks better than he knew his own whiskers.

He heard none of the typical sounds most common to woods—crickets and birds and locusts—yet he went deeper into the forest of his dream world.

He was having another vision; something that had invaded his dreams since he was a small child. Papa Chief Red Crow told him once, “You beware them dream gods. They don’t come fuckin’ wit you for no damn reason.”

Formed from towering trees, a corridor stretched before him like a mystical black and white tunnel. A young man stepped from the gray trees at the far end of the forested hallway. He wore a leather vest with crisscrossed bones. He had a face that reminded Abe of a predatory animal. Dark, dangerous and cunning.

Between him and the neanderthalic visitor, a tree stump grew. The boy pulled back his hood and their eyes met. His hair was as long as Abe’s but darker than blackened fish.

Abe saw nothing within the youngster's expression. Abe spoke, but no words sounded from his moving lips.

From his waist, the boy unsheathed a dagger and stabbed it silently into the stump. Giving Abe a nod, he turned and disappeared into the woods.

Abe waited until the ghostly projection was out of sight before approaching the stump. His hand reached out to grab the dagger but it swiped through the handle. He tried again, but again his hand passed through the handle with a ghostly wisp.

He panned the eerie woods and called out to Vicki, Shane’s dead sister. She’d first appeared to him in his dream world shortly after Amy had been admitted to the psych hospital. Ever since, she’d been appearing to Abe in his dreams.

She wanted him to help watch over Amy and Shane. Abe assured her that he would and that she could pass onto the next dimension without worry for them. But she’d never left him.

Vicki, appearing dressed in the same shorts and shirt she’d died in at ten years old, appeared on the other side of the stump. Before he could utter a

syllable, she easily slid the dagger from the wood and offered it to him.

Abe's eyes opened. He found himself no longer in the eerie woods. He was now in his own bed, lying on his back. Three lawnmower blades slowly rotated above him. His ceiling fan. Abe rolled off his cot and examined the dagger in his hand.

A name was etched into the ivory handle: *TOBIAS*.



Chapter Fifteen



AMY WAITED INSIDE HER Escort outside Roxy's until school bus number 71 pulled into the parking lot. Scooter exited the bus. His brown hair was unkempt, and his polo shirt wrinkled, not typical of Scooter's usual neat style. He climbed into the passenger side of her car, scowl on his face.

"How was school?"

Scooter glanced at her, suspicion in his eyes.

That wasn't really what she wanted to ask and he probably knew it. She really wanted to ask: *Did anyone stuff you in a locker or make you eat ABC gum. Or Heaven forbid, did anyone put a cigarette out in your hair again?*

"I want my own car." he said.

"Maybe you should think about getting a job. I can talk to Carmen and see if they need a workhand on the chicken farm."

Scooter let out a huff. "That's disgusting. Those places stink worse than paper mills."

"You have to start somewhere."

Scooter folded his arms against his chest. "Shane could give me the Jalopy and buy himself a new truck."

Amy bit her lower lip. Scooter was about to graduate high school and hadn't worked a day in his life. Part of her felt worried for him since he didn't seem worried for himself; but another part of her wanted to see him get his hands dirty. She decided to change the topic. "Mrs. Wright came into the diner today. You're not being mean to her daughter, are you?"

"I'm usually the one taking the beatings, I'd never bully anyone else." He hesitated. "But what does Joanne expect? I mean who's dumb enough to get pregnant at sixteen?"

"Lots of kids make dumb mistakes," Amy said. "But you won't be one of them. You're too smart for that. Right?"

"I have a summer project," Scooter said abruptly. "It's on the effects of animal behavior in relation to moon phases. If I complete it before July then my science teacher will write me a reference letter for UCLA."

"Interesting," Amy said.

"UCLA professors won't help but be impressed."

"Are you sure you won't miss Buckeye if you head out west?"

"The only thing I'm gonna miss about this place is you."

“Well isn’t that sweet.” Amy smiled. “I bet Abe would be perfect for helping you out on that project.”

Scooter’s eyes grew wide. “Really? Isn’t he crazy and a drunk?”

“I don’t think he’s a drunk,” Amy said with certainty.

“The guy’s kind of a weirdo.”

“People say that a lot about me, too.” She patted his jean-clad thigh. “But you still like me.”

He gave her a sidelong glance, grinning. “That’s true.”

“Come on, we’re gonna go see Abe right now. I need some worms. Your brother’s coming home early.”

“They fire him?”

She’d been wondering the same thing but hadn’t the nerve to text Shane and find out. “I hope not.”

Scooter said, “I got a new board game called Knight City. You want to try it out later?”

“I would love to.”

Scooter’s board games were elaborate and complicated but she knew he didn’t have many friends, except Zack Grouse. Sometimes it had gotten hard for her being solely responsible for Shane’s brother while he was away, but she wouldn’t trade the kid for a million of Roxy’s pecan pies. After looking out for him for the past five years during Shane’s stint in the Army and now in the oil field, she couldn’t imagine a day without him or his mind boggling board games. And if it wasn’t for her watching Scooter, she and Shane would’ve gone their separate ways just as they’d done after Victoria’s accidental death.

After a short drive, Amy flicked her blinker and steered into the drive of Abe’s Bait & Tackle. Shorthand for *Abe’s Beer, Bait, Ammo, Tackle and More* which was printed on the receipts. The little brick building was nestled between a dilapidated warehouse and a dinky gas station with only two pumps. Stacks of dog, horse, and cow feed bordered the doorway.

Amy and Scooter walked between two drink coolers filled with beer. They stopped at the glass counter where the grizzly old man sat with his back to them. His waist-length silver hair was tied into a ponytail. He focused on a bigmouth bass swimming in an aquarium built into the wall.

“I’ll be with you in a moment, *cher*. I’m having me a talk with Apollo.”

“What’s he saying?”

“I said I was talking to Apollo. If the damned fish starts talking back to ol’ Abe—”

Amy laughed. “I need some night crawlers.”

“Don’t understand why you people don’t just go find ’em yourselves. All you got to do is move some pine needles and them *bebettes* be crawling on that sweet, moist soil.”

“Wouldn’t that hurt your business?” Amy folded her arms on the glass countertop.

Abe swiveled his stool to face her and Scooter, a can of beer in one hand, a briar pipe in the other. Wisps of spicy sweet Latakia rose to the ceiling in halos. A dark purple gris-gris bag dangled around his neck. “You think I make my living off worms? That makes me want to laugh, *cher*. You going fishing tonight?”

“That’s the plan. When Shane gets home.”

“It’s a full moon. Fish be biting real hard when the moon’s full.” He puffed on his pipe. Speaking around the stem, he said, “But you best be staying outta them woods. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” Amy said, shaking her head. “I don’t need any more adventure in my life than I already got inside my head.”

Abe’s pipe bobbed up and down. “What adventure you gettin’ up to, *cher*?”

“Oh, nothing out of the ordinary. Just the voice in my head and finding out that there’s a ‘beast’ out to get me.” Amy enunciated the word ‘beast’ and swiped the air with a claw-shaped hand.

“Excuse me,” Scooter said. “What do you know about how the fish bite on a full moon?”

“I know a lot about such stuff. I tried to teach your stubborn brother, but his head is harder than a crawdad’s claw.”

“Scooter’s doing a science paper on the effects the moon has on animals.”

Abe sipped his beer. “I was born under a full moon. Whenever it’s full now my big toe twitches and strange women come knocking on my door. Hell, last month a saucy Latina showed up and gave me a hell of a blowjob. That woman could suck a—”

“Gosh all mighty! I don’t think Scooter or me want to hear about that.”

“Speak for yourself,” Scooter said, while giving Amy a teasing grin.

Abe chuckled. “I bet you would, pony.” He tampered the leaves and relit the tobacco. “In nature, after the autumnal equinox, a female gets frisky three days before the second full moon. Some folk say that’s when the Earth Mother reunites with her lover-consort-son.”

“After both lying dead for the whole winter,” Amy finished. “What else you got, Abe?”

Scooter removed a notebook and pen from his backpack.

Amy nipped at her lower lip. “Is there anything you know about the moon and animals that doesn’t involve sex?”

“Ever hear of the moon rabbit?” Abe asked. “Folks say it’s a behemoth of a jackrabbit that dwells up on the moon and pounds on moonstones to make elixirs of life. But that there rabbit ain’t nothin’ compared to Vostrict, the scorpion sentinel to the gateway of countless Hells, up on the Martian moon, Deimos. Course, some been saying he guards gates on our world, too. If Abe sees a big-ass bug like that, he be movin’ somewhere else for sure.”

Abe tilted his head to a corner of the shop where a funnel-shaped web clung to the crumbling ceiling and wall. A spindly Hobo spider waited amongst the sticky strands. “The Moon sent that there spider down to Earth to give us simpleton folk a message.” He crushed the empty beer can and tossed it into a wastebasket.

Scooter asked, “So what’s the message?”

“Fuck if I know, boy.” Abe studied the arachnid with a slanted stare. “The Moon can even drive a spider insane.” He cracked a fresh beer and walked to a shelf where dozens of Styrofoam cartons containing night crawlers were stored.

“Thanks.” Amy dropped a couple dollars on the counter.

Scooter knelt in front of the glass casing and examined a box of bullets labeled: OMEN AMMUNITION. Written in smaller print: Genuine Pure Silver Ammo.

“Are those really silver bullets?” Scooter asked.

“What do people want silver bullets for?” Amy asked. “Ain’t that what they use to kill vampires?”

“Werewolves,” Scooter said. “Silver bullets kill werewolves.”

Abe grumbled something beneath his breath. “Worse things out there than what you see on them Universal pictures.” He sipped his fresh beer. “Silver is a lunar element, linked with the moon. But I reckon it’d do as good a job as a lead bullet.”

“Interesting.” Amy knelt and examined the other items in the glass case. A small wooden box with bronze latches. A beige price tag hung from it with Abe’s handwriting: AUTHENTIC TROLL SLAYING KIT - \$599.82.

“You know how curious them outsiders are,” Abe said. “Come to Buckeye on hunting trips and they hear about them strange tales coming out of the old Rawlins House and them woods. I figure I might as well make a buck off their monster hunts by offering silver bullets, wooden stakes and holy water. That reminds me.” Abe braced himself on the countertop with both elbows, looking at Amy. “Do you by chance know somebody that goes by the name Tobias?”

Amy jolted upright from her kneeling position. “What do you know of him?” Her fingers gripped the edge of the counter.

Abe plopped on the stool and rolled to the left. He rummaged under the counter. When he rolled back he set down something covered in a brown cloth. “Take this here, *cher*. I suspect it was meant for you.”

With trembling fingers, Amy unwrapped the cloth.

Scooter gawked at the dagger hidden in the folds of the dirty rag. “Awesome.”

Etched in gold lettering into the ivory handle was one word. TOBIAS.

“Where did you get this?” Amy asked.

Abe swiveled toward the fish tank. With his back toward Amy and Scooter, he mumbled, “Fuck if I know, *cher*.”



Chapter Sixteen



ATTICUS STOOD ON THE russet red sandstone battlement atop the rugged Tower of Tribulation. He glared across the white and burnt sandscape flecked with cacti. Sparse sun-dried shrubbery spilled over a distant ravine. Bound with a black band, his red ponytail draped down the length of his back. Hands clasped behind him, he planted his boots on the tarnished parapet, the last place Rourn, had stood before he threw himself over the ledge.

Rourn had plunged a hundred-and-forty feet where he smashed face-first into the sand.

Healer Merrick had said the Twin warrior broke his neck on impact and passed from this world without torment.

Rourn abandoned him: no warrior partner, no confidant, no blood brother...no friend of worth.

Atticus gazed over the ledge and spat. “Coward!”

Sticky hot droplets splattered on the back of his neck. His head snapped up. Hovering yards above, a charcoal leather-skinned gargoyle flapped bat-like wings. Mustard-yellow saliva oozed from its open maw. It circled the tower, screeching like a banshee—a scavenger searching for its next meal.

“Come to me, fiend!” Atticus grasped the pistol in his leg holster, but hesitated. Not that way, he thought.

With rawhide gloved fingers, he snatched the pearl encrusted hilt of his sheathed short sword, freeing the blade from its scabbard.

The beast swooped. Talons reached for his scalp, but Atticus ducked and rolled. He bent his knees and thrust forward.

The gargoyle dodged to his right flank, evading Atticus’ strike.

Atticus cursed. Then repented for the swearing, and muttered a quick prayer for aid against the foe.

The creature took to the sky. It hissed and screeched. The gargoyle’s ruby eyes glowed as it descended.

Atticus scrambled, but the creature proved cunning and slammed into his chest like a sack of iron ingots. A crushing pain burst from under his breast.

Damnation!

A claw grazed his torso, slashing his shirt open. The padding beneath shielded his belly from serious injury.

Enraged, Atticus hurled his sword upward. The blade's tip struck the gargoyle's underbelly, but ricocheted off the scaly hide before clattering to the floor. Hissing, it swooped down, landing on the battlement a few yards away.

Through gritted teeth, Atticus inhaled a painful breath.

Lotus-eaters alive! A cracked rib.

He spat bile and snatched the pistol from his leg holster. The gargoyle crept closer. Rancid smoke blew from its black nostrils. Lines creased Atticus' forehead. Nose scrunched, he stifled a gag. All Paladins were trained to use firearms as a last resort.

He leveled the gun, steadied his hand.

Then he tossed the gun aside.

He flexed his fingers and stepped toward the creature. Ruby eyes flashed bright, while leathery lips stretched to reveal rows of sharp gleaming fangs.

Atticus loosened his muscles. Facing the creature but turned slightly sideways, he assumed a staggered stance. His hands glided into position near his chest and abdomen, finger tips slanted and partially spaced. "Let's end this, you bone-sucking fiend!"

The gargoyle lumbered forward, tilting its head back, mouth gaping, screeching vehemently.

Atticus swept past the gargoyle's right flank, and immediately whirled his right boot, planting the heel harshly into the creature's backside. A loud reverberating crack, and the gargoyle staggered forward. While the creature still remained dazed, Atticus dashed to its opposite flank where he delivered another high kick to the creature's broad, bony shoulder blade.

When the pathetic creature slashed out in blind rage, Atticus sidestepped the strikes. He continued keeping his distance as the frenzied creature assailed the air in front of itself with wild abandonment. The glowing red eyes had lost much of their previous fervor.

Taking advantage of the creature's loss of focus, Atticus raced to his sword lying a few feet away. Just as he gripped the hilt, the creature lunged forward with outstretched arms and hooked claws. With his side facing the lunging beast, and no time to reposition his stance, Atticus speared his sword forward and slid toward the creature's deadly embrace.

The tip of the blade pierced into the creature's throat, tender and soft; its arms went limp, and its whole body writhed, convulsing, before vanishing into a column of orange flames, leaving Atticus standing with sword held in mid-air.

From the far side of the tower, echoed the sounds of clapping hands, measured and slow.

With one hand, Atticus braced himself on the wall, and with his other, he palmed his aching chest. “Did I pass the test?”

Elder Cai crossed the battlement, his steps graceful and swift. A black robe flowed around him. Green leather pants hugged his nimble legs; a black leather vest with pearl-laden straps crisscrossed his chest. From each ear dangled a pearl earring—the symbolic gem of the Paladins. Elder Cai held a glass ball. Within it, lightning flickered and the tiny shadow of the gargoyle faded from view.

The dry desert wind carried the foul remnants of the gargoyle’s stench far into the endless desert.

“Superb, my boy! It is good that you resisted the use of the firearm. My cautions about relying too much on guns and bullets have embedded into your psyche; I can see that for certain. And your remarkable display of the *Palakration* martial arts will be more lethal than any modern weapon.”

“Yes, Elder, but it would have been so much easier to have just blown the fiend away with the gun.”

“But we are not akin to those Paladin factions who worship technology over innate skill. We can learn much from the strength of nature and the environment, and rely on its awesome and ancient knowledge, and not the marvels of the nuclear age.”

“My skills are superior but...” Wincing, Atticus holstered his sword and pistol, then cradled his upper torso. “I was a fool to relinquish my blade in a fit of rage.”

“You maintain an air of mourning for the death of Rourn that continues to obscure your judgment.”

“He was like my real brother, as you are like my real father. How can I simply forget that he is gone?”

“Because it is your duty to do so! Now get up and act the Twin warrior that you are. We must continue your training.” He extended a slender arm, palm up.

“Yes, sir.” Atticus grunted, his arm wrapped around his chest. “The gargoyle was more punishing than the vampyre you had us battle last week.”

If Rourn was still alive Elder Cai would have sent three gargoyles, and both of them would have yearned for a fourth.

“Do you think your adversaries will be merciful? If you cannot handle a gargoyle or a little soreness then how can you ever expect to face the Beast?”

“I will be prepared if the Beast ever comes.”

“He is coming soon, Atticus. Very soon. Rourn knew this, and so do I. You must be prepared.”

Atticus held his head high. “Then, I am,” he said with confidence. “If it is true that this Beast is coming, then I shall kill him in name of holy vengeance!”

“Revenge,” Elder Cai said the word wryly, “is possibly the least important reason for stopping the Beast. But go now, seek a healer, and prepare for the graduation ceremony later this evening. And we will hold a warrior’s funeral for Rourn tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir.” Atticus bowed before stumbling toward the mechanical lift.



Chapter Seventeen



CINDER DETESTED POLITICS and drama. It was the way of their people never to get involved in ridiculous things. But when the Dark Trinity appeared to him, he could not refuse, for he liked his head on his shoulders, which was the least of the promises the abomination had threatened him with.

As instructed, he entered the woods right before sunset. Just as the Dark Trinity had said, two men came trekking through the forest at exactly 4:43. Both men wore camo with orange hunter's vest.

Cinder stepped out from behind the wide oak, obstructing the two men's path.

"What the hell is this?" the one named Chris asked. "You're that freak from the bar."

Cinder puffed blue smoke from the tip of his thick cigar. "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,

But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep."

"Who the heck is this?" Chris' companion asked.

"He's nobody but a dead asshole," Chris said, lifting his rifle.

Cinder blew icy rings of smoke from his lips. The barrel of the rifle turned to brittle ice. When the trigger was squeezed the weapon shattered into millions of pieces with a sound of nothing more than a quiet *poof*.

"I'm getting the fuck outta here!" Chris' companion shouted as he fled away. Chris remained, holding a small scrap of the rifle's stock.

"I'm sorry man. I'm really sorry." He backed away. "I was high as shit last night and didn't mean to harm that bitch. I swear."

Cinder scowled. "To ask if there is some mistake. There only other sound's the sweep of easy wind and downy flake." The tree directly behind Chris became encased in scales of ice. Chris' back clung to the frozen trunk.

"Stop," Chris cried out. "Please don't, man. Please don't do this."

White steam billowed around Chris and seconds later his frozen corpse fell to the forest floor.

Cinder knelt by the man's icy blue body, white mist rising off the brittle flesh. "Between the woods and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year." Cinder blew out another smoke ring. "Robert Frost."



HEADING SOUTH ON I45, Isaac sped toward a restaurant called Roxy's, the location where Galmoria had said he could find *The Beloved*.

The low-fuel light illuminated. He hit the blinker and exited the highway. Pulling alongside pump Two, Isaac turned the vehicle off. A bell jingled when he opened the door to the Shell station. Approaching the counter, scrunching his nose at the pine scented car fresheners, a grossly inaccurate attempt at the fragrance of nature, he slid his wallet from the breast pocket of his dress shirt. "I'm going to pump sixty dollars-worth of gas and you're going to charge me two dollars and two cents." His yellow eyes fixed upon the long-haired clerk.

The boy blinked. "Two dollars and two cents."

Isaac handed the cash to the clerk while giving him a curt nod.

"You have a nice day, sir," the clerk said.

Diseased mortal, my day is of no concern to you, Isaac thought. *Upon finding 'The Beloved' I shall leave this forsaken place and never return.*

This land known as Texas was as tormenting as his desert planet home world with two suns. Though centuries ago, his mind recalled a lush jungle inhabited by many anthropomorphic beings, but none as mighty as himself, the sole Geminus, King of the Beasts.

Two teenage cubs approached. One put a hand on Isaac's shoulder. "Hey dawg, got a smoke?"

He brushed the paw from his silk shirt. "You would do well to keep your germ-ridden paws to yourself." Isaac waved the bothersome cubs away. The human teenage offspring were most irritating. Isaac would have killed them and gnawed on their bones if he didn't have a mission for Galmoria to complete. *Perhaps, he thought, after my quest for Mother is fulfilled, I will ruin this land of Texas before departing.*

Across the two-lane highway, a hag in a nightgown and slippers entered the Fiesta Mart. Her body reeked from foul odor.

Disgusting peasants.

With morbid fascination, Isaac watched as the crone passed a younger female, less than three decades old. A wisp of delicious musk straddled the warm summer breeze.

A new pungent aroma replaced the old hag's stench.

A whelp!

Her pudgy arms gripped two sacks of groceries. A rose-colored blouse clung to her stocky frame, barely concealing her pot-belly. Cotton black shorts reached just past her knees. Short coffee-colored hair lay matted against her head.

A white light flashed in Isaac's eyes. Every muscle in his body stiffened. Paralyzed and blinded, Isaac threw back his head and released a guttural scream,

a fierce shriek conveying both laughter and immense joy.

“What the hell, man!” One of the cubs fled toward a side street. Mouth gaped, complexion pale; his friend chased after him.

Isaac sniffed the air. The familiar scent of a female Geminus electrified his senses. After centuries of waiting, he had finally found his twin.

And nothing would stand in his way of fusing with her.



Chapter Eighteen



CHEERS, APPLAUSE AND chatter erupted from inside Eagle Hall, a brick building centered amongst all other structures in the Paladin compound. The aroma of fresh cooked meats, vegetables, and home-baked fruity desserts floated from the Festive Chamber.

Wrapped in a ceremonial green cloak speckled with pearls, Atticus stood outside Eagle Hall, adjusting the gold cinch around his waist. The pillar candles at the hall's threshold bewitched him, tunneling his consciousness into dark and isolated despair.

For seventeen years he had lived, studied and trained, learning the sacred ways and rites of the Paladins under the Order of Abel. He had yearned for the day he would be recognized as an honorable Selector, a prestigious Knight of the Order. But this day was always meant to be shared with his Twin chosen warrior, Rourn. Without him, it was nothing more than a depressing reminder of his loss.

Atticus took a deep breath, his posture straight and rigid. He would do the Order proud. There was no other option. If the prophesied Beast came, as Elder Cai claimed it would, then it would perish at the end of his blade. And because he had been adequately trained by the wisest of the Elders, Atticus knew he possessed the strength, might, heart and soul of a warrior more than capable of slaying any evil that dared present itself to this world.

He was after all, the best, of the best, of the best. The self-indulgent jest hardly brought a smile to his face this time.

Lucid or drunk, Elder Cai believed he was ready to face any challenge. But what of the Dark Trinity that he'd spoken about yesterday? Elder Cai claimed Rourn had spoken in depth with this mysterious spirit that spoke of the future, and doom, and courses of action that had to be taken now, in present day. But was it all a figment of Elder Cai's imagination, concocted by the gypsy's potent brandy?

A clacking noise stirred him from his mental woes. A band of Junior Cadets, equipped with wooden swords, battled ferociously, chasing after imaginary wargs. Atticus' focus drew to two boys lunging at each other and laughing with each cross of their weapons. Their images faded, replaced by a young Atticus and Rourn. Over a decade ago, they had slain their share of wargs, griffons, and their arch enemy, Snarlith the Bad.

From behind, the wind carried the sweet tangy scent of Elder Cai's favorite cordial.

The Elder laid hands on Atticus' shoulders. "You have worked diligently and are worthy of this honor. Yet, you let the troubles of the recent past still burden you."

Atticus turned to face his mentor. "I will do what is asked of me, but I cannot help but feel that this honor does not belong to me anymore without Rourn. We should be here together."

"Rourn is dead. You are not. He took his life for a greater purpose, so do not squander yours, and make his sacrifice in vain."

"All in the compound mourn the loss of the other Twin while I mourn the loss of a friend."

Elder Cai shook his head. "The angels are like the Fates. They weave our destinies at the spur of the moment. Never forget we are but specks in this universe and the lightest of winds can alter our lives monumentally. Those are Rourn's own words written in his journal."

"He'll be condemned to Purgatory, won't he?"

"I am but a simple man and I cannot presume to know what happens to any of us after we lose the struggle with this mortal coil." He gestured to the band of warriors fighting to banish the phantom wolves. "You possess the same heart and spirit as they, but the days of fighting imaginary foes are no more for you."

"Will you tell me more about the Dark Trinity who had spoken to Rourn? Is it a nefarious spirit that corrupted my brother?"

From a golden flask hung around his neck, Elder Cai gulped and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He wrapped his arm around Atticus and ushered him down the stone walkway. "We should not speak of that matter right now, my boy. Come, for tonight is a time for joy and celebration." He winked. "And tonight we will consume a great deal of brandy." Elder Cai pressed through the double oak doors. "We must delay no longer."

Atticus followed him into the Festive Chamber.

Green and silver tinsel adorned the sandstone room, elegant cobwebs weaved by a divine spider. Brass sconces, mounted high on the four-story wall, shimmered from the flicker of torch fire rather than the desert sun. His mentor walked him toward the stairs leading to the altar carved from red rock. With a nod, Elder Cai disappeared into the crowd, shaking hands with other current and yet-to-be Knights.

Prefect Warren Cauldrick, the towering Elder with bronze skin, patted Atticus on the shoulder and pulled him into a firm hug. "Blessings, Sir Atticus. We do hope that you are prepared for the honors that are to be bestowed upon

you.” When Elder Cauldrick broke the embrace, Atticus clamped straight arms to his side. He bent at the hip, gliding his hands along on his thighs.

Prefect Cauldrick handed him a package wrapped in brown paper. Inside was a velvet green pouch inscribed with his name in gold cursive font: *A prayer satchel*. Atticus thanked him with a smile and nod.

Prefect Cauldrick approached the pulpit and snapped his fingers. The hundreds of people packed in the room hushed.

“Thank you. We gather not only for festive foods, nor the finest gypsy brandy, nor the splendid decor, but to pay our respects to the fallen champion Rourn Immanuelin. May his soul delight the angels; may he forever watch over us from atop the oldest mountains of pearl...” His voice trembled. He smiled and continued. “...where the kingdom of Heaven awaits us all.”

He panned a somber look over the crowd. Sniffles and sobs broke the silence.

A chill touched Atticus. Would Rourn watch over him?

Prefect Cauldrick lifted a hand, silencing the crowd. “We do not gather here solely to mourn the loss of Rourn. The Order of Abel strikes forward against this dark hour to bring forth another shining light. I hereby bestow a great honor upon the surviving Twin: Cadet Atticus.” He offered his hand. “Congratulations, I now declare you Selector Atticus, Knight Of The Order Of Abel and bless thee.”

The eruption of booming cheers and shrill whistles shook Atticus to his core. So easily they forget the fallen and blindly ushered in their next holy symbol.

Prefect Cauldrick served as the shepherd of a flock!

“Come up here, Selector,” Prefect Cauldrick said. “Assume your honorary position beside me.”

Without a word. Atticus whirled and strolled away from the altar.

“Selector Atticus!”

Once more the crowd fell silent.

“Atticus!”

As the heavy back door closed behind Atticus, Prefect Cauldrick’s voice echoed among the muted chamber. “Son!”

Outside, Atticus leaned against the door and sighed. The roar of a bonfire reaching for the purple sky caught his attention. With determined and wide strides, he approached and shucked his robe. He tossed it into the fire. Hungry flames engulfed the luxurious fabric. Black smoke billowed, blotting out the stars.

A gust of dry wind rustled the agave scattered amongst the span of the desert. Beneath the dim illumination of the street lanterns, he plodded along the

footpath. Loose gravel crunched beneath his boots. Rounding the corner of Eagle Hall, he found himself locked in Elder Cai's steely gaze.

Standing amongst a patch of Yucca plants, Elder Cai shook his head. "You disappoint me."

Atticus bowed his head. "I'm no Selector. And most definitely no longer a Twin. Not even a knight."

"Then who are you?"

"Perhaps I should be retrained as a leatherworker, or a blacksmith, or even a basket weaver."

Elder Cai held a fist against his mouth and coughed a laugh. "Basket weaving? Not while I draw breath." He held a finger up and paced. "This just might be a good sign. You have not let your new position as lead warrior go to your head. You will make a fine knight."

"It's the 21st century, Elder! What can knights and Paladins offer in this modern age of military machinery, biochemical weapons, and digital warfare? We've nothing but swords, faith and a pinch of the arcane."

"You've still much to learn about the forces of destruction this Order has fought against for ages. Without us, Atticus, there would be no modern society as we know it. Do not speak so lightly of swords, faith and magic."

"What if I choose not to follow this path?"

"Few are ever ready to follow their path. You must take a leap of faith as your first step."

"The Order and the Templar Court are prepared to trust in me...alone...without my Twin? Are you all so willing to play with madness?"

"The better question is: are you prepared for the repercussions of not playing with madness? Because if you choose not to accept that which lay before you, then you do so at the peril of all humanity." The Elder's head cocked, eyes narrow with curiosity. "Do you fear you cannot defeat the Beast?"

"No! I will shred him. I swear it so. Rourn's death will be avenged."

"I see." The Elder walked along the stone path. Atticus followed. "Rourn did not relinquish this burden on you alone without proper cause. Accepting it for vengeful desires is irrelevant. However, refusing it entirely would be catastrophic. There is a larger scheme existing between the stars of this world and a million others. Destinies have been foretold, Atticus. The weight of universes fall upon your shoulder and the shoulders of others that you will soon encounter. So, if you must pursue the Beast for revenge then so be it—as long as you pursue the Beast!"

"Others? What others?"

Elder Cai scratched his chin. “Roun spoke to me about others. You will soon meet them and they will become your allies against the forces that threaten all worlds.”

A massive shadow crawled over the compound as a monstrous storm cloud obscured the evening sun.

Twin lightning bolts struck through the black cloud leaving a strange symbol stained in its midst. The wind carried the foul stench of ash and ammonia. Atticus and Elder Cai gawked at the archaic symbol—β’—emblazoned against the black storm cloud.

Glancing to the eastern sky, Elder Cai shook his head. “It has begun...”

“What has begun?” Atticus asked.

The old man palmed his forehead and sighed. “The Time of Reckoning the Beast.”



RARELY DID GEMINUS encounter another Geminus, especially a mate. But Isaac instinctively recognized the scent of a female whelp.

Darkness smoked from his rigid body and rose into the sky, eclipsing the evening sun. Twin lightning bolts split the blackened clouds. Claps of thunder rumbled the earth. Street lamps splintered, shedding piney shards. Power lines ripped, snapping like excited serpents, dragging businesses and homes into shells of gloom; while frisky sparks swarmed the streets.

People scurried from their cars to seek shelter within the convenience store. Across the highway, a mother held a toddler against her chest as she dashed from the parking lot and into the Fiesta Mart.

Do these cretins actually believe their inferior edifices can yield shelter? Not even the gods can stand between me and my mate.

For centuries, Isaac had crossed myriad worlds without ever detecting a female. Since male Geminus would slaughter their male and female cubs, and the cubs of other Geminus, their survival depended on scattering their offspring across the numerous cosmic planes where they’d be hidden.

A roar swelled in Isaac’s throat and erupted more savagely than a tormented lion.

Hurricane-force winds coiled around him. Paper and debris pummeled vehicles and buildings. Windows shattered. Swarms of flying glass tore into light poles and clawed at brick walls.

Isaac bolted across the highway. Brakes squealing, a farm truck swerved and narrowly missed him.

“Crazy bastard!” the driver shouted, shaking a hairy arm.

A gust of wind swept across the road, tumbling the truck like a clump of weeds. With a thunderous crack the vehicle landed upside down in a ditch.

The truck burst into sizzling flames. A wheel rolled onto the highway and a charred door skidded across the grass. The groaning fire overtook the yelping driver.

Howling winds returned to Isaac, cocooning him like a mother to a newborn babe. He strode across the supermarket's parking lot, barren of life except for her, his Geminus twin. All the mortals cowered in their puny structures. At a whim he could've razed all of them and slaughtered the inhabitants; but he'd achieved his goal.

He was alone with his twin.



“TIME OF RECKONING?” Atticus eyed the ominous sky. “The Beast is here?”

“He is in Texas.”

“Texas? How do you know this?”

“Rourn has foreseen it through the aid of the Dark Trinity.” He pointed to the sky where the emblazoned symbol had faded from view. “That was the sign that the Geminus are among us. The Stag has found his whelp. Its appearance in the eastern sky indicates Texas. If we don't stop him from turning her to vixen, the ramifications will prove more catastrophic than the obliteration of—”

“Sodom and Gomorrah,” Atticus said. “The first and last known fusion of a Geminus.”

“Correct.” Elder Cai said. “You did pay attention in your historical studies. Sadly, we lack much of the understanding of the universe that our ancestral brethren possessed to defeat the ancient beings.” He sighed. “Fear not your worth and skill. You are a master swordsman and have begun to explore and tap the potential granted to you by the traces of your sacred lineage.”

“So it's my skill with a sword and my bloodline that has deemed me as the world's champion?” Atticus scoffed. “Isn't that a lunatic's notion that only one warrior is to defeat the greatest threat of all mankind?”

“Come walk with me, boy.” Elder Cai continued along the stone pads forming a path. “As your Elder, I can officially declare your first orders. You are only to track the Beast, discover what ill-gotten reason it has for being here, and learn where his lair is located.”

“A reconnaissance mission? That is my first assignment as a champion?”

“This was never a battle meant to be fought by one solitary warrior. Though the prophesied might have the Order and the Court believe otherwise. Once

you've determined where the Beast resides, then you will lead a group of warriors into the final battle."

"But without a Twin, do I stand a chance?"

"You will have to take the offerings you have at your disposal now and carry them on your journey. But if the spirit that Rourn trusted his destiny with is correct, then there is another...another who is your Twin."

Atticus stopped, blood and muscles petrified. "Rourn was my Twin! There can be no other."

"So the Order and Court believed," Elder Cai said. "But even they are subject to error."

A chill seized Atticus' core. "I don't understand, Elder. You are my mentor, teacher, and father, yet I cannot believe you deny that Rourn was the other Twin."

The pack of Junior Cadets ran around and through the two of them, chasing an imaginary warg. A boy broke away from the ranks, waving and thrusting his sword as he approached Atticus.

"Selector Atticus," the auburn-haired boy bowed deep. "I am overwhelmed to meet you, the appointed Twin warrior." The boy looked up, his face bright with admiration. "Will you be my teacher someday?"

Atticus bit his lower lip, tilted his head. He knelt on one knee. "I would ask your name?"

"Junior Cadet Eric."

"Show me the Striking Arrow stance, Junior Cadet Eric."

With flushed cheeks, he nodded. He put his left foot forward. His right leg extended behind. As he whirled and thrust his arm, he stumbled.

"Rotten roots!" the boy cried out. "I have failed you."

Atticus smiled and patted his head. "Keep training. You'll reach the Tower of Tribulations before long."

The boy bowed before running to find his battling allies.

Rotten roots indeed.

"Come with me," Elder Cai said "I have a surprise." After a short walk past a row of mills and shops, they approached a dusky stone structure with no windows or doors.

"You have led me to a supply silo?" Atticus asked.

Elder Cai placed his palms on the wall and slid his hands along the rigid surface, slow ritualistic circles. The wall glided to the right, rumbling as stone scraped against stone. A dark chamber was revealed.

Atticus said, "I thought you were supposed to say 'Open Sesame'?"

Elder Cai snorted. “What garbage have they made you read?” He stepped inside, torches sparked with flame. They traveled a long thin corridor and came upon a large storage bay. Elder Cai swept his arm over the hood of an orange three-wheeled vehicle. “My gift to you.”

Standing in the threshold, Atticus scowled. “It’s not much bigger than a scooter.”

“The vehicle runs on electricity. It reaches speeds up to one hundred and eighty-five MPH and can go five hundred miles on a single charge. Is it not splendid!”

Atticus’ mouth fell open.

“You are without word,” Elder Cai said. “I am delighted.”

“I am to hunt the most feared cosmic being in existence—a beast of which we know little about,” He thumbed, “driving that?” He threw his hands up. “Screaming locusts! Has the Court no Corvettes, or Ferrari’s. I will even settle for a DeLorean.”

Elder Cai frowned. “You should be so fortunate that gratitude was not a subject of study. For you would not rank well.”

“My sincerest apologies.” Atticus bowed at the waist. “Facing a demon of such caliber as the Geminus, does not excuse my desire to do so with such little regard of Mother Earth. If the Order is to have me save the world in a souped-up scooter, I shall endeavor to do so.” Strolling around the compact automobile, Atticus mumbled, “Basket weaving is looking better.”

“Decades have weathered my hearing, boy. What was it you said?”

“I said...casket thieving ghouls are drinking my liquor.”

“Yes, indeed. Pesky, them ghouls can be.” Elder Cai said with a wink. “There is one more thing.” He fished a key from his cloak and unlocked a compartment built into the wall. “Prefect Cauldrick wanted to present this to you at the ceremony tonight, but I wanted to give it to you in person. Considering how the ceremony went that was a wise decision.”

Atticus approached the hood of the car as Elder Cai laid a long scabbard down.

“A Selector’s Silver long sword!” Atticus said. The lavish silver cross guard that tapered toward the sheathed blade jutted from the scabbard. The hilt was cast in gleaming shades of silver and intricately etched patterns, the pommel set with a Paladin emblem featuring a four-point star with two circles cut around it. Each point represented Mind, Body, Heart and Soul—the Glorious seal. Circlets represented Heaven and Earth. Tiny emerald stones were embedded amongst the iron grip.

Atticus lifted the blade. The tip of the blade featured an etching of an artistic star.

“Now this is a spectacular gift!” Atticus raised the blade high overhead. “By this blade alone, the Beast shall know death!”



A WHELP. UNBELIEVABLE. Isaac licked his lips.

She walked toward him. The whites of her eyes flashed yellow then faded back to white.

Isaac's breathing deepened. *Feel me, my mate. Come to me.*

Her head tilted and her eyes narrowed. When he stopped before her, she dropped the plastic sacks from her arms. A package of juice boxes toppled from a bag along with a bottle of Strawberry Shortcake bubble bath.

A sweet moan slipped from her mouth. She leaned inward and tucked her face into the nape of his neck. Deeply she inhaled and sighed. Then, pulling away, she circled him before pressing her nose into the center of his back. She dropped to her knees, slid his slacks up and pushed her face against his ankle. She performed the ritual of memorizing and revering in his scent with instinctive perfection.

When she stood and faced him, the pungent fragrance of sulfur and ammonia—combined with the tangy aroma of her sex—consumed the last of his resolve. A primal lust compounded in his groin.

His arms encircled her waist. Barbs protruded from his tongue, barbs he used to lash her cheek. Blood poured down her face.

She wrapped herself around him and nuzzled the side of her face against his chest. A crimson tribute of blood stained his yellow shirt.

“I don't know how, but I know what you are.”

Geminus blood and essence surged through her aura, but she knew not what she was other than the carnal instincts she possessed. A perfectly hidden cub.

She will require my unwavering protection until her instincts are fully awakened.

Isaac lashed kisses down the bridge of her nose. At the base of her neck, his barbed tongue branded her slick-with-sweat skin, carving the numeral two in their archaic language. He pulled her against him. Their separate auras swirled from their bodies and merged, fusing him and her as a one-soul being. The whites of her eyes morphed yellow as a warmth touched his own.

Isaac growled, “For every breath I expound, you shall devour.”

In a strained whisper, she said, “For every breath I release, you shall ingest.”

“I’ve grown weary of stalking worlds for centuries without you, my eternal mistress.” Isaac sealed his lips over hers. Tongues tangled. Teeth scraped. He tasted her lower lip. Blood trailed down her chin. His tongue savored the metallic liquid pooled on her salty skin. “My Geminus. My love. My twin.”

Face flushed, breath coming in pants, she tore at the waistband of his slacks but he stayed her hand. “What do the mortals here call you?”

“Lynn.”

He palmed her cheek where he’d scraped her skin with his tongue. “You have much to learn Lynn, and I, Isaac, your eternal master, will teach you everything you need to survive, but you must be patient. Now is not the time to seal our destinies with a mating. We need the blessing of our Mother and now that we’ve begun the Fusing our predators will sense our presence. They will hunt us.”

When Lynn tore Isaac’s dress shirt open and nibbled on his chest, he pushed her to arm’s length. “Nothing will stop me from protecting you, but you must follow my direction without question or hesitation.”

She let out a shaky breath and held his stare, the conflict within her evident in her rapid breaths. He felt her frustration and lust as if it was his own, because now they were fused and shared everything, pain and joy alike.

She hung her head. “Command me, my master.”

Isaac put a finger under her chin and lifted her head until their eyes met. From the ground, he retrieved a juice box and crushed it in his fist. Red liquid trailed down his forearm. “Your existence as a mortal is no more.”



Chapter Nineteen



FROM BEHIND, SCOOTER loomed over Amy as she unlocked the trailer door. She threw a look of impatience over her shoulder but Scooter just grinned, shifting his weight. He had harassed her, begging to get a better look at the dagger, but she insisted he wait until they got home.

In the kitchen, Amy placed the carton of worms on the counter next to a portable FM radio playing a local country station. She heaved a sigh as Scooter peered over her shoulder and inside her purse. She removed the strange weapon.

A fish chomping at bait, Scooter snatched the dagger. He let the cloth fall and stared, mesmerized at the archaic weapon and lifted the blade like a scrawny, young Conan. “Incredible.” He turned it, running his fingers along a rope of gold intertwined on the handle. “Strange lettering.”

Amy leaned closer to get a better look. “What do you mean?”

“It seems to be a runic alphabet popular in the 7th century. And I don’t think it’s a replica either.” He turned the dagger again. Written in modern day English, with a crude flair, was the name TOBIAS. Scooter glared at her. “A friend of yours?”

Amy tucked a lock of hair behind her ears. She grabbed a pitcher from the refrigerator and gave a nervous huff. “Nobody I know.” She poured a glass of tea. As she sipped, she eyed Scooter over the rim of the glass. He quirked his brows in question. Coughing, she spilled tea from her mouth and wiped spittle from her chin.

She took the strange artifact from Scooter’s grasp, whirled and strode toward the living room. “You know Abe. He’s always messing with me.”

Scooter followed her. “But where on earth would he have gotten something like that?”

“Where does Abe get half the junk he collects? Probably an auction or the scrapyard.” If only she believed that.

Amy plopped on the couch. The dagger balanced on her lap. With shaky fingers she gripped the sofa cushion.

Scooter sat beside her. “You okay?”

My God, Tobias. You are real. She palmed her forehead.

Scooter grasped her hand. “Are you about to faint?”

She shook her head and pulled her hand from his grasp. “I’m fine.”

So she wasn't losing her mind. The thought should be comforting, but the alternative meant a *Beast* might really be coming for her.

Tobias? You there?

But her mind remained quiet. Her hands trembled.

Scooter turned and grabbed a vial from the end table. "Here."

She took it from him and sipped, grateful she had more in the house. She leaned back against the cushion and closed her eyes. The black herbal mash scratched at her throat, she swallowed several more times. *I need to know. Who are you? What is a Dark Trinity?*

A distant crackling sound filled her head, like paper being crinkled, or perhaps crackling of a campfire.

A gift. The voice was abrupt, but clear.

Amy smiled at the sound of Tobias' deep voice. His random visits to her mind were becoming familiar and she got worried when he didn't respond right away. *Thank you. It's remarkable.*

"Can I keep it?" Scooter asked, reaching out and patting the hilt.

Amy shook her head. "I think I should hold onto it."

Give the dagger to the boy.

You said it was a gift. Amy sent the telepathic message to Tobias.

Never said the gift was yours to keep. The boy must have the blade.

Amy nodded.

Scooter carefully took the weapon. "Zack will have a nerdgasm when he sees this!"

Are you sure about this, Tobias?

The crackling fire faded and her mind fell quiet.

Scooter waved Amy on, pointing the dagger like an officer of the cavalry.

"Come and play a session of my new war game." he ordered.

She locked all the windows and the front door.

Harsh laughter sounded in her mind. *Locks will not keep you safe from the Beasts.*

I don't see you doing anything about it except giving Scooter a sharp, pointy knife.

In my world the boy would have fathered three offspring and killed a dozen men at his age.

Kids here do that too...if they're in the Aryan or Tango Blast gang!

If you do not trust me then all the nightmares you attributed to vengeful rats will become your world's reality.

What do you know about those nightmares?

They were not nightmares. They were visions of mine. Visions of possible futures that may still become.

“Are you coming?” Scooter called.

Amy reluctantly followed him down the hall.

The easy-going sound of classic rock filtered from his bedroom. She stopped at the doorway.

Do you know how much stress those nightmares...visions caused me?

Your days of stress are inconsequential to my greater goals.

You're a jerk sometimes, you know that?

Scooter laid the dagger on his bed. He began placing small pewter soldiers on a wooden table decorated with a tiny scaled-down forest, actual rocks taken from their driveway and plastic highways. “I’m setting up the armies for combat now. Some have swords and magic, and others have assault rifles and SMGs.”

Amy leaned against the door jamb. Once again her mind had gone quiet, signaling that Tobias had left the building. “Aren’t you a little old to be playing with action figures?”

“Action figures?” Scooter scowled. “These are genuine metal miniatures that I diligently painted myself.”

Amy palmed her heart, feigning interest. “Pardon me. My mistake.”

He grabbed a figurine. “This knight has 10d Confidence and is equipped with a 2d8 Valiant Scythe that can obliterate an army of dread goblins in one roll. Hardly a children’s game.”

Amy pushed from the doorway and picked up a tiny knight. She examined it quickly before placing it beside the figurine Scooter had just held.

Scooter shook his head. “No. That’s an Imperial Gunsmith. He can’t move that many squares away from his original formation. This is more complicated than you realize. Allow me to explain the—”

Amy’s phone rang. “Hello, sweetheart,” she answered while leaving Scooter’s bedroom. She poked her head back into the room. “As intriguing as this sounds, I have to take this call.”

“There’s been a slight setback in the plans,” Shane said. “The Jalopy blew a gasket. We’re about two hours out of Pecos. Mechanic said it won’t be fixed until tomorrow morning.”

“I got some worms. We going fishing when you get home?” *If the Beast hasn’t eaten me by then.* Should she tell Shane about the voice and the dagger?

“You know I’ll be itching to take you fishing.”

A flash of white light suddenly lit up the entire house. Thunder boomed, causing the trailer to shudder. Amy braced herself against the wall to prevent from falling over. “Oh my God.”

“Damn,” Shane said. “I think we’re having a mild earthquake.”

“Same here,” Amy said. “You think we’re experiencing the same earthquake?”

“Maybe. Got some freaky ass lightning.”

“I saw the lightning too! But you're hundreds of miles away. How could we be watching the same storm?”

“Great,” Shane said. “The world is ending and I’m stranded in East Bum Fuck with Birch. This day just keeps getting better and better.”

“I haven’t seen any more lightning and the grounds not shaking anymore. Maybe whatever it was is over.”

“Stay put until we know for sure.”

“That works for me.”

“I’ll see if there’s any reports about the storm on the news. My battery is low and all I had was a car charger so I got to say audios, babe.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. I love you.”

“Later.” As the phone went silent, darkness swallowed the trailer.

“Amy?” Scooter called from behind her. “The power went out.”

Amy entered the master bedroom. She threw open Shane’s closet and took out one of his hunting rifles: Remington 30-30.

I will protect you when the time comes.

Amy shoved a cartridge into the rifle. *That’s comforting but I’m still gonna sleep with the gun.*



Chapter Twenty



SHANE STOOD ON THE street corner in front of T & T Towing. Across from him was an Applebees. To the left a coffee shop. Down the street to the right was El Salvador's Cantina. Without a word or a second glance, Shane and Birch walked east toward the smell of jalapenos and grilled meat.

"I heard they found an empty pill bottle in Kevin's truck," Birch said.

"I know a lot of guys on the rig end up in the gutter, but I wouldn't have pegged Kevin as one of 'em. I know he had shit going on, but it doesn't make sense."

"Just a matter of time before we all end up like him."

The job sucked but Shane would never let it get the better of him. "During my two year tour of Iraq we only lost two guys in our unit. Two years on this goddamn rig and four men have died. Remember that kid, Rick, who got sliced in half by the steel cable? I never saw that much friendly blood in the desert."

"The kid didn't follow procedure," Birch said.

"Bastards just threw him at the job. Not a lick of training," Shane added.

Sounds of mariachi music grew louder as they neared the cantina.

Shane opened the colorful glass door. Cool air blasted from inside the dimly lit restaurant.

The uniform of mini-skirts and low-cut tops gave the place a Hooters feel, but families with babies and children doodling on kid's menus suggested different.

From a corner booth, Shane moved two dirty mugs to a neighboring table.

Birch slid onto the cushion. "I'm not going back to the oil field."

Shane slid across from him. "You're kidding right?"

"The job's not meant for a family man. I'm gonna go home, hug my wife and play Xbox all night long with Matt."

"Never dawned on you until now to play Xbox all night with your son? But your co-worker dies and you're suddenly father and husband of the year?"

"It's natural when someone you know dies, to assess your own life."

"What happened to Kevin doesn't make me question my own life."

"Maybe it should."

A waitress approached. She had cropped black hair, a modern-day Audrey Hepburn look. One of the straps of her red bra hung rebelliously off her

shoulder. But Shane couldn't help noticing that her eyebrows looked like streaked charcoal.

"Howdy boys. I'm Lizzy. Can I start you guys off with a couple beers?"

"Bud," Shane said. "Bottle, not draft."

"Modelo Negra," Birch said.

Lizzy hurried off.

"Bud? Broaden your horizons," Birch said. "Mexican beer when at a Mexican establishment."

"You drink your foreign piss. I'll stick with the King of beers."

"Fine. Stick with your watered-down cheap beer. Leave the real beer for the men." Birch flexed his scrawny arm.

"I'll show you who the pussy is."

When Lizzy started back their way. Shane gave her a lazy smile and a wink.

She set the frothy mugs down. "You guys set to order?"

"Nachos," Shane said. "And your phone number."

"If I was that kind of girl, I'd love to." Her face flushed, playing coy as if she hadn't been fucked upside down and inside out before.

"We'll just take the nachos," Birch said.

Shane folded his arms against his chest and leaned back. "You're definitely that kind of girl."

With a strained smile, Lizzie scribbled in her notepad, ripped a page off and slid it across the table to Shane.

When she strode away the red skirt covering her chiseled ass swished like lava bubbling over hard stone. Shane glanced at the note where a phone number was written in cursive, girly print, along with a smiley face.

"You won't be happy 'til you screw things up with Amy, will you?"

Shane frowned. "I'm just fucking around. I got no intentions of calling that skank."

"Stop punishing yourself for Vicki's death and let it go."

Shane slammed his mug down. "Jesus, dude. What backwoods road did you take to get there?"

"You think you don't deserve happiness so you're always trying to fuck up everything good in your life." Birch shook his head. "So stick the number in your pocket, let Amy find it in the dirty laundry, then she'll dump your sorry ass. All because of the self-destructive guilt you inflict upon your life because of the accident."

"You want a quarter for that Freudian bullshit?" He slid the paper across the table. "Stick your psychoanalysis in her."



SITTING IN THE PASSENGER seat of Isaac's luxury sedan, Lynn pressed her face against the window. Silhouettes of cottonwood and cypress trees rushed past. In the distant shadows, a rabbit dashed as a copperhead struck; a thorny leaf fluttered from the rabbit's sudden departure, its thudding heart close to bringing on deadly shock. Exhaling, Lynn observed it all. Senses heightened, mind sharpened, and body vibrant, an awakening consumed her. It felt like Mother Nature, draped in exotic fig leaves and morning dew, had touched her soul, enchanting her with the spirit of a forest nymph.

In all her thirty-one years she'd lived sightless...soundless. But now the depths of the world flowed in torrents she'd never thought possible. Even the soft touch of cool moonlight tickled every inch of her skin. An urge to chase prey into the woods clutched her. Fingers gripped the door handle.

A savage impulse, but one born of natural instincts.

She glanced at Isaac. His short black hair was slicked back, the complexion of a rugged outdoorsman, and a face carved from raw beauty. Smokey colored brows arched over his dark copper eyes.

Without thinking she traced her fingers down his sports jacket, feeling the well-toned biceps. His muscles twitched.

Isaac turned the vehicle down her street. Her heart raced with warning. Since the moment she met Isaac, not once had she thought of her children or husband. Guilt, though mild, overcame her. Heat warmed her face. She palmed her cheeks, trying to cool her skin.

They pulled into her driveway. Lynn sucked in a hard breath.

After shifting to park, Isaac exited the car. He removed his shirt, shoes and slacks, placing them on the hood.

Lynn glanced at her modest ranch home. The porch light offered dim illumination for her aged deck. Parked on the right side of the house, the frontend of Joe's Harley glared at her like a chained guard dog, snarling with suspicion.

She tugged at the door handle.

It didn't budge.

Nude, Isaac stalked toward her front door. The jewel embedded in his chest flashed like an angry beacon.

Lynn glanced to the neighbor's houses and cringed. It was dusk, but not quite dark. If they glanced out their window they'd see Isaac, in all his glory and the brightly glowing stone. Her lips stretched into a grin. Peering down her blouse,

she palmed her own chest, wondering why she didn't possess a radiant gem anywhere on her body.

The porch creaked beneath Isaac's feet. The front door was flung open, and Joe's bare torso blocked the threshold.

Weren't her children in the house? How many did she have...two? Two human children...

She tried the door again. And again. Fear, confusion and anxiety raced through her. Gripping the handle tightly, she yanked.

It snapped off. Furiously, Lynn hurled the plastic handle behind her.

Joe looked up and down Isaac's naked body and scratched his bandanna covered scalp. "What the fuck is this?" He craned his neck to peer around Isaac. Lynn caught the filthy daggers in his dark gaze.

"Lynn is mine," Isaac said.

A three-foot tall boy child—Ben?—hovered near the waist of his stout father. "Daddy?"

"Not now," Joe said. "Go watch TV. Daddy's got to take care of something."

Tears pooled in Lynn's eyes as she watched the boy disappear into the house. She kicked at the windows. Pounding. Grunting. Clawing. Screeching.

Black fur suffused Isaac, his body contorting into a regal panther. Wings sprung from his shoulders and folded against his backbone.

Pride blossomed in her core. Isaac, her twin, her mate, magnificent in his honest form.

"Holy Mary shit!" Joe slammed the door.

Lynn heard the steel deadbolt slide into place. She pressed her face closer to the windshield, entranced by Isaac's new form crowding the porch. The incredible beast resembled only something she'd seen in drawings, something mythical.

A furious Minotaur, Isaac plowed through the locked door. Hinges screeched as wood violently splintered.

Lynn's supernatural hearing punished her with the screams of her husband. She covered her ears but it did little to drown the soul-piercing cries and gory splashing like a bucket of slop being spilled, followed by the ravenous snorting and grunting of a starved boar.

And the sound of skin ripping.

The crunch of bones.

Four-year-old Madison sobbed, "Daddy! My Daddy!"

Lynn stamped her feet, rocking back and forth. "Make it stop." Salty tears streamed down her cheeks. Her body shook. A grumble of helplessness rattled the windows. "Make it stop! I don't want to be a monster!"

A blinding green light flooded the car. The agonizing sounds vanished.

She glanced down at the lush greenery beneath her feet. Fruit bearing trees and vibrant blossoms sprouted all around her. She stood in a garden of beauty surrounded by plants and trees she could not identify. The greenery and buds shimmered with an unearthly beauty.

Mighty trees stretched to a lavender twilighted sky. A congregation of stars twinkled against the purple heaven. Moisture purified the earthen soil. From the forest canopy, songbirds sang sweet hymns and a summer breeze curled around her, carrying the comfort of Frankincense and myrrh.

Lynn walked along a path that led deep into the Eden-esque grove. She came to a clearing, a perfect circle etched in the untouched garden.

A black kitten played with a fallen leaf, its eyes large and watery. Lynn scooped the animal into her arms and it purred with the ferocity of a tigress, drowning out the songbirds. The kitten pressed its soft fur against her chest, and for a still moment she felt safe.

A child screamed.

She whirled and saw a black panther dash through the clearing, its predatory breaths amplified by the trees.

The lush foliage wilted and fell to ash on barren dirt. Like quicksand, the ground imploded, sinking into the center of the opening where she stood until nothing remained but the stars in the charred sky.

The kitten in her arms meowed. Lynn gritted her teeth before snapping its neck.

She fell through the sinkhole.

The car's passenger door flew open and Lynn tumbled out.



Chapter Twenty-One



ATTICUS STOOD IN THE center of the room that Rourn and he had shared for almost two decades. Rourn's bureau, black walnut with golden trim, had been emptied, his robes and garbs that once hung in the closet gone. His sheathed long sword rested peacefully on top of the bureau, waiting obediently for its master's return.

Atticus held up the Silver Selector long sword gifted to him by Elder Cai. The sword had been hand forged by the Grand Smithy of the Templar Court the day of his birth. Though it possessed no arcane powers, it had been specifically crafted for the battles surely to face a Twin warrior. According to some antiquated lore a warrior was to name the sword he intended to carry into battle, then he was to prick his finger with the tip so the named blade would know its master's blood, and never accidentally harm him in the throes of war.

But Atticus neither possessed the imagination nor concern for folkloric nonsense. Two swords had been crafted on that day long ago, but only one would ever be wielded—Rourn's counterpart was doomed like its master to remain somewhere deep within a vault.

He placed his unnamed sword on his dresser and crawled into the bottom bunk. Rourn always took the top. He said he liked being closer to the sky than to the ground.

There is more knowledge and faith in the stars above, than in the Earth below our feet.

But it had been a long day and though Atticus couldn't stop thinking about his lost blood-brother, the inauguration, Elder Cai, and the Time of Reckoning, he soon drifted into a restless sleep.

Somewhere in an unknown desert, he found himself bound to a tall wooden stake. A nightmare of a beast that towered above mountain shadows, burned him at the stake. Just as the flames engulfed him, a harsh shaking woke Atticus. "Screaming locust!" He jolted awake.

"It is time." Bathed in light from a kerosene lantern hung on the end of his hornbeam staff, Elder Cai stood beside the bed. "You must depart for Texas immediately."

Atticus knuckled sleep from his eyes.

"There has been a murder," Elder Cai said. "It would appear the Geminus is behind the massacre. Come with me, now, Selector. We make haste to the

Knightwood Coliseum.”

Atticus threw some common clothes in a duffel bag. He paused before grabbing the Silver Selector long sword and fastening the scabbard to his belt. He tucked Rourn’s journal into a deep inner pocket of his cloak before staring out the open window. If he’d known he was going to depart so soon, he’d have gone to Venora, and said his farewell. And he would also deeply regret missing Rourn’s funeral.

From his robe pocket, Elder Cai pulled a chained pendant. The Glorious Seal was carved into the pendant’s pearl. He draped it around Atticus’ neck. “I have enchanted it with arcane magic...to aid in your mission. Use it sparingly. Use it wisely.”

Atticus nodded.

“Come, boy!” Elder Cai said. “We’ve no time to spare.”

Crossing the desert sands of the compound, Atticus asked, “Rumors fly as to the safety of teleporting.”

“It is as safe as any magic.”

“Will it get me to Texas in one piece?”

Elder Cai tilted his head. “Either that or you could land in the Arctic Circle. But we are praying for Buckeye.”

“Such comforting words,” Atticus said.

“You’ll be fine, boy. But you did pack winter clothes just in case, didn’t you?” Elder Cai gave a playful wink.

Atticus and Elder Cai strolled through the bronze arched tunnel and into the Knightwood Coliseum. The electric automobile waited in the open arena. The most exalted warriors from times past and other cadets who’d been stirred from sleep gathered in the bleachers to see Atticus’ grand departure. They came to offer their support in the most honorable fashion.

Two raised platforms hosted eight men, four on either side. Adorned in elegant green mantles and silver ceremonial helmets that masked their aged faces; the High Templars of the Templar Court, all held the posture of statues.

Prefect Cauldrick, in his own large ceremonial garb, hands clasped behind his back, said, “The Court...” He eyed Elder Cai. “...pledges its support of the lone Twin.”

Atticus bowed. “I accept my duty with honor, Prefect.”

Elder Cai coughed into his fist. He threw a mock smile at Prefect Cauldrick. “And you support the Court, do you not?”

Prefect Cauldrick ignored Elder Cai. “Please take your position inside the vehicle.”

Atticus stepped toward the driver's door. He hesitated before turning. "I wish to speak with the High Templars." He knelt on one knee before Elder Cai and the Prefect. "This burden weighs on me. I am the grasshopper beneath the cobblestone from the fables."

Elder Cai waved his hand. "Go then and speak with the Templars, but do not linger."

"The lone Twin is not ready," Prefect Cauldrick said. "We cannot send him on this assignment for it was meant for Twin warriors to reckon the Beast."

"Do not second guess my pupil any longer, for I know this is Atticus' destiny and so knew Rourn."

"Foolish insolence," Prefect Cauldrick said.

Atticus strode toward the platform on the left. The four sagacious warrior priests stood six feet above. He craned his neck to view their masked faces. They remained solid as stone.

Atticus held himself straight. "I ask of you, the High Templars of the Court: am I ready for the Reckoning?"

In unison the four warriors replied: "Alone you shall stand."

Atticus gave a curt nod and approached the four warriors on the other side.

"I ask of you, the High Templars of the Court: am I ready for the Reckoning?"

In unison the four warriors replied: "Together we shall fall."

Atticus sighed. *These elder warriors will not give me their truths, only more ceremonial proverbs.*

He marched back to the car.

"Do not let the pressures of politics cloud your faith," Elder Cai said to the Prefect.

"You're a fool, Cai!" Cauldrick said as Atticus approached them. "Nothing but a drunken poet!"

"He is no fool," Atticus said. "He is my mentor, and my friend, and my only father. Rourn is dead, and now I must carry on without him. And I will do so with or without your blessing."

Prefect Cauldrick gawked at Atticus then at Elder Cai. He shook his head.

"We have the utmost faith in you, Selector Atticus. We only—"

"I haven't the time, Prefect. I must go now."

Cauldrick nodded, straining a smile. He neared Atticus and handed him a blossoming white rose. "Then as the Prefect I bless you. Under the rites of the Order of Abel I bestow the Rose of Validation, Selector Atticus; and shall the rose wither, so shall your triumph; but shall the rose remain vibrant, then so shall your virtues."

Atticus placed the stem between his teeth as custom dictated and slid behind the wheel. The sweet scent of the flower filled the car's small interior. The ritual claimed that if it did not wilt after he went through the portal, he beheld the inner strength of a true warrior, able to channel his life force even to a delicate rose. But if the flower wilted...

Through the windshield, he watched the High Templars rotate their hands while reciting incantations.

At the far end of the Coliseum a small white star appeared and expanded.

The swirling portal continued inflating, concealing the far walls of the arena. Elder Cai stood beside the driver's side. The portal spiraled with a multitude of colors, a swirling kaleidoscopic wheel.

Elder Cai gave him a comforting smile, tipped his flask and gulped. "Go!" he shouted as he waved his arm.

Atticus floored the gas pedal. The car rocketed forward, accelerating. Like a pebble from his slingshot while Horny Toad Popping, the car hurled toward the massive star that shined ahead of him.

The speedometer climbed.

Fifty-five...

His teeth clenched tighter around the rose.

Sixty-five...

The rose would show him the truth.

Seventy...

The portal's energy was so bright he could no longer see the Coliseum.

Eighty-one.

Atticus snapped his head to the right and spat the rose.

Eighty-six.

A sea of whiteness and beams of electric blue engulfed him. A deafening silence rolled over the car. The light faded, replaced by darkness. Headlights beamed in the distance like the eyes of a charging automaton wrym. Atticus gripped the steering wheel while releasing the gas pedal.

A massive oncoming vehicle blared a howling horn as it passed. He clutched the wheel. The car swerved chaotically. He missed a guardrail and careened sideways across a grassy median; and came to a stop on the other side of the road. His eyes widened as two cars raced toward him. Gunning the gas, he sped to the other side of the highway and into the break down lane.

Shifting to park, he exhaled a lungful of air he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"This is quite different than training in the desert."

Atticus glanced to the digital screen above the radio and waited for the GPS to upload his location. A flashing blue circle appeared, indicating he was just outside Houston, Texas.

Thank the angels above I am not on a glacier. Gripping the steering wheel at and ten and two, he sighed. *But I have to get the lotus off this highway.*

A billboard advertised Dr. Pepper. *Poisonous serum for the masses*, he recalled from his Contemporary Studies. The phone clipped to the visor above him rang, a Celtic hymn. He answered.

“Are you in Texas?” asked Elder Cai.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then it worked!” Elder Cai’s voice sounded distance as he retold of Atticus’ success to those in the Coliseum. “And what of the rose, Atticus?”

He glimpsed the dead flower in the passenger seat, petals dry and stem broken. The sweet scent no longer present. “It remains vibrant; white as your beard, Elder.”

“Splendid! I knew it would be. I knew it would be.”

“I am overwhelmed at your confidence in me.”

“Waste no time with pleasantries, Selector. Onward to the murder scene and report back with your findings.”

“Yes Elder.” Atticus hung up and reached under the seat. He retrieved a paper folder, full of topographical maps and data he’d need for his mission. He removed Rourn’s journal from his pocket and laid it on the passenger seat next to the dead rose, then shifted to drive and swerved onto the interstate. Headlights flooded the dark highway ahead. “I guess you’ll still be accompanying me,” Atticus said to the darkness. “We will defeat the Geminus together, my brother.”

Atticus tapped the radio and a voice came through: “You’re listening to The Eagle, Houston’s only classic rock station. Here comes *Judas Priest* with ‘You Got Another Thing Coming’”



Chapter Twenty-two



ON HER HANDS AND KNEES, Lynn panned her new environment. The burnished concrete that formed a crescent drive in front of a four-story mansion. Graphite columns lifted a gable, like pallbearers holding a casket. Wrought iron barred windows prevented entry from the outside, or escape from the inside. A sprawling lawn stretching a couple acres beside and behind her, giving the mansion a foreboding remoteness. Yet, Lynn saw other neighboring properties.

She shot upward and latched onto Isaac with clawing hands. “You murdering bastard!” Her fingernails peeled flesh from his neck. Through burning tears she aimed for his face, screaming and flailing.

A sardonic groan served as Isaac’s only protest.

The back of her hand smashed into his lips. Blood trickled.

Isaac clutched her wrist. A glint of moonlight reflected off her diamond ring. With a menacing crunch, he bit her finger at the knuckle, leaving behind an amputation of surgical precision. He chewed, swallowed, and spat remnants of the diamond and gold onto the concrete driveway.

Searing pain and ghastly fright overpowered her body and mind. Lynn saw the blood on her hands, the blood on his lips, the blood on the ground; she smelled the metallic aroma. Shrieking and jumping, the world blurred as tears seized her eyes.

But the intoxicating scent of the blood broke through the agony, driving her into a new frenzy. She lunged, nipping at his parted lips, and grasping for his crotch. The jewel in his chest rapidly pulsated and turned a brighter crimson red.

Tongues tangled, her blood on his lips. Saliva poured from their mouths, and spilled down their cheeks and chins.

Isaac hurled her against the front of the car. With a swipe of a claw, he shredded her blouse, severing her bra, exposing her erect nipples.

With ravenous delight, his lips clasped around her right breast, his hands gripped her hips. He forced her shorts and panties down her thighs. A smooth claw flicked her labia, grazing her sensitive folds, and sending satin strands of electricity through her body. Hot wetness—pungent and exhilarating—gushed from her insides, coating his claws and fingers in creamy fluids.

Her throat unleashed a deep and powerful growl—a promise that she would erupt with the most fantastic orgasm.

Isaac lifted her, placing her on the car hood. He palmed her breast, forcing her to lay on the warm metal, the hot steel delivering quivers throughout her naked skin.

Using his torso, he pried her legs apart. Each of his firm hands held her wrists, his snarling face lingered near her collarbone. He was about to rip her throat open, but with a ruthless jolt, he shoved her higher until she sat upright, her back against the cool windshield. With a needful panting, he dove between her legs where his feral mouth clasped onto her labia. He flicked his rough tongue along her engorged clit.

A thirsty beast, he greedily drank from her frothy well.

While nibbling and sucking, he breathed throaty moans. Her body surrendered to orgasm, pleasure charging through her. Over and over and over. A haze of ecstasy shrouded her mind. Her struggle to regain her senses was almost over when...

A zipper and the shuffling of clothes.

“Master! No!” a strange female voice cried.

Isaac glared at the intruder, a pale naked and bald young woman standing behind him. He swiped a claw at the woman, but she leapt away.

“You mustn’t take her yet.” The naked woman further floated from his reach.

Isaac snarled, and terrifying canines flashed.

Lynn’s body throbbed with need. Between her thighs, the blood in her veins pulsed. Stickiness seeped from her sex—her sex that mercilessly craved more.

Isaac looked back to Lynn. A softness glazed over him before he ruthlessly tossed her to the ground. As Lynn crawled to her feet, she saw a shadowy blur. Once again, Isaac morphed into a panther. Dark wings soared him over the trees.

Lightning flashed in the night sky.

“Isaac!” Lynn called after him. “Don’t leave me alone. I’m frightened.” As the hormonal hysteria dissipated, an agonizing throb hummed from the void of her missing finger.

“Come, Mistress Lynn, I will tell you all you need to know.”

Lynn eyed the naked woman floating above the gable. A strange and overwhelming sense of jealousy pervaded her. Lips curled, a rumble vibrated from her. “Start with who the hell you are.” She glanced at the sky where Isaac had vanished. “And end with why my mate has abandoned me!”



Chapter Twenty-three



A LOW GROWL PURRED from Lynn's lips. A growl? The stump of her severed finger throbbed, spurting blood.

She slid her shorts on and searched for her shirt and bra, then remembered Isaac had shredded both. Shredded them with a claw that extended out of his hand. Tears pooled in her eyes. Tears of frustration. Of rage and unfathomable jealousy and a cocktail of other harshly unstable emotions. A wild rabid spirit had invaded her loins, mastering her humanity. Never in all her thirty-one years had she ravaged a man like she'd ravaged Isaac.

She tilted her head back and roared. An inhuman scream vibrated from somewhere deep and foreign. A single bat screeched from atop the mansion's roof. A distant child cried out, fleeing.

Her stomach rumbled.

Royal purple curtains on the second floor window back-dropped the ghostly woman who floated near the ledge. "I am Ira." She bowed while levitating.

Lynn stepped closer to the awning over the front door and glared at the bald woman. "You're a ghost?" Lynn cringed at the husky tone of her own voice. Shaking her head, she covered her eyes. "I think I'm going to shred you like paper and I don't even know why." Her lips curled back and she involuntarily snapped her jaws. Instinctively she reached out to grasp the closest stone pillar. The spirit inside urged her to climb the column.

"It's your true self coming forth. It's what you are." The ghost held her position near the second floor window.

"This isn't what I am. For God's sake, I'm a fourth grade music teacher." Holding balled fists over her head, she said, "I hate you!" The nub of her missing finger twitched and bled. Blood speckled her hair. She grimaced. "Come down here you phantom whore!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. Had she really said that?

"Geminus females are legendary for their ferocious nature. None, in all the universes, dare cross one, especially one who has found their mate—the most aggressive beings in all existence. But I am Isaac's servant and not a threat to you."

A soured tangle of anxiety and anger twisted inside Lynn's gut. Geminus? Mate? Confusion overwhelmed her. A sharp nail drove outward from her

abdomen, causing her to groan and clutch her stomach. “I think I’m starving,” she wheezed, bending over.

“You need to feed, Mistress. Refrain from shredding me like paper, and I will serve you.”

A coy, almost child-like expression on Ira’s face made hating her difficult. But not impossible. Lynn straightened, held her head high. “Can a ghost even be shredded?”

“A Geminus can rip my corporeal and incorporeal body from the mortal realms.”

“How exactly do you serve Isaac dressed in...well...nothing.”

Ira floated to the ground, glancing down at herself as if she’d forgotten she was buck naked. She tittered, covering her mouth. “My apologies, Mistress.” A frail black robe materialized, covering her from neck to foot. She waved Lynn on. “This is your new home, Mistress. Please come inside and I will tend to your wound.” Ira glided through the front door, leaving Lynn alone in the driveway.

She shrugged then followed the ghost inside, into a foyer. To the left, she spotted a bull horn tree. Native to Central America, she’d never seen one up close. The tree was young and still potted but spines already sprouted from the base of its leaves. Extraordinary.

“Mistress?” Ira waited further down a dimly lit corridor. Over the hallway’s threshold, a large beaver-like head looked back at her with lifeless eyes, and threatening teeth.

With reluctance, Lynn followed the ghost through the dark hallway.

The fragrance of Frankincense and myrrh captivated her, the same scents she recalled from the garden she’d envisioned earlier that day. The mansion held both a classic and contemporary styling. A chandelier that probably cost more than her three-bedroom home, hung low over a long dining table. A marble fountain churned sparkling clean water. She could smell its purity, the absence of pollution. How she could smell it, she had no clue.

Ignoring the instinct to lean forward and lap at the unpolluted trickling water, she panned the vast entryway and living area.

As large and luxurious as this place appeared, the walls threatened to collapse in on her.

The hallway gave way to a formal dining room with an exquisite wood table. Lynn paced the length of the table. The walls mocked her. They may as well have been bamboo bars—the room, a makeshift cage.

The spirit within hungered to be freed back into the wilds.

Lynn held her bloody hand against her bare chest. More blood smeared her naked breasts. Sweat bubbled on her forehead. Anxiety rolled through her. The

ceiling was two stories high, yet it felt more suffocating than a coffin. She lifted her hands over her head, readying to catch the falling lid that would surely seal her into an eternally dark tomb.

Ira said, "It's the metamorphosis warping your sense of reality." She led Lynn through a living area—big enough to park three vehicles.

"This is unbelievable," Lynn muttered. "None of this can be real. That man drugged me, he kidnapped me and you're his accomplice. You two are sickos like the people from those true crime shows."

Ira whirled around in mid-air. Her black robe blossomed into a southern belle dress but remained black as coal. The ghost whirled again and the dress shriveled into a petite skirt and tight top before the robe returned. Then Ira melted through the table only to materialize next to Lynn.

"Mistress, I'm afraid this is all very, very real. You are Geminus. Soon, very soon, the metamorphosis will awaken the hidden Beast hibernating within your soul where it has been since the day your Geminus twin parents conceived you."

Geminus twin parents? So her mother was a Geminus twin? And what the hell is a Geminus twin?

A sudden fever gripped her entire body. Her skin felt aflame. Screaming, Lynn lunged at Ira. She tossed the phantom bitch through the wall. Lynn tore open the glass doors that led outside and stepped onto the flagstone patio. An expansive courtyard surrounded her.

Ira floated toward Lynn. Lifting a black silk robe from an iron hook on the brick wall, she held it out.

Lynn snatched the robe from Ira and the ghost floated off, following a path made of silver hexagonal stepping stones embedded in the lush green grass.

Lynn tied the robe's cloth sash around her waist while blood from her severed finger stained the soft fabric. She glanced at the wide open and dark sky. Anxiety gone, she sucked in a deep breath. A breeze curled around her, a welcoming sensation. Clean, crisp air filled her lungs.

The three-story walls of the mansion barricaded the courtyard. From what or whom, Lynn wondered. Inside its barrier, a row of Neoregelia flowers, the cultivar of Hannibal Lecter, a crossing of punctatissima and carcharodon. Quite rare for this region, yet the leaves were a vibrant burgundy and missing the typical stripes and dots. She slid the long, shiny leaf between two fingers. Beautiful.

"Master is a lover of tropical plants. The Neoregelia is one of his favorites. He says it reminds him of his home, a spectacular jungle-covered world."

Lynn inhaled the flower's exotic fragrance. Despite her chosen career as an elementary school teacher, horticulture had been her first true love. Ever since

she was a little girl, the plants, flowers, vines and trees had called to her, a fascination that thrived deep inside her core. Her mother supported her interest in the local flora, always decorating her room with exotic plants.

But Ira had said she was separated from her parents. Was her mother really her mother at all?

Lynn watched as Ira neared a large marble fountain—beholding statues carved to depict three of the same creature: a seductive woman with large bat-like wings; another was of her squatting, her palms flat on the ground between her bent legs, as if about to take flight; the third captured the frightening woman in mid-flight with a giant scorpion draped along her back, its curled tail appearing to belong to both arachnid and woman.

Lynn tilted her head in the direction of the western sky. Something beckoned. Two stars glimmered brightest. Divinity filled her body and soul like she had drunk the world's most wholesome ambrosia. "What's happening to me?"

"You are maturing, Mistress," Ira said. "The Geminus inside of you is awakening."

"What is this 'Geminus' you keep talking about?"

Ira's slim lips formed a gentle smile. "It is no great surprise you don't know your origins. Geminus offspring are always scattered across the stars and hidden from other adult Geminus, including their own parents. For like many animals of this world, they will cannibalize their own young out of territorial preservation."

Lynn frowned. "I'm not a Geminus. I was not 'scattered across the stars'. And my parents did not give me up. I was born right here in Texas! By my mother."

"And what of your father?"

"My mother raised me alone." Blood gushed from her clenched hand and splashed onto a granite stepping stone. Saliva filled her mouth. Swallowing, she longed to lap the blood, like a house cat would milk.

"She was not your mother," Ira said. "She was—"

"You know nothing about me or my mother. How can you say such a thing?" Lynn hissed, like a hormonal alley cat.

"Because," Ira said, her gentle smile fading. "After the fusing, Geminus cannot survive without their mate. Separation would mean certain death. Your Geminus parents gave you to a surrogate mother so that you would have the chance to mature and that a mate would claim you." Ira glided across the courtyard like a dainty string of silk. She tugged on Lynn's arm, urging her toward the fountain.

"Get away. Don't touch me!"

Ira clasped a strong hand around Lynn's wrist.

“What are you doing?” Lynn tried to pull away, but Ira possessed uncanny strength for a dainty string of silk. Icy water rolled off one of the statue’s wings. The liquid cauterized Lynn’s wound, sending sharp tingles through her hand and up her arm.

Lynn examined the stub: the blood, severed skin and bone gone, erased. “It...d-doesn’t hurt anymore.” She stared at the missing digit, but could not even see a hairline scar.

“I am here to serve.” Ira bowed. “I will fetch you food.”

“Wait.” Lynn grabbed at the ghost’s robe, her fingers slipping through the fabric and touching cold hard flesh. Lynn recoiled.

Ira smiled sweetly. “Yes, Mistress?”

When she looked into the woman’s sad gray eyes, Lynn lost her train of thought for just a moment. “Why do you ingratiate yourself to him?” She scowled. “Are you in love with Isaac?”

Ira shuddered, as if in fear of the very thought. “I feel nothing but gratitude for Master Isaac.”

Lynn’s brows furrowed. Her face scrunched, conveying her doubt. “Gratitude for what?”

Ira whirled and floated toward the edge of the courtyard. “I became with child and was unpromised and unwed. My brother had me killed and my soul was sent to Purgatory.”

Lynn stared at the back of Ira’s pale scalp. She was a woman once and wronged by her own blood. Now she was a slave or servant or whatever, rescued from a place called ‘Purgatory’. A place Lynn’s Baptist pastor had preached did not exist. Heaven or Hell were the only two options for the dearly departed.

Yesterday Lynn watched her daughter—whose name she could no longer recall—practice ballet, readying for her recital. Today her daughter was dead and she was listening to the woes of a ghost. And the phantom’s tale afflicted her with more sorrow than the memory of her own daughter’s murder. She struggled for words of consolation, but alas could not find any words of worth.

Ira’s robe fluttered with the shift of the wind. She glanced over her shoulder and gave a weak smile. “My brother gave me to Union soldiers. They raped me before peppering me with buckshot.”

“As in the Civil War’s Union army?”

Ira nodded, gliding her hand over her slightly protruding belly. A baby bump. “This was once my world too, in another place and time.”

Lynn gasped and covered her mouth. “You’re not still...”

“He’s within me, where he’ll remain until the end of time with shrapnel lodged in his tiny unborn body.”

Lynn swallowed a dry lump. “I didn’t mean to pry. Good Lord, forgive me.”

“You need not apologize. I am grateful to serve Master Isaac and you, for you both can have the love that life never granted me.”

Lightning flickered in the western hemisphere.

Whiteness blinded Lynn. Unable to see her own body, her head rushed through a long, winding white corridor, chasing the fleeting spirits of her past; her faceless children, with sunken black eyes, stood sullenly in a threshold and vanished into mist as she raced through them. Another white corridor blurred past her peripheral vision. Several ivory doors slammed shut on either side of the hallway. The slow flapping of wings echoed from around the next bend.

Then she stood in the courtyard again. The odor from a wet rat drifted from the edge of the brick wall several yards away. The heels of her hands pressed against her eyes. She felt Ira’s cold grasp on her shoulder. Lynn lowered her hands and gazed into the tenderness of a tragic soul.

Her first friend in her new life.

“You are not of this world,” Ira said. “You’re feeling the proof of it right now. The quicker you submit to your inner Beast, the quicker your soul will be at peace.”

“My family was murdered,” Lynn said, her tone matter-of-fact. She wanted to be angry but hunger made her weak yet the thought of eating caused nauseating cramps. “My supposed mate has abandoned me without a word of explanation and now you’re saying the woman I thought was my mother isn’t who I thought she was.” She threw up her hands. “And I’m not even human. My whole life has been one big fat lie.”

“Your surrogate mother, I am sure, cared for you deeply, as if you were her own child. Otherwise, your Geminus parents would not have entrusted her with you.”

“So my parents are from another world? And they sent me here to live with an adopted mother?”

“Yes, Mistress.” Ira gave a thin lipped smile. “It is the safest option to assure the survival of the young.”

Lynn let out a shaky laugh. “Safest? The more you tell me, the more questions I have.”

Ira floated toward the fountain. “Then let me start from the beginning. The Geminus originated beyond the stars, and beyond the veils of this universe and reality. Galmoria—” she waved a hand over the statues “—gave birth to the first Geminus twins on a distant moon after mating with multiple beasts. But the Geminus have since spread among the universes for they are the most territorial creature in existence. To protect their offspring, the females are sent to live with

surrogate mothers, and the males are sent to harsher worlds where they will mature into stags like Master Isaac. No two males can inhabit the same world or they will destroy one another. They will even destroy their own offspring.”

A cool wind blew. Lynn hugged the silk robe tighter against her body. “Then Isaac came here to find me? To mate with me?”

Ira shook her head. “There has not been a Geminus mating on this world since Sodom and Gomorrah. You are very fortunate, for the odds of discovering your twin are astronomical.”

“If not to find me, then why did he come here?”

“Isaac returned in search of the one Galmoria calls *The Beloved*.”

“The Beloved?” Jealousy flared inside her. A river of blood flashed in her mind. Her mouth watered. Lynn sat on the base of the cool marble fountain. “Why did he abandon me here with you? To go find this ‘Beloved’ one?”

“Before Master Isaac and you can mate, he must dominate Galmoria and prove his seed is worthy of procreation. She is the Priestess who must bless the Fusing before the two of you can mate and you can mature into Vixenhood, a fully matured Geminus capable of bearing cubs.”

“Isaac must...dominate that woman?” Lynn gestured with a nod toward the statues.

“She is not a woman,” Ira said, giggling. “She was once a demigod, and led an army of mighty beings against the forces of God, defeating all the saints and holy warriors of a distant world before claiming it as her own dominion.”

“I don’t understand any of that,” Lynn said. “And I refuse to believe I am the offspring of a demon creature that opposes God!”

“All you need to know is that you belong to Isaac and he belongs to you—and that he will do all in his power to protect you, and place you high upon the cosmic throne.”

“Me on a throne?” She scoffed. “How can he promise that then abandon me with a naked ghost?” Hot tears slipped down her face. She covered her mouth. “I need him here...with me. Not with her!” Lynn flailed her hand toward one of the statues.

“In time, this will all come to make perfect sense,” Ira said.

Lynn glanced up the walls of the mansion surrounding the lush courtyard. The estate was like something she’d only read about in dark romance novels. Counts and governors or dukes would wisp homely young women to their elegant abodes and romance the pants right off them. She returned her gaze to Ira. “You want to know something crazy?”

The ghost floated to stand beside Lynn. “Yes madam. Tell me something crazy.”

“I can’t remember my past anymore. My kids. My husband.” Lynn snickered. “All I can think about is Isaac and pleasing him. What kind of monster am I?”

“You are no monster, Mistress Lynn. You are *Geminus*.”

Lynn sighed. “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Love and romance is what fairytales are made of. Not beasts who bite each other’s finger’s off.”

“Before Isaac, on this plane of earth, did you experience love? Was it a, as you say, fairytale?”

Lynn chewed her lip. “My husband was a backstabbing, cheating loser and was never home. Not a fairytale or love.” She hesitated. “But this, what’s happening to me and Isaac...it’s anything but a holy union.”

Ira frowned. “I never said any of it was holy.”

The thought should terrify her, but a warmth tingled in her groin, suggesting anything but revulsion. She desired Isaac, the Geminus beast. And that desire was so overwhelming it made her laugh drunkenly.

Ira wrapped a frail arm around Lynn’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“I’m frigid. Clinically diagnosed twelve years ago with Female Sexual Arousal Disorder. I gave up alcohol, smoking and fatty foods. I talked to a counselor and even prayed with my pastor. But I’ve never had an orgasm in all my thirty-one years.”

Ira smiled. “Only Master Isaac can meet your needs. Now that you are together, you will know pleasure.” A devious smile tugged at her lips. “And know it again and again, until you beg for mercy.”

Lynn’s mind flashed back to the feel of his lips on her clit. His hands on her body. The brisk and clean scent of his lust, pheromones seeping from his body. The orgasm that rocked inside her, begging for release.

Suddenly she was drawn to her feet and circled the fountain. The robe’s tail dragged behind her. The marble fountain whispered to her the way the wind whispers to the trees. The water flowing over the stone grooves and edges of the legs, faces, wings and scales sparkled like droplets of crystal. A summer night’s breeze teased Lynn’s hair. She smiled as she met jeweled eyes.

Galmoria reached out with ebony talons. The water trailed down her marbled maiden figure and smelled pure as a country rain. Cerulean moonlight showered the statue in a pale glow.

Lynn moved around the fountain. She eyed the statue of the demon in a pose like she was taking flight. The behemoth scorpion riding on her back, glassy yellow eyes, and intricately carved carapace regarded her with skepticism.

Ira remained behind her. “She is Galmoria, and that is Vostrict, the Lunar Guardian, who serves her.”

“Something familiar about her,” Lynn said.

“She is your mother, Mistress. Your Eve.”

Lynn reached for the statue’s outstretched hand. Foundation rumbling, the three stone women crept toward her. The ebony wings became the consistency of shadows. Six wings unfurled before enveloping her in a warm and protective embrace. Lynn nuzzled into the silken fur, closing her eyes.

“Mistress?” Ira’s hand touched her arm.

Lynn shuddered, realizing the fountain was intact and stationary.

“Are you okay, Mistress Lynn?”

Lynn purred and gazed at the stars. “I’m home.” Her legs began to shake. Dizziness made her blink. Stumbling, she grabbed onto the statue for support. Her hand slipped down the slippery stone and she tumbled her knees. Rolling to her back, she closed her eyes and fell unconscious.



Chapter Twenty-Four



THE BLACK WATERS OF Sera's Pond lapped the moonlit banks. A sweet wind creaked the ancient boards and rafters of the nearby Rawlins house. The shadow of a winged panther descended. The waters boiled before parting, revealing an illuminated portal in the pond's bed, a simple threshold with pulsating multi-hued smoke. The Beast entered the gateway.

Along a craggy terrain, Isaac rode a black stallion with crimson seraphim wings. Dagger-like stones, petrified trees, and bottomless canyons scattered the region while a violent electrical storm eternally raged within the clouds of the planet ruled by a perpetual and massive full moon. Lakes of molten magma sprawled on either side of him. Through wisps of smoke and shrouds of ash, the horse leapt and soared.

A petrified skull of a behemoth alien creature, Nephruck, loomed in the distance. Multiple horns protruded from the skull and towered into the stormy atmosphere. Hollow slanted eyes gaped, one sewn shut by a massive spider web. The other still possessed a single yellow eyeball.

Half of the skull was buried beneath the stony wasteland; the top part of its open mouth serving as an entrance into Galmoria's lair.

Nephruck, one of Galmoria's many enslaved, once a behemoth golem composed from millions of the slain holy warriors and saint's corpses, now reduced to a living fortress, home of the Winged Priestess.

Isaac's mount neared the spinal-cord like bridge that crossed a deep crevice filled with bubbling blood from Nephruck's still beating heart. The horse strained against Isaac's command to cross the bridge.

"Cursed minion!" Isaac dismounted. He withdrew a ceremonial blade from his cloak and ran it through the creature's skull. "Dare you defy the King of Beasts!" As the winged stallion collapsed in blood-spurting spasms, Isaac slammed himself into its flanks, sending it toppling over the ledge and into the sea of fiery blood.

After he licked the blood from the flat edge of his blade, he began crossing the bridge. Below him, the blood popped and crackled, and the heat stung through his clothing. When he arrived at Nephruck's open mouth, a black scorpion, three times larger than his misfortunate steed, blocked his passage.

"Do you challenge my entry, Vostrict?" Isaac eyed the sentinel's beady yellow eyes.

It performed a scuttle-dance, side-to-side while its stinger waved threateningly over its stone hard carapace.

Isaac held his dagger in front of his face. "You will obey me and remove yourself from my path."

Vostrict halted, but the stinger remained erect, sludge-like venom dripping.

A growl tugged at Isaac's lips as he stepped forward. "Now."

The scorpion scudded away, deep into the living fortress.

It had been nearly two centuries since Isaac had set foot on this world. Eons past, the world had served as an alternate Earth, but demons led by Galmoria had overthrown the angels.

Isaac entered the skull. "Mother. I have come for you!"



Chapter Twenty-Five



OCTOBER 21ST

As with all things in and outside the natural world, there are rules governing the realms of morality, immorality and amorality. And for each and every decision we make, we engage ourselves in the nexus of societal propriety—whether we abide by, create, or break the norms. Thus, our choices make us the people we are, or the people we are not—and for an unfortunate, lot, the people we regret.

From stone tablets and papyrus, the laws of our people are handed down through the ages. The laws instruct and guide, but sometimes I fear they constrain. For laws exist inside a black-and-white tunnel that permits limited liberties. And these laws have passed through the scrutiny of many centuries plagued with hands of oppression. Do we even know the truth anymore?

Many times our liberties are plundered by those who wear the elitist robes. Though we hold ourselves to a much higher acclaim than the world we keep distanced from us, we are truly no more advanced in our decision-making politics than the so-called ‘superpowers’ of this planet. Is there any difference with the dog who sleeps on the bed and the dog who sleeps on the doorstep?

To our discredit—or perhaps to our advantage—we maintain an air of nobility—as if God blessed us above all others. So insatiable is our piousness!

Yet, I speak of the righteous and moral choices one must make in order to keep their heart, mind, body and soul pure! These choices do not exist within the narrow tunnel of absolutes, and their applications and consequences alter from moment to moment as do the shifting tides of life and destiny.

When a child ventured too close to the raging river she was taken by the currents; and the young mother cast herself into the violent waters to save her child. But they were both no match to the powerful river.

Would I save the drowning child or save her weakened mother before the river carried them to certain death?

No one can know the appropriate moralistic decision until they have heard the crying child and the weeping mother. And reckon the true force of the raging river.

If obeying the dictum lowers my ‘moralistic superiority’, then I do so choose, for the alternative would leave my heart, soul, body and mind poisoned.

If only I could make my own choices.

If only the Order would trust my intuitions as equally as they trust the arc of my sword.

Those who raise, feed and clothe me, are also the ones who put the blade in my hand—command me to inflict pain, suffering and death upon their enemies in the name of their laws, or perhaps distorted interpretations of the laws handed down from the prophets and disciples of antiquity.

The time will come for any one of us to swim against the tide, when we must know the advantages—or implications—of our choices. For if we blindly follow the rules, obey the dictum, what is the measure of our success? Is the price too costly?

But I caution that none of us let that temptation possess us at every opportunity, for once it is inside our heart, body, mind, or soul, we may find ourselves descending deep into the shallows of evil and deceitful ways; decisions we justify to protect our egos.

~Rourn

Atticus closed Rourn's journal and checked the time. 3:15 am.

Sparse street lights offered poor illumination along the sidewalk, but the bright moon guided him well. A Seeker—a Paladin informant and spy—had reported the murder back to the Order Of Abel even before the police had arrived on the scene. But the street Atticus strode down was now lined with black and navy squad cars and flashing blue and red lights.

He approached a police car parked sideways, blocking the street, lights flashing. Two police officers conversed beside the vehicle.

“Jones said there was blood and body parts all over the house,” one officer said.

“Yeah,” the other said. “I saw Thomas run outta there and hurl like a rookie.”

“Shit. I'd hate to see whatever turned that bastard's stomach.”

Atticus remained quiet, concealed in the shadows. The easiest way to pass without alerting them would be to entrance their minds and plant false memories or mind control—but using such power against the innocent was forbidden under the Third Law of Arcanium—a written constitution of magic maintained by the Templar Court.

Atticus' fingers traced the Glorious Seal suspended around his neck. To most, it only resembled a stone trinket, but Atticus could see the tiny specks of arcanium sparkling within the pearl and two outer rings; raw arcane matter placed there by Elder Cai.

Mage Master Rolland had taught Atticus the morphic and illusionary powers of the moon—one of elements under Heaven's dominion.

“You draw down the moon’s glow and wrap that light like a robe around your body.”

Only a person with the third-eye sight could see through a lunar guise. But hopefully, he thought, none of these policemen had that uncanny gift.

Atticus channeled the elemental particles within the stone. Soon a pale blue mist draped his entire form. He wrapped and manipulated the fluff of mist into a second layer of clothing.

Lunar essence chilled the skin like frozen ice melting into every pore. Though perhaps the easiest magic to control, especially at night, even lunar mana had inherent risk. Channeling too much of the energy could cause the worst case of frostbite imaginable.

To his trained sight, or third-eye, it might have looked as though he wore a tightly woven shroud of mist around his person, but to the untrained eye they would see a black uniform. For the time being he was not going to be Selector Atticus the Paladin, but Agent Adam.

Atticus cut through the front yard, using the shadows to further hide his approach.

Orange tape cordoned off the dilapidated ranch house. Flashing lights flickered against the blue vinyl siding of the rundown residence.

He strode past a middle-aged woman dressed in a flannel nightgown. A menthol scent, like the balm Healer Merrick used on the warriors’ aching muscles after a long day in the arena, billowed around the woman.

“Sounded like a pack of wild animals was in there,” she said to a skinny police officer. “I heard screaming...terrible, terrible screaming. I’d have sent my husband to check on that poor family but he’s working overtime at the mill—or so that’s what he told me.”

Atticus ducked under the tape and headed for the open front door.

“Hey you!”

Atticus turned. A skinny cop strolled toward him.

Screaming locust. Was his illusion not strong enough?

“You’re gonna have to leave. This a restricted area.”

Atticus held his palm up as if presenting identification. The pendant sparkled. A gleam reflected in Atticus’ palm—an illusionary badge.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know the FBI was called in.” The cop shuffled back to his post in the yard next to a dying rose bush where he continued taking the old woman’s statement.

Atticus entered the home. Men and women wearing latex gloves picked through kitchen drawers and dusted the counter, refrigerator and walls. A woman moved around the room snapping pictures in rapid succession. Atticus had been

briefly instructed on modern police procedures but was encouraged to rely more on keen observation.

You'll miss the obvious if you're seeking the hidden, Elder Cai had once told him. Until this moment, he hadn't understood what that had meant. Blood caked the walls, floor and countertops, some in the form of large pools and others in long streaks.

The crime scene unit busied themselves with their forensic work while Atticus examined the surroundings for himself.

Though he had never seen modern appliances before, except in catalogs teachers had used during Contemporary Studies, he remained focused on his immediate duties rather than gawk at the awkward machinery.

A stray beam of moonlight filtered through the kitchen window above the sink full of dirty dishes. The sweet-sour scent of pasta sauce fumed from beneath the soapy brown water. A strand of moonlight reminded Atticus that his Lunar Robe would soon dissipate. He needed to make his own investigation quick and get out before his illusionary garb vanished.

A burly investigator with a scruffy face approached. "Who the hell do you think you are? This is a murder scene. You can't just waltz in here like you own the goddamn place. Jesus Christ."

Atticus caught the officer in a steely gaze. "I'm Agent Adam Lawson." He thrust his palm toward the man.

The detective frowned, paused. "The feds? What the hell you boys doing here?"

Blazing ghost. If only he could just plant a few false truths inside his head this would all be much easier. Atticus noted the man's gray uniform shirt with the letters BSD—Buckeye Sheriff Department.

"This crime scene shares similarities to other recent murders in the Arklatex region," Atticus said. "You can call the Houston office later, but for now we must work together on surmising what occurred here." Behind his back, he crossed his fingers, clinging to his childhood belief that crossed fingers brought good luck.

The officer looked Atticus over. "You're awful young looking to be an agent."

Atticus hesitated while thinking of another fib. "I'm twenty-eight. My father was an agent, and his father before him."

"Right. Well, I was the senior officer first on the scene. I've already viewed the entire residence and have my own speculations as to what transpired here...about five hours ago."

Atticus patted the man's right shoulder. "Good work. Now let me pass, Detective?" He lifted his brows in question.

"Lieutenant, actually. Lt. Ralph Chambers." The lieutenant disappeared into a room adjacent to the kitchen. Mesh patterns of dried blood stained the magenta trimming, and the paint along the doorway that had peeled away in long gashes.

Atticus stopped and looked to the lieutenant. "Is this damage new?"

"It was like that when we got here so I don't know. The blood splatter is fresh as daylight, though."

Lieutenant Chambers lifted his chin in the direction of the other room. Atticus stepped through the threshold.

Strewn about was a dismembered body; pools of blood, and piles of entrails scattered around the dining room. A torso without a head or limbs lay sprawled across the dark table, chest ripped open to display the jagged ribs with deep slashes in the marrow; the stumps masked by dried bloody gristle. A bald severed head in the corner of the room grimaced at Atticus, its eyes gouged—but Atticus could hear its taunting expression: "You're too late!" An arm rested on the windowsill with several fingers missing.

Dozens of fat black flies darted from one rancid pile of remains to the other, gorging themselves on the gruesome banquet.

He glanced to the lieutenant who appeared very pale. "You alright?"

The lieutenant nodded, unconvincingly.

Atticus silently vowed to find the creature that could kill with such ferociousness and when he did, he would not disappoint Elder Cai and use a gun. He would gladly tear the monster apart with his own bare hands.

"Three decades on the force and this shit still shakes me up," the lieutenant said. "Do you want to see the children's bedroom?"

"Children? There were children here as well?"

"Yep. Triple homicide. A real sick fuck. I been a Buckeye cop for over thirty-six years and I ain't ever seen anything like this. Even the Valles farm murders back in '82 don't compare to this shit."

Elder Cai had forewarned Atticus that modern day authorities might use excessive foul language.

"You want to see it or not, kid?"

The older detective called him 'kid' but Atticus did not feel young anymore. "Show me." He swallowed a lump of rage and repulsion.

Lt. Chambers led the way down the hallway. Bloody prints created a morbid track on the tile flooring.

Tracks. Not footprints. A pad with four large toe-prints. Had the Lieutenant and others overlooked this detail?

“These are animal tracks,” Atticus said.

Lieutenant Chambers shrugged. “You’re a real Sherlock Holmes aren’t you?”

“That doesn’t seem strange to you?”

“Hell yeah it’s strange, but it’s too early to jump to conclusions. It’s a biped. I suspect the killer dressed in a costume so he didn’t leave behind real footprints or shoe prints. It makes me think it was either a young punk or an experienced killer. Wide net to cast, but you gotta start somewhere. That’s what my daddy always said.”

As far as these authorities were concerned that was a genuinely plausible explanation.

And an entirely incorrect one.

“This is the bedroom where the daughter and son slept, eight and four.”

Chambers waved Atticus into the room where purple plastered one wall and blue the other. A poster of a princess on the purple side and a poster of a large robot covered the blue.

The beige carpeted floor was soaked in blood, but not much of the children remained, save a head with long brown hair lying on the pink bed and a lower torso wearing ripped pajama bottoms halfway beneath the bed.

And more of the black flies dotted the purple and blue walls and bed sheets.

“Not much left,” Lt. Chambers said nonchalantly. “I suspect the fucker might be a cannibal and ate the remains. Or took them with him as souvenirs.”

It would have to be human to be cannibalism.

A bottle of Strawberry Shortcake shampoo lay spilled across the floor amongst the children’s blood and viscera.

Atticus re-entered the hallway. “Was anyone else present in the home?”

“As far as we can tell, no.” Chambers shook his head. “But there is a female occupant missing, the wife and mother. We have an APB out for her.”

A tingle crept over Atticus’ ribs and arms.

A wife-and-mother missing...

“What in Jesus H. Christ is this bologna-shit?” Chambers cried out.

A cold moistness sloughed off Atticus’ body—the Lunar Robe illusion gone. He stood in the hallway wearing his traditional black and green leathers and bandanna.

“What kind of game is this you little punk?” Lt. Chambers barreled toward him while retrieving his nightstick.

Atticus bolted down the hallway and burst into the kitchen. Two officers tried to block his path with outstretched arms. The others joined in pursuit.

“Raging damnation,” he muttered, escaping into the dining room where the father’s eyeless head still gawked at him.

Atticus rushed to the large window in the back of the room—the severed arm remained lying against the sill. Swallowing a sour knot, holding his breath, he carefully removed the appendage. It was cold, stiff and surprisingly heavy for a single arm.

“Don’t move!” Lt. Chambers stood in the threshold.

Atticus grabbed the window, shoved upward. It was locked.

“You’re surrounded,” Lt. Chambers said. “Give it up and make this easy as possible.”

Bathed in the moonlight that entered through the window, Atticus froze. His eyes switched from the two locking mechanisms on the window, to the cold, dead arm on the floor and back to Lt. Chambers and the others piled behind him in the kitchen. Craning his neck, the Glorious Seal felt cool against his chest. He faced the detective and stepped forward. “I’ll comply. I am sorry I deceived you. But I have a divine mission to complete.”

“What are you?” Lt. Chambers asked.

Atticus stood tall and confident. “I am a Paladin.”

The man looked amused. “If I find out you’re the one who murdered these people then I’m going to personally throw the lever when they fry your ass at Huntsville.”

Atticus hung his head. He could not explain how he’d fool them nor how he was about to fool them again—and though he couldn’t stomach that they thought he might be the murderer he had neither time nor method to convince them differently.

Lt. Chambers took a step just as the seal turned warm against Atticus’ skin. He uttered an incantation and turned his head.

“Stop!” Lt. Chambers ordered, but a wave of yellow light engulfed the room.

Lt. Chambers screamed, “Shit! I’m blind. I can’t see. Jesus H. Christ! I can’t fucking see!”

A gun discharged. The bullet burned past Atticus and shattered the glass window.

“Cease fire!” Lt. Chambers commanded.

The room remained frozen in a blinding yellow glaze, except for the portion of the room behind Atticus.

Atticus unlatched the window and threw himself out where he landed in the dead rosebush. The officer who’d been manning the position earlier was no longer there.

Leaping to his feet, he dashed toward his car. No one trailed him. But he didn’t slow until he reached his vehicle.

Tires screeched, as he sped away. Barely slowing, Atticus turned off the street, the rear of the car sliding on the sandy concrete. A burnt smell emanated. He glanced down. One of the four-points of the Glorious Seal pendant had burnt. The point of the metal shriveled from silver to a midnight black.

Atticus fumbled with the settings on the car's dashboard before he spoke the name of the establishment Elder Cai had directed him to take shelter in.

“Directions to Stonehedge Western Bed and Breakfast.”

The GPS lit up. “You are looking for Shoney's breakfast buffet?”



Chapter Twenty-Six



BEFORE REACHING JIMMY'S Auto Shop, Shane and Birch passed a Dollar General locked up tighter than Fort Knox and Pete's Donuts with a dozen cars in the lot. The town seemed no bigger than Buckeye, but not even Buckeye had a Dollar General.

When they arrived, Jimmy was in the office doing paperwork, surrounded by the thick scents of coffee, motor oil, and new tires.

"What was wrong with the ol' girl?" Shane asked.

Jimmy looked up, dropped his pen. "Clogged fuel filter, probably from cruddy gas."

Shane gave the man his credit card. "Sure appreciate it."

"You fellows say you headed to Buckeye, huh?"

"That's right. Home sweet home."

"Always been hearing them tall tales about the woods being haunted and strange animals roaming around out there."

Shane laughed. "Like you said, it's all a bunch of tall tales. It's one of them towns that's so small it's only got half a horse and half a hole in the wall. When the locals get bored they get drunk, and when shooting out of the lights gets old they tell wild tales around the bonfire. And the next morning the whole town hears about the latest boogeyman."

"Is that right?" Jimmy said. "I reckon I oughta get over there someday and see what all the hoopla is 'bout."

Shane got behind the wheel, hung his arm out the window. "If you do come to Buckeye, skip the woods and drop on by Roxy's diner. Birch and me will buy you a slice of pecan pie."

Shane lowered the visor as they rolled past a golden pasture with a herd of Brahman and Holstein cows chewing on a big heap of hay inside a rusted metal hay ring.

Ten minutes down the highway and the gold field ended.

Birch readjusted himself in the passenger bucket seat. "Called Lizzy."

Shane jerked the wheel. A horn blared as a SUV sped by them. "You're married!"

"And you're in love, so you shouldn't have asked for her number in the first place."

Shane scoffed. He hesitated before asking, "Well, what'd she say?"

“It was the number to Doyle’s Funeral home. She was fucking with you, dude.”

“Guess I deserved it.”

“Yup. But on the bright side Doyle’s is having a two-for-one sale on caskets.” Birch leaned the seat back, closed his eyes and laced his hands on his stomach, before muttering, “Should’ve spent the extra twenty bucks for Big Dave’s Hotel.”

“I really am a fuck up,” Shane said.

“Yup.”

“Got booted off the football team for fighting. Same goddamn thing in the Army and I fucked us over in Pecos; got the whole damn rig shut down.”

“Don’t forget about getting us thrown in a Mexican jail. Lucky we didn’t get raped by Jesus. That biker dude looked like he could do some real damage.”

Shane took the on ramp to I45. The sign read: Houston 402. He set the cruise control to seventy. “I get why you want to leave the rig and I’m right there with you. I don’t belong there. Hell, I don’t belong anywhere.”

“And that night in Colorado last fall.”

“Technically that one wasn’t my fault. I didn’t realize that girl was a guy ‘til after I’d pinched his ass.”

Birch looked at him. “You know where you belong? With Amy, that’s where.” He closed his eyes again and turned on his side. “So just don’t screw that up and you’ll be fine.”

Shane smiled. “Yes, oh wise one.”

“The blood is thicker than water, young grasshopper. But you must store the past under the bridge and stock grain for the coming winter.”

Scooter was the only blood Shane had left. He hadn’t seen his old man in years. Last he heard, his mom was living in Topeka, with her latest boy toy. Probably passed out right now in some rundown studio apartment.

For the last five years, Amy had watched over Scooter right down to the parent-teacher conferences. When Scooter was laid out for three weeks with mono, she had pulled all-nighters patting his head with cool cloths. All day she read to him in between serving ginger tea, chicken soup and acetaminophen. During his freshman year, the kid received one hell of a shiner, prompting Amy to march into the school office and lecture the principal on developing a better zero-tolerance policy.

Amy might not be blood but she was family. And she’d been his sister’s friend, before Shane killed her, that is.

Shane thought back to the day she came back into his life, the day she agreed to move in with him and Scooter.

Crusted blood on his nose, his right eye black as night. He sat on the front porch of the trailer drinking coffee with Amy. "Thanks for staying last night."

"You took a bad beating. I didn't feel right about leaving." She sipped her coffee. "I didn't want to go home anyhow."

"I just inherited a trailer and custody of my kid brother yesterday," Shane said. "What the fuck am I supposed to do with him? My mother, the drunk bitch, threw a hissy and walked out on him...on us."

"She never got over Vicki's death, huh?"

Shane fingered his sore ribs, and sipped the bitter black coffee. "You still hear her voice, don't you?"

"No."

"You're lying," Shane said. "You just don't want me to think you're crazy."

"I'm not lying." She glared at him. "Until last night Vicki hadn't spoken to me in over six months. She left my head 'cause she didn't want me to spend the rest of my life in a nuthouse. But she's still watching over you and me, and that's why she told me you were in trouble at that bar last night."

Shane laughed and she glared at him again.

He held up his hands, as if in surrender. "I just got this mental image of you playing patty cake with my dead sister."

"You're a real comedian, jerk."

Shane wrapped an arm around Amy. "Sorry."

"I think Vicki knows you're leaving and she can't go with you. I can still feel her presence somewhere deep inside of me...and it's a really sad presence."

"Right." He'd only been fifteen when he was screwing around in his old man's truck, and disengaged the emergency brake. As it rolled down the driveway, Shane felt the hard bump and heard Amy's earth-shattering scream. Vicki lay in the driveway, looking very, very wrong. Her little lips tried to form words but the only thing she spouted was blood. Brightest red blood ever. It trickled from the corner of her mouth and down her chin.

Amy'd only been twelve when she witnessed her best friend's death, and at sixteen her dead friend started talking to her.

"I don't think you're crazy Amy. It was all my fault. I shouldn't have been fucking around in that truck and been so careless."

She shook her head. "It wasn't anybody's fault. It was just a tragic accident. And I'm glad I could hear her voice. I know she's always going to be watching over us both."

"I guess everybody can benefit from a guardian angel," Shane said. "Now that you've escaped the nuthouse where are you staying? I'll drive you home."

“Well,” Amy said, exhaling, “With this guy named Boone. We met in therapy and he’s got a small two-room house in Cedar Ridge.”

“So this Boon is a crazy?”

Amy laughed. “Yeah, like me. He’s bipolar.”

“You got some messed up thing for the crazies don’t you?”

She laughed. “I used to have a thing for you so you tell me.”

With a snort, Shane said, “I’m not crazy. I just ain’t no good.”

“It was an accident.”

“Accident? Semantics,” Shane said. “She’s dead. It’s my fault. My parents split. My dad’s God knows where and my mother is so strung out on booze and painkillers she doesn’t even remember she still has two living offspring.”

Amy kissed him on the cheek.

His arm still around her, Shane gave her a squeeze. “I never really noticed how much an attractive girl you grew into. Guess I still see you with pigtails and sticky hands from a Popsicle.”

She blushed. “I haven’t worn pigtails in nearly a decade.”

For the first time ever, Shane really looked at Amy. And not only had he seen a radiant yet humble beauty in her pale face, but he also saw a slight swell on the apple of her cheek. A thin sliver of a cut under her eye. White-hot anger shot through his veins.

“Boone’s roughing you up, isn’t he?”

“Nobody’s roughing me up.”

But Shane noticed the slight trembling in her lips. He brushed her blonde hair away from her collarbone. “I’ve choked enough guys in my life to know that those are finger marks.”

She recoiled. “He goes off his meds sometimes. That’s all.”

“I went out drinking last night ‘cause I wanted one last night of fun before Uncle Sam pays my airfare to Iraq. I can’t watch over my brother and you need a place to stay, so how about you look after him while I’m abroad? I’ll send you and Scooter money. I swear it.”

She looked at her feet and shrugged. “Boone really needs me.”

The front door opened and Scooter skipped down the steps between them, backpack full. He had a water jug under one arm and a pellet gun in the other. Tears streamed down his red cheeks.

“Where you going, buddy?” Shane asked.

Scooter strode up the dirt driveway. “Mom left. You’re leaving. That girl doesn’t want to take care of me either! I’m gonna go find dad. I hate you and that stupid girl.”

Shane sipped the last of his coffee. “That boy needs you a lot more than some crazy bastard. And he won’t hurt you.”

Twenty miles had gone by on the long Texas highway. Birch snored...loudly. Shane chuckled. If anyone had ever deserved a good ol’ fashioned ass kicking it had been that crazyass Boone. And it had been one of the best beatings Shane had ever had the pleasure of delivering.

Birch snorted and twisted.

One hundred and seventy miles to go.



Chapter Twenty-Seven



JANUARY 1ST

Today I confessed my visions to Elder Cai. I have been hesitant to do so and have struggled with the decision for the past few months. But these visions are a marauder in the dark that steals away my sanity night after night.

I informed Elder Cai of my intended path which did not surprise him. He said, “We are all enslaved by destiny.” He did not, however, press me to further describe my communications with the Dark Trinity.

I have always revered the Elder to the best of my abilities and never spoke my hesitations aloud. But after today, I suspect Elder Cai’s intuition greatly exceeds every other elder and Templar of the Order and Court.

But does he support my path in earnest?

Regardless of his support—or lack thereof—it sways my decision none. Whether I turn north or south, east or west, my future looks bleak. I must do what will benefit the Order, the Earth, the universes...

With a heavy heart, I went to my room to retire. There I noticed Atticus lying in bed, his hands clasped behind his head. He appeared dazed, as he had most of today.

He spoke of young Cassian and pretty Venora and the thoughts that had possessed him as of late. I cannot blame my blood-brother—both maidens are quite striking. Most warriors could not ignore their delicate features and playful wit. Even I sometimes falter in their presence.

But I cannot allow their beauty and charm to distract Atticus. The fate of all existence depends on him remaining true to his convictions.

Years ago, I informed Atticus of the importance of frequently ‘stroking his sword’. Tonight I reminded him of that lesson in hopes that tomorrow he will maintain better focus.

~Rourn

“Your destination will be on the right,” the female GPS voice said.

Atticus turned his car into the shaded parking area of the Stonehedge Western Bed and Breakfast. A wrought iron fence, adorned with wagon wheels, surrounded the property, trapping and preserving the authentic western setting. A stone chimney poked from the top of the large brick home, themed after an 1800’s motel. The guest parking was located just outside the fence.

Wide open, a double-iron gate welcomed him.

Ragtime piano music accompanied by the sound effects of clinking glasses and muffled voices filled the lobby. Faux-wanted posters, sepia toned, featured photos of people named Roarin' Roxy, Wild Boar Bowden, Mad Man Abraham, and others—locals of Buckeye, Atticus surmised.

"Well, well. What do we have here? Ain't you a scoundrel of a young fella." A middle-aged brunette woman with a young oval face stood behind an antique cash register, its edges rusted and corners bent.

"I would like a room," Atticus said.

"Of course you would, sweetie. Why else would you be here? Let Miss Trish get you all fixed up."

A poster was tacked to the parallel wall. Written in a large comical font:

*Deemed haunted by the world renowned
Buckeye Paranormal Investigations (BPI)
The Stonehedge Western Bed & Breakfast
Offers no discounts for rooms already occupied
by the supernatural.*

"Were you interested in staying in one of our authentic haunted guest suites?"

"Just a standard room, please."

"Oh come now." She gave him a sly smile. "Our ghosts are friendly enough. Nothin' to be afraid of."

Atticus' lips stretched into a half-grin. "I have slept with worse."

Trish hesitated, seemingly taken aback. She cleared her throat. "What brings you to town?"

"I hunt the Beast."

"Ah, well, you'll find plenty of them in Sacred Forest." From one of the cubby holes behind her, she fetched a key. "How long will you be staying?"

"Until the Beast is dead."

Trish nodded. "Well, we offer a home-style breakfast. Roxy's diner caters lunch. In the evenings we offer sweet tea, front porch sitting and horseshoes." She gave a wink. "Ramsey, my husband, is the undefeated champion."

Atticus set a stack of money down. "How many nights can I afford?"

Trish let out a delicate squeal as she fanned the bills. "That'll get you two weeks at the least. If you need anything, darlin', you just ask for Miss Trish or Mister Ramsey Stonehedge." The woman scanned the small lobby. "Bobby! We have a new guest." Trish's face contorted in disappointment before she turned back to Atticus with a cheery expression. "Kids are so lazy these days. But can't really blame 'em, with all those gadgets and doodads they got." Head cocked, she sighed. "You sure do look like an old soul, hun. What's your name?"

He bowed. "My name is Atticus."

"After Mr. Atticus Finch?"

"No ma'am. After the martyr."

"Oh. I see. Well, it's a nice name."

An overweight teenage boy entered from the parlor room. He held a half-empty bag of deep-fried potato slices called potato chips in one hand and a large can of soda-poison in the other. "Yes ma'am?" he said while munching.

"Bobby, dear, meet our newest guest, Atticus."

"Yo," the boy said.

"Take Atticus to his room."

Bobby waved Atticus along as if he were a pet. "C'mon."

His bag slung over his shoulder, Atticus followed.

"Nice gear," Bobby said as they climbed a short staircase to the second floor.

The worn wood creaked beneath Atticus' boots.

The boy looked back at Atticus. "Looks like the leather armor from *Guild Battles*, after you add the green dye that you have to get from the goblin archers in Pyrewind Meadows."

Strange. The Order was under the impression they'd eradicated Goblins from this region of the planet long ago.

"Here it is," Bobby waved at a door with a copper star emblazoned into the antique wood.

A photo of a malnourished gunfighter was pinned on the bedroom wall. A caption beneath read: *I'll be your huckleberry.*

"It's the Holiday suite," Bobby said. "Get it?"

Atticus slung his gear and sword onto the bed.

"Yo, man. Is that a real sword?"

"Indeed." His back to Bobby, Atticus unzipped his bag. He removed Rourn's journal and the wilted flower. Placing them on the dresser, he asked, "Is there food...a restaurant nearby?"

"Carmen will be by around noon with lunch. Not my taste, but people 'round here seem to love her...I mean the food."

Atticus gave a curt nod and closed the door in the boy's face. His stomach growled. He hadn't eaten since graduation night. But first he needed to report his observations of the murder scene. From his belt clip, he unclasped his phone and dialed Elder Cai.

"Atticus, my boy."

"I humbly ask is there any more information you have uncovered regarding the Geminus?"

“I have consulted with members from the Arch Templars of the Divine Council. Their knowledge is limited, but we have found some clues after searching the ancient texts. The female—or Whelp—will be in heat and prove to be extremely fatalistic.”

“The Stag has already proven its savagery,” Atticus said.

“The gruesome murder of one family is just the beginning. The female will morph from human into a primordial beast with more animalistic than human traits. The Arch Templars speculates that the Geminus will attempt to mate soon, bringing her into full maturity.”

“Understood. But I am unclear as to how to proceed.”

“I will continue to meet with the Council and phone as soon as I know more.”

Atticus paced at the foot of the bed. “Is there no path I can explore while I wait for your call?”

Elder Cai hesitated before replying. “An inter-dimensional gateway can be found somewhere in the Sacred woods on the outskirts of Buckeye.”

“I will leave at once.”

“Nay! Only if the Order has exhausted all other avenues and still can find no further clues to help with your search of the Geminus. It is a last resort only. Understood?”

Atticus shook his head, giving no verbal reply.

Elder Cai’s deep sigh reverberated through the phone. “You may inadvertently summon an evil entity or worse, lose yourself on some alien realm. You lack the esoteric skills required to manipulate a cosmic vortex. It would be far too dangerous.”

If Elder Cai deemed the summoning too dangerous, why had he told Atticus of it? Was this another test?

Atticus glanced out the window. A patch of thick woods lined the distant landscape. He gazed into Sacred Oaks, the forest where he could find answers. But he was to do nothing; just sit and wait. “I am expected to save the world with my hands bound by the chain of command?”

“As I am a steward of the Order, I must dictate procedure warning you against unauthorized actions.”

“I refuse to sit idle.”

“Open your ears boy. I’ve given you an alternative.” The Elder hiccupped. “One last thing. The Geminus are capable of sensing your presence. It is only a matter of time before it attempts to eliminate you. After all, you are its most feared predator.”

Atticus looked again at the woods. “Perhaps it is time I start playing with madness.”



Chapter Twenty-Eight



TWO HOURS LATER, THE Jalopy rattled its way into Buckeye a quarter past noon. Roxy's Bus Depot read 'O en'; the 'p' darkened. Over the years, little had changed in the small Texas town. Just how Shane liked it. He shifted to park and killed the engine.

Birch grabbed his large duffel from the truck bed and headed for his car parked on the side of Roxy's.

"You don't want to come in for a quick bite?" Shane asked.

Birch glanced over his shoulder. "Not sure I can stomach watching you and Amy ogle over each other. But let's work on our bikes tomorrow." Birch tossed his bag in the back of his car. "That is, if the little lady don't tucker you out too much tonight."

Shane waved and strode into Roxy's.

Amy, wearing the standard Roxy uniform—black shorts and white T-shirt—hurried by carrying a plate in each hand, both topped with a burger and steak fries.

The richly scented air tasted of bacon grease and buttered biscuits. His mouth watered and his stomach growled.

A poster-sized photograph of his high school football team clung to the wall: the Buckeye Vultures, taken over a decade ago, right after they won the state championship—the glorious Kettle days before he tossed his sorry ass into Uncle Sam's pot.

Amy set the burgers down at a nearby table, swung around and lunged into his open arms. "Thank God you're home!"

"Hello, baby." He held her head between his hands, his eyes roamed her body. "Just let me look at you."

Their lips fastened. Shane tightened his grip around her waist and drew her close. *God, she feels good. And smells a hell of a lot better than raw oil, chewing tobacco and body odor.*

"It's all over the news about the earthquake," she said. "And the strange lightening."

Amy's face was covered in makeup. He ran a thumb over a pink bump on her cheek. "What happened?"

She kissed his palm. Running the back of his hand along her face. "I missed you."

Fuck that shit! His hands on both sides of her face, he forced her to look at him. “What the fuck happened to your face?”

“You’re the only one that’s noticed.” She hesitated. “Restroom incident at The Bull. Clumsy is all. The door just came out of nowhere.”

Shane drew her against him and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I’ve told you to be careful around those dangerous doors.” He decided to lighten the mood. Lowering his head, he whispered close to her ear. “Has *Bastet* been having all the fun?”

Amy blushed and gave him a shove. “Hush. I can’t believe you told Carmen to do that.”

He pressed his face into her neck and inhaled “Mmm. Think I’ll have today’s special. Meatloaf is it?”

She scrunched her shoulders. “Down boy. I’m at work.”

Carmen held two plates, each topped with fried eggs and a scoop of hash browns. A black ponytail bounced in rhythm with her steps. “You two make me want to hurl.”

Shane draped his arm around Amy’s neck, tucking her close. “You’re just jealous, Car. Blew your chance to be with a hero and now you’re stuck with a bunch of zeroes.”

“Oh jeez.” Amy groaned. “Don’t ever utter that phrase again or we’re through.”

“I’m parched. Mind getting me some sweet tea?”

Amy planted a quick but fiery kiss on his lips and disappeared into the kitchen. She returned with a pitcher and a glass.

Shane straddled a stool. “Sit. I need to talk to you.”

Amy slid onto the stool beside him. A smile lit her face. “Did you decide to attend the anger management class?” She let out a delicate squeal and clapped her hands. “I’m so proud of you, honey.”

Grimacing, he shook his head. “Not even close.”

Fuck the anger management classes. She needs to drop that shit

Her shoulders sagged, brows furrowed. “Then what?”

Shane cracked his knuckles and let out a deep sigh. Seconds crawled by while his heart hammered against his ribs.

“What did you want to talk about, sweetie?” she said.

Does your mama know you're a slobbering pussy? The taunting words of his former Sergeant Stark rung through his head. *Scoop up your balls and tack ‘em back on ‘fore I stomp all over them little girly nuts!*

Shane cleared his throat. “I want you to—”

“Is anybody gonna bring me my damn coffee?” the old geezer, Robert Campbell, bellowed. The minty scent of Bengay wafted from his skin and clear across the cafe. Had the guy bathed in it?

Amy held up a finger to Shane. “Be right back.” She hopped from the stool. He snatched her wrist. “Marry me.”



HOLDING A LARGE PLATTER of bloody meat, Ira floated into Lynn’s bedroom.

Amongst the king-size bed and a full-length mirror centered over an antique dresser, Lynn slept. A faint purr whispered from her lips.

On the end table, Ira set the plate down. A water canister hung from a hook in the corner of the room. She watered the exotic plants dangling from the ceiling and several small potted trees that adorned the corners. Hovering over the brown carpet, she closed the thorny vines framing the floor-to-ceiling window, shading the room from the afternoon sunlight.

Ira felt Lynn’s sweaty forehead. A frown curved her lips. Lynn had been asleep for fourteen hours. Settling onto the foot of the bed, Ira watched.

And waited.



Chapter Twenty-Nine



INSIDE NEPHRUCH'S SKULL, Isaac disrobed. With his dagger tip, sharper than a falcon's talon, he lacerated the archaic numeral two into the leathery skin of his chest. Scorches of pain seared through him as he carved himself all according to the ceremonial rites.

The same way sirens lured sailors to their doom, the musk clinging to every branching corridor of the lair—like a sweet oil—beckoned Isaac to penetrate deeper into the cavernous skull.

Darkness enveloped him, but he plunged forward. A warm sourness licked at his naked body. Somewhere amongst the labyrinth the clicking movement of Vostrict's patrol resounded.

Slices of green light filtered through cracks of the charred bone walls. Rotten, hardened muscle and sinew clung like grout. Torn and broken spurs hung from the passageways' low ceilings.

Since the dawn of time—or at least since the decay and ruin of Eden—Geminus stags had made a similar pilgrimage as he was now, back to mother's lair to seek the blessings of the matron goddess. Not since his sixteenth season had he tasted her essence.

According to the ancient scriptures of the *Tabbrunica*, Galmoria's bittersweet essence flowed like tainted ambrosia from every pore of her body and it enticed even the mightiest of beasts to kneel and serve her wicked desires.

But Isaac would never cower. His lips curved into a sinister sneer. He imagined bending the Winged Priestess over her own altar and fucking the goddess' black asshole until it bled with her slimy fetid guts.

As one of her offspring, he would need to prove his alpha bloodline, confirm he was worthy of carrying on the Geminus lineage. He would need to force her to submit. Only then would Galmoria bless his union with his twin and allow Lynn to mature into a Vixen—and together his mate and he would rule the throne over all the tribes as King and Queen of Beasts.

But if he failed Galmoria would kill or enslave him.

Galmoria could kiss the lips of Death and chill the Reaper down to his tiniest bone.

At the end of the last chamber, a jagged threshold opened to his left and a larger cavernous alcove to his right. Isaac ducked into the smaller opening.

Four naked males were shackled to the scabrous wall, their bodies blistered and their genitalia consumed by pus and warts. Swarms of fat flies infested the dungeon chamber as did piles of writhing maggots that feasted on the blood, urine and feces of the four prisoners.

Isaac sniffed the air.

Geminus.

Three of the males spat at him. The fourth, grizzly and aged, stared with hollow black eyes. His scrawny arms were chained to a jutting bone spur above his head. A disgusting blistery rash covered the lengths of both his arms.

Isaac approached. "Why do you not spit like the others?"

The old Geminus said, "He ponders with me?"

"You failed your conquest over mother, all of you." Isaac panned the wretched prisoners, and chortled. "I shall be your master soon."

"I tried not." The male met Isaac's gaze. "I drank not of her bowl."

"And now you hang here like a fool."

The male hung his head. He snorted, blood dripped from his nostril. Lifting his gaze, grinning, a toothless smile, he said, "I saw the burning chariots over the city walls and they fell."

"You have gone mad, brother. Justly so, for your failure."

"When he came down from the mountain...his skin was aglow and his hair turned white for he had seen the face of Gods—the face of giants."

"I suspect you've been here awhile, my wretched brother."

A raspy laughter came from the threshold. Galmoria slithered inside the dungeon like a wet reptilian. Black wings trimmed in scarlet flapped against the wall. Ember red hair flowed to her waist like liquid flames. She wore only a lace halter with a tawny red thong, and knee-high boots with tiny human skulls chained to the outer sides. Her firm abdomen sparkled from onyx and garnet embedded in her skin. Curved talons protruded from her bony black fingertips.

Her forked tongue traced full bloody red lips. "Hello my darling."

The other three Geminus hissed, snarled. They lashed out with their hands and chomped their jaws. One-by-one Galmoria kissed their lips and stroked their infected genitals, immediately lulling them to sleep.

"Meet your brother, Adela," Galmoria glided until she stood between Isaac and the old male. "On that forsaken world called Earth, Adela once thought it a grand idea to be a priest for the humans. After he found his mate, he deemed himself too righteous for his own Mother." Galmoria wagged her finger. "But for the last thousand years, Mother has taught her little boy a lesson, hasn't she, baby?" Galmoria inched her face toward Adela's.

“I spaketh to the Lascivious Maid along the Red Sea!” Adela recoiled. “Return to whence you came!”

“Of course you did, my sweet cub.” Galmoria pressed her lips against Adela’s and trailed a forked tongue down his bare chest, leaving behind a slim red incision. She flashed Isaac a smile. “I’ve never been to the Red Sea on Earth,” she said. “Your poor brother is mistaking me for that petty little insect Lilith. I’m not a thing like her. The wench had pathetic taste and such an insignificant legacy barely even worth footnotes by mortal-kind.”

She turned toward Isaac. “As a welcome home gift, I will let you kill this worthless, disgusting, miserable disgrace of a child.”

Isaac tossed his dagger onto a bed of maggots, and claws ripped from his fingertips. “It is my pleasure, Mother.”

“Lilith soul be damned!” Adela muttered. “I forgive my brothers.”

Isaac punched his claws into Adela’s chest, digging his fingers deeper, grabbing for the rib cage, and clutching at his pumping heart. Squeezing the hot wet organ until it ruptured.

Galmoria cooed as the lacy top shed from her body. For the second time in over two centuries, she exposed her naked breasts to Isaac.

Son and mother circled one another, their bare feet splattering Adela’s pooled blood.

Galmoria rushed forward, hissing, fangs bared. Isaac slipped, landing on the slick bone floor.

They wrestled, squirming for the dominant stronghold. Their bodies rolled among the blood and maggots. Galmoria flipped him. His kneecaps smashed the hard floor and he unexpectedly found himself on hands and knees. She slithered from his blood-soaked grasp.

Something wet and prickly circled his anus—her demonic tongue trying to invade him!

She mounted him.

With the ferocity of a nest of wolverines in heat, Isaac’s guttural roar echoed in the small cavern, waking the slumbering Geminus who commenced to hissing and clawing against their rusty shackles. Galmoria’s cold talons pierced his back. He collapsed to his belly and rolled from under her weight, before snatching a handful of red hair and flinging her into the chamber wall like a living flail.

“You will never enslave me.”

“Did little Isaac come to fuck mommy or sass her?” Galmoria hovered close to the floor.

“I come seeking the blessing to mate with my twin.”

“Have you done what Mother asked and brought *The Beloved*?”

“She will be yours soon, but my twin awaits me. I have come to dominate you.”

Galmoria screeched, the walls shook. “You know what happens to cubs who disappoint.”

Galmoria hurled a yellow ball of energy. It pounded into his chest and burst, unleashing a swarm of angry hornets. Isaac growled as the flying pests stung at his naked body.

Galmoria darted from the dungeon. Her scream thundered throughout the lair. “Let the hunt begin, my cub!”



Chapter Thirty



SHANE SQUEEZED AMY'S hand, "I said I want to marry you, Amy Rae Wintry."

Amy blinked as if lost in a dark cave.

The clatter of dirty dishes had ceased. Incoherent whispers sifted amongst Roxy's patrons. All eyes focused on Shane and Amy.

She covered her gaped mouth, staring past Shane. With a grimace, Shane glanced over his shoulder and back at her.

"I was gonna say yes," she shrieked. "Geesh."

"What?" he asked. *What is she looking at?*

Amy waved a hand at him. "I wasn't talking to you." She stared away again. "Ground rules! Hush up. I can do this without your help."

Who the hell was Amy talking to? He turned her head, forcing her to look at him. "Just say yes."

"Somebody get my coffee, dammit!" Robert scoffed and tugged at his tattered overalls.

"Good God! Gate your hens, Mr. Campbell." Amy tightened her grip on Shane's hand. "Oh my gosh! I sneezed three times this morning."

"You did what?"

Squealing, Amy straddled his lap and threw her arms around his neck. "I love you."

"Then say yes."

"Why the hell not?" Amy's lips curled into a devious smirk. "I mean, yes!"

The cafe erupted with applause and shouts of congratulations. Carmen dropped dirty dishes into a tub and ran toward Amy, arms open wide. Amy slid from Shane's lap and met Carmen halfway. They embraced.

"Congrats, *mami*."

Roxy poked her head from the kitchen. "Well, it's about damn time, Baker. Thought you were gonna wait 'til the gal was an ol' maid 'fore you married her." Roxy straightened the hair net covering her grayed bun. "Congrats, you crazy kids, but y'all better get back to work 'fore the place gets backed up more than my brother was last Thanksgiving."

Amy wiped tears from her face. She grabbed a pitcher of iced tea and refilled Mr. Campbell's coffee mug. "Yes, Miss Roxy."

Mr. Campbell scowled at his mug of iced tea.

Shane grabbed Amy by the hand and dragged her outside to the back of the restaurant. With their hands laced, he pinned her against the wall. He captured her lips in a passionate kiss and lifted their arms over their heads. His body rocked tight against hers.

Amy turned her head and broke from the kiss. "Why now? I mean we've been together five years and you not once brought up marriage. I always figured we'd just..."

Her lips pressed tightly together, as if she was struggling for the right way to tell him that because of his bad boy, womanizing reputation, she figured she'd be living in sin for the better part of her life. Better yet, maybe she thought he'd eventually dump her and move on to his next conquest. Did she really not know how he felt about her?

Shane gave her a sidelong look. "You figured what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He stepped back, unclasping their hands. "There was an accident on the rig. Kevin was killed. I didn't know him that well, but his wife was eight months pregnant with their first child. It got me thinking."

"I knew something was up. I heard a dog howl three times last night." Her eyes narrowed. "So you proposed because your friend died?"

Shane blew out a breath.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "I've waited to hear you ask that question since damn near puberty. I ask you why now and all you got is 'I got to thinking.' God knows you're no Shakespeare but you gotta give me something better." Amy sighed, looking at the sky. "Ground rules, remember?"

"What ground rules?" Shane asked.

"Never mind," she ground out.

Shane's eyes widened. "Well, who the hell were you talking to?"

"I could tell you but you wouldn't like the answer."

He held her at arm's length and looked her up and down.

"What're you looking at?" she asked.

"I was picturing you in a strait jacket. If we add some lace it'd make an eccentric wedding gown."

Amy socked him in the chest. "That's not funny."

Carmen's voice cut through the back lot. "Get your skinny ass back in here before Roxy comes out here with a frying pan."

Amy gave him a forced smile and headed toward the restaurant.

"I love debating the finer points of hotdog relish versus regular relish," he said.

Amy paused, her back to him.
He said, "I love that you put garlic in your hot tea every morning."
Amy turned around. A blank expression on her face.
"I love you," Shane said.
She shook her head. More tears fell.
Shane scoffed. "What the hell is wrong with you?"
Roxy screamed from inside the diner.
"I gotta go." Amy disappeared inside the diner.
The screen door squeaked in protest as it swung shut with a clang.



Chapter Thirty-One



ATTICUS PLACED ROURN'S journal and the wilted rose on a shelf. He checked his email where he discovered a message from Elder Cai:

The vast woodlands called Sacred Oaks is believed to be a pathway for the righteous and evil to pass unto this dimension from the infinite universes spread throughout the spectrum of space and time. All of these myriad galaxies form the multiverse that consist of every possible alternate reality and course of time.

According to recorded Mexican Texas history, a cult opened the portal in the 1830s. The leader, Joseph Rawlins, an eccentric book seller and self-proclaimed scholar, established the Ministries of I'gnononid, a secret society and organization dedicated to the enlightening of life, the human condition, and focused on alternatives outside traditional Christian rhetoric; he obsessed with finding a way to travel through space and time and into other worlds and dimensions.

Joseph orchestrated multiple occult rituals in attempt to control the randomization of the cosmic elements in order to manipulate his destiny and fate in the universe. Through the assistance of other cult members he conducted strange and esoteric ceremonies.

On November 11th, 1833, there was an orgy of debauchery ending in a mass cult suicide. His fifteen year old daughter, Sera Rawlins' body was discovered raped and drowned in the pond near the house.

Joseph was never found.

On November 13, 1833, a tear in the universe's rift opened an astral gateway beneath what is nowadays referred to as Sera's Pond. This gate links time, space, and alternate planes allowing the transit of cosmic entities to pass to and from the portal.

Act with caution, Atticus.

A distant clang resounded from somewhere downstairs. The dinner bell. Atticus descended the stairs, intending to eat quickly then, with or without the Order's permission, head for Sacred Oaks.

As he reached the bottom, Atticus saw Trish speaking to a young woman. The woman's black shorts stopped high on her thighs, revealing her shapely legs. Rings of gold, large enough to double as bracelets, hung from her ears. Hair—shiny as silk and dark as a crow's feather—poured over her shoulders.

“How much do I owe you?” Trish asked.

Atticus blew out a breath. Bloody locusts! She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“Roxy said you’ve got credit,” the beauty replied.

Atticus felt his groin swell. In horror, he glanced at his green leather pants, tight against his obvious arousal. He cupped his hands over himself, unable to peel his eyes from the prominent breasts peeking from her white T-shirt.

When her eyes met his, he feigned interest at the ‘Wanted: Roarin’ Roxy’ poster.

Trish scoffed. “Roxy’s a sweetheart. I’ve not had credit in weeks.”

Atticus wiped his brow, scanning the lobby and nearby dining room. People talked and went about their business as if this almost-naked woman was not lingering in their presence. He felt his face warm with heat and pulled at the collar of his tunic.

“You won’t believe what just happened.” The beauty grinned. “Shane just popped the question.”

The raven-haired lady sipped from a Styrofoam cup. When she swallowed, Atticus’ erection twitched. With the back of his hand, he wiped sweat from his forehead.

“Get outta town,” the owner of the establishment said. “That’s great. I’m happy for Shane and Amy both. I mean, she did accept?”

“Of course.” The beauty turned and waved. “Adios, Trish.”

“Bye, Carmen.”

Holy rattlers! Atticus inhaled. A combination of sweet and salty aromas made him growl. He hadn’t been this hungry since losing his way in the Guilded Safari Retreat four years ago. He eyed the dining room. With plates and silver in their grips, a crowd had gathered. Shaking his head, he stomped back up the stairs, cursing his traitorous hormones. Food could wait.



AFTER SHANE HAD LEFT, a tour bus of senior citizens stopped in. They were on their way to Mountain View, Arkansas, for the outhouse races. The diner was slammed for two straight hours. Amy made over a hundred dollars, but the devil if her feet didn’t ache.

Exhausted, she waited outside Roxy’s until Scooter pulled up, driving her Escort. She gave him a thumb-to-the-wind sign to get out and let her behind the wheel. She kicked off her sneakers and tossed them in the back. At the sound of a DJ relaying the news, Amy turned the radio up.

“Strange news out of the woods again, folks,” the DJ said in a slight jocular tone. “Local wildlife and fishery discovered the bodies of two men in the

western region of Sacred Oaks this morning. The most bizarre part of this story...y'all brace yourselves for this one now: Cause of death...hypothermia. That's right, y'all. They froze to death...in Texas." The DJ played the intro tune to Twilight Zone. "As an FYI: yesterday's heat index was 131."

"That defies any logic whatsoever," Scooter said.

"The bodies have been identified as Chris DeWalt and his younger cousin, Jacob DeWalt."

A chill sliced Amy's abdomen like a guillotine blade. "Oh my God," she breathed out.

"I take it by your reaction that you knew the recently deceased?" Scooter asked.

"Yes. Sort of. But it doesn't matter. He wasn't a friend."

"Was he an enemy?" Scooter pressed.

"I don't have enemies." Amy gave Scooter a sidelong glance, and noticed a fresh scratch down the side of his cheek. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"Is someone giving you problems again at school?" Amy pulled onto the two-lane road.

Scooter exhaled. "I said nothing happened."

Amy nodded, biting at her lower lip. "Well, your brother made it in today." The statement more of a cautionary one.

"Great. Thanks for the heads up. Will you drop me off at Zack's house?" Scooter stared out the passenger window.

Shane wouldn't be happy about Scooter getting his butt whooped again and she wasn't going to force the poor guy to listen to one of Shane's hot-headed lectures about standing up for himself and being a man. Not again.

After she dropped Scooter off at Zack's house, a wave of emotion washed over her. Tears filled her eyes. Silently, she scolded herself for being so damn emotional. Was it from the heavy night of drinking? Had the news of Chris' bizarre death brought out the emotions and waterworks? If she put any stock into what her body was trying to tell her then she knew something was off.

Something new and strange and not-quite-right was festering inside of her.

She had just gotten engaged to the only man she'd ever loved. Why wasn't she ecstatic? It should've been the grandest, most marvelous, day of her life.

What reasons is there for this much despair?

Vision blurred from a steady stream of tears. Struggling for a breath, her lungs heaved against her ribs, hiccupping in rhythm with her uncontrolled sobs.

She thought back to Shane's proposal, and the smirk on his face as he teased her about getting married in a straight-jacket lined with lace. Pursing her lips,

wishing she could do it all over again, she'd hit him much harder. In the face.

No.

The family jewels.

What afflicts you?

“You killed Chris...didn't you?”

The insect dared to touch the Beloved and the blasphemy cost the price of its life.

“Chris wasn't an ‘it’. He was a person, not an insect. How could life be so petty to you?”

My motives are not of your concern, female!

She slammed her palm on the steering wheel. “Stop calling me that!” With a growl, she muttered, “Men.”

I am no man.

“Dammit!” She wiped tears from her eyes. “Go away. I need space.”

Your tone is of great insult to me.

Amy turned on the radio. Rock 'n' roll. Loud.

Miles stretched without a word. She pulled onto the dirt road leading to the trailer.

You will marry the one you call Shane. For it is his feats that are critical in the saving of worlds. If you do not then the course of time will be forever altered. And all universes will be enslaved by the King and Queen of Beasts and the Empress. Nothing more will mortal-kind be than food, labor and playthings. All your modern civilizations will crumble; your mass weapons be reduced to the lethality of sticks and stones; and within a century all mortal-kind will be extinct.

Amy turned into her driveway. She shut off the engine. “I really wish you were a figment of my wild imagination. I'd rather have just dealt with the pissed off rat spirit than listen to your ravings of the end of all universes.”

I will depart and give you this ‘space’ which you speak of.

Amy scooped up her purse and sneakers, and leaned against the car door. “I do love him.”

This I have known.



Chapter Thirty-Two



THAT BRAZEN BEAUTY would render his doom, Atticus thought. He pulled his leather pants up, gathered his sword and fastened his belt.

As he descended the stairs, Trish ran toward him with a camera in hand. Before he could utter a word, she had blinded him with a flash as bright as the arcanium blast he'd used at the crime scene. She waved a flimsy sheet that had ejected from the contraption.

"Oh, sweetie! Sorry. I just had to get a pic of you in that get-up." She pointed to a corkboard plastered with photos of people standing over slain deer and hogs.

Trish tacked his picture next to a fat bald guy holding a silver can in one hand and a string of fish in the other. "Now when you snag that big ol' beast you're after you just bring him back here and we'll put your picture on the trophy wall."

"Yes ma'am." While the notion was utterly absurd, Atticus could not help but smile at the thought of him 'snagging' the Beast and getting his photo taken with its head on an iron pike.

The feast was served on paper plates with plastic utensils. He served himself and sat across from an elderly couple. Skepticism abandoned him when he tasted the succulent seasoned beef. It was more spectacular than anything he had ever eaten at Eagle Hall.

The old man took an upside down bottle from the center of the table and squirted red goop on his meat.

"What substance is that, sir?"

The old man stared at him. "Ain't you ever seen ketchup before?"

"May I try some?"

"Sure."

Atticus shook a drop onto his plate. He tasted it on the tip of his fork before lathering the meatloaf with the remainder of the tangy but sweet substance. Halfway through his feast, he ran dry and looked for another bottle but could not find one. Sighing, he pushed the remaining food away and headed for the door.

Outside, he stretched his arms, popped his neck before jogging out the gated driveway and toward Sacred Oaks.

What better place to seek insight on his prey? Perhaps he could witness a new fiend surface from the cursed waters and touch the Earth for the first time. He had not slain a foe. The warrior in him yearned for the virgin kill.

At the edge of the thick woods, Atticus searched for an animal trail that would serve him. He soon found one that deer frequently traveled. Trees were scraped and missing bark, obvious signs of a buck; and the soft dark soil was imprinted with hundreds of tracks.

Like any other woods, Sacred Oaks was alive with chirping songbirds, a cawing crow, and numerous locusts and grasshoppers.

“Rotten root!” He swept a thick spider web from his face.

The further he ventured into the forest the more dense the woods became. He could no longer see the soil through a blanket of crisp leaves and dried pine needles.

The forest canopy blotted out the mid-afternoon light. Atticus feared not the dark, and he welcomed the coolness. The Beast was as lethal in the day as well as the night.

An owl hooted as if to mock him.

“Hush,” Atticus said in a harsh whisper. “I will kill you then nail your carcass to the tree, you ominous pest.”

He came to a pond filled with murky water. Bullfrogs croaked warnings. Crickets chirped their gossip. Sparrows and crows watched from the ancient ash and oak.

“Listen to all of God’s creatures,” Elder Cai had said. “Even the bees and the spiders have wisdom to bestow.”

With his legs planted wide on the dried pine needles and leaves, he held each hand out—palm out—in front of his body and circled them counterclockwise.

In his current stance, he opened his soul to all planes.

The bubbling pond taunted his efforts in a sinister tongue. Elder Cai’s words rang in his ears. “Evil will tempt you from the righteous path, but a true Paladin will remain firm to his convictions.”

“I am Atticus,” he said aloud. “The power of the seven choirs are with me!”

The pond water boiled. Steam rose from its choppy surface, testing his patience further. Atticus held the stance for several long minutes before he repositioned himself.

He spread his arms wide, curved his back, and spread his legs as if succumbing to a free fall. He opened his mind.

Voices whispered from the trees. An unseen creature hissed.

“Grant me your wisdom.”

More hissing filled his mind, and soon an orchestra of snarling and buzzing.

Atticus fell to his knees. Water seeped into his boots and saturated the green leather covering his legs. His palms pressed against his chest. He angled his elbows upward, pointing to the west and the east.

Silence.

“Provide my heart with direction.”

The bullfrogs and the crickets went mute.

The water rippled.

“*Chlokend dekruaacho eha-da ekrloli Galmoria.*” Alien words echoed.

Atticus’ eyes opened.

A shadowy humanoid standing thrice as tall as him stood on the surface of the boiling pond, its body a shifting blur of shadow. Eight insectile arms wriggled in front of its thin form. The only part that was not shadow were the two bulbous eye peering from beneath a black hood.

“Be gone! I do not seek knowledge from a devil!”

The demon rumbled like a bear in a deep barrel. Was it laughing?

Atticus’ hand gripped the hilt of his blade.

Two cold slimy tentacles shot forward and wrapped around his throat.

Suctions stuck to his flesh and tiny barbs burrowed into his trachea.

“*Chlokend eekruaacho eha-da ekrloli. Galmoria!*”

In desperation, he abandoned the hilt of his sword and latched hold of the tentacles with both hands. They weren’t tentacles, but bones as rigid and unyielding as ironwood branches. There was no breaking free of the demon’s clutch.

Oxygen deprivation took hold. His might struggled to keep his knees from buckling; the muscles in his face strained to keep his eyes wide, fighting through his blurry sight.

The otherworldly creature’s face leaned forward like the top of an ancient tree bent by a powerful wind.

“*Ho’gon Geminii-th Kiqus Cinis-hub!*”

His knees sank into the mud. His fingers uncurled from the black limbs.

From above, the creature’s mouth fell agape before gobbling him whole.

Then it was over.

Blackness.



Chapter Thirty-Three



SHANE STOOD AT THE stove, stirring the macaroni into the boiling water. He didn't much like cooking but soon after their first fight, he'd learned flowers and chocolate were not key to fixing things with Amy. Birch had recommended cooking her a nice meal. So he had taught himself how to fix her favorite, his failsafe plan for every time he fucked up.

Except this time he had no clue what he'd done to piss her off. Amy seemed so happy and excited when he proposed, then—as if a switch had been pressed—she got all emotional and shit. If she was any other girl, he'd chalk it up to girl stuff, but Amy wasn't like other girls. She wasn't prone to fits of emotional outbursts.

Shane loved her. He told her so. He wanted to marry her. He told her so. What the fuck did he do wrong?

Shrugging, he stirred the cheese into the macaroni.

So far, the simple recipe had worked. Two hundred and thirty-six to zero. Not bad odds for a guy who caught the kitchen on fire the first time he'd cooked cheeseburgers in the frying pan.

He set the spoon down and cracked his knuckles. *Here's hoping for two hundred and thirty-seven.*

He heard the front door open and glanced over his shoulder. "Hey babe." He dumped the pasta into two bowls.

She tossed her sneakers on the floor and smiled as she turned into the kitchen. But she didn't seem happy. Her eyes were swollen and red.

Fuck.

Shane set the bowls on the table. "Hungry?"

Nodding, she draped her purse on the ladder-back chair before sitting. She took a bite and glanced up at him. "Thank you."

This time the smile appeared more genuine. But her eyes indicated he wasn't out of the woods yet, and if he didn't navigate this evening perfectly he'd be docking with Alamo tonight.

He sat across from her. As they ate, she told him about buying worms at Abe's. Amy told him of Carmen's latest fight with Derrick, and them both getting arrested during make-up sex in the back of Derrick's truck.

Most women who just got engaged would rush out and buy wedding magazines. They'd be debating colors, flowers and a romantic locale for a

honeymoon.

But not Amy.

She was more interested in worms and Carmen's make-up sex.

God he loved her.

"So where's my brother?" Shane asked.

"Oh, I dropped him off at his friend's house."

Shane grunted and dropped his fork. "I told him I didn't want him hanging out with that freaky kid."

"How do you know it's Zack?"

"Cause he doesn't have any other friends."

"Then let him have this one. Plus you'll get me all to yourself tonight."

He craned his neck and exhaled a deep breath. "Fine." *For now.*

When Amy finished eating, she took her plate and fork to the sink. "I want to be at the creek by six tomorrow morning." She squirted a sponge with soap and began scrubbing her plate. "So let's get to bed early."

From behind, he wrapped his arms around her small waist and pressed a kiss to the crook of her neck. He whirled her to face him. "I sure ain't one to refuse a girl her beauty sleep. Off to bed it is."

Amy laughed. "That's not what I—"

He covered her lips with a hand, drowning her words. "Hush." His pelvis tight against her hips, he pinned her against the sink. When her body leaned into his, his erection pushed painfully against the crotch of his jeans.

He kissed her.

The radio DJ cracked jokes about the bizarre atmospheric disturbances from the night before.

Amy's posture stiffened. Her muscles tensed, shoulders squared. Without breaking from the kiss, he reached and jerked the radio's cord from the wall. He slipped his hands under her shirt and pulled it over her head.

Shoving him, she shot a glance over her shoulder, out the window. With one hand, she drew the curtains. With the other she covered her breasts. "Don't let the neighbors see Brassy and Sassy!"

"What neighbors?" He reached behind, his fingers unclasping her skimpy blue bra. With his head between her breasts, he licked his way from Brassy to Sassy. Inhaling, he moaned.

Amy dipped under him, escaping from his grasp and fled through the den. Her taut ass turned the corner and vanished down the hall.

Two hundred and thirty-seven. Grinning, he dashed after her. The bedroom door slammed in his face. When he tried the knob it didn't budge.

"What's the magic word?" she called from the other side.

“Let me in!” He had been gone ten days with nothing to comfort him but his right hand. He was so damn horny he could barely think straight, nodding through dinner, struggling to stay focused on the conversation and not on her—

She laughed. “Nope. Try again.” Shane heard the bedroom radio crank, an old country station.

“I guess you don’t want me to screw your brains out?” He tried the knob again but still it didn’t turn. “I swear to God I will kick this door down if you don’t open it. You know I will.” *Then I’m really gonna fuck the future Mrs. Baker raw.*

When he heard her snicker, he stepped backward and kicked. The latch broke, shuddering the door open.

His grunt drowned out the steel guitar. “Hello, baby.”



ISAAC SPUNTED AFTER Galmoria. Her taunting laughter echoed deep within the large tunnel. His bare feet pounded the coarse bone as he flung himself into the depths of Nephruich’s bowels.

The furious wasps caused a patchwork of welts to seize his bare chest, pumping hot toxicity straight to his heart. His skin turned sallow. Stings to his groin left white bubbles of pus on his throbbing cock.

Galmoria wished him nothing but sorrow and pain and she would deliver as much as possible and all in the name of the sacred ritual, which he had no choice but to engage in, not if he wanted to fuck his mate.

Isaac’s feet touched a smooth crystal floor. Just as he looked down, the bottom dropped from beneath him. Shards of crystal imploded and rained down. The tunnel vanished.

With a crash, he slammed onto a wood plank. Looking around he discovered he was in a small ferry, a large monstrous rat carved in the wood at each end. Murky water splashed onto the bow.

Over a dozen wharf rats scurried inside the boat. On the opposite end, a small brown-haired boy wearing a red cloak rowed.

Stalactites made of sharp bones jutted from above and Isaac was forced to duck.

“Samuel of the rats at your service,” the boy said.

“Where is she?” Isaac brandished his dagger. “Where is Galmoria?”

“Tis not my place to know such things, sir. Only I have known the rodents for two centuries.”

“Get me to shore.” Isaac crossed the boat, stepping on rats biting at his ankles.

“Impossible, sir. Ye are my passenger on a cursed voyage.” Samuel stared past him and began to whistle a forlorn tune. He sang:

*The rats and pigs will come for thee
The rivers and bones will have your soul
Thou eyes and liver will rot with me
Ye shall pay the eternal toll—*

“Enough!” Isaac’s dagger cut through the boy’s neck.

Laughter echoed from behind. Glancing back, Isaac growled at the same boy, now seated at the opposite end. The rats scurried between the two cloned ferry-boys.

“My Master said, if thou discerns him. Me thought I known a beast, but man is he. Behold this creature, he is no king, of man or beast.”

Isaac’s lips quivered as he snarled. “Cease your ridicule, fiendish slave. I shall rule your soul.” A rat chomped at Isaac’s foot and he kicked, sending the rodent hurling into the muddy water. A yagh-yaht, slender albino snake-like creature with a barbed tail, swallowed the rat whole with its fish-like large mouth.

The boy squealed like a mad swine. “Thou murdered Osklot!”

A sinister urge tugged at Isaac. Howling, he stabbed another rat onto his dagger. The vermin screeched and writhed at the tip of his blade.

Both visages of the boy violently shook. They emerged as one—the original one. The boy charged and pummeled Isaac with tiny fists.

With a swift arc of his blade, he lopped Samuel’s head off. The severed head splashed into the dark river. The remaining rats jumped over the rim of the boat and swam toward the head.

“The whole world shall follow the beast. Hail the king,” the head sputtered while it drifted. The rats escorted it to shore.

Ahead, a fern green light lit the tunnel. As the boat drifted closer, the cavern gradually opened into a vast room, at least ten stories high and wide, all cast in the same green glow. The boat suddenly ran aground. The river went dry. A swarm of yagh-vahts that had been lurking beneath the water slithered into the shadows.

White sand rained from high above. As the heavy sand filled the chamber, he heard Galmoria’s laughter resounding off the high ceiling. “Poor, poor Samuel.” Her words echoed. “Such a sweet, sweet boy—a Librus, too. Such puny children.”

“Show yourself, Mother! Come to me.”

“Don’t be hasty, my cub. Mother wants foreplay.” Her demonic groans of pre-orgasm flooded the room, as quickly as the sand.

The grit covered the boat, reaching to Isaac's knees now. He spotted the rats carrying Samuel's head up wide black steps. Isaac followed. The steps felt like rubber—rotten muscle of Nephrukk.

The sand fell harder and faster. It spilled over his head and bit into his cuts and wounds caused by the wasps, rats and his self-inflicted laceration to his chest.

At the top of the steps, Vostrict perched on what appeared to be a petrified mushroom, large enough to serve as a throne.

Isaac scowled and charged the giant scorpion. Its tail went erect, stinger shooting thick venom. Isaac took a face full of the poison as he leaped onto Vostrict's back. Isaac straddled the scorpion as if it was a raging bull, and held onto the creature's bone-hard carapace.

"Take me out of here, Vostrict. Obey me, you pest!"

Vostrict scurried down the steps, but not before his stinger stabbed into Isaac's back. Isaac winced, but couldn't suppress a howl that tore from his throat. The stinger, a bony stiletto dagger, harpooned through his backside and Isaac felt it throb as it unleashed streams of venom into his body. His hands gripped tighter on Vostrict's shell.

The scorpion dug through the sand, burying deeper and deeper, taking Isaac with him.

Isaac's vision blurred. Vostrict's poison relentlessly coursed through his body, a mixture of lava and ice, scorching and simultaneously freezing. His muscles locked. Couldn't even open his jaw to curse the arachnid.

Vostrict crashed through a floor of sinew. The cavern and green lights vanished, replaced by a vast, purple sky and clouds of pale lavender. Isaac rolled off the scorpion. With a thud, he landed on a bed of sand. An endless sea lapped at a peaceful orange shore.

Soft waves nuzzled him. With trembling hands, he splashed his face. Blood from his fresh wounds seeped into the water and was carried by the returning tide.

His muscles were stiff like bolts and rods had been inserted in his limbs and torso. And his teeth chattered. And his heart thundered.

And he thought he might be dying.

When he looked into the sky the colors melded. He forced himself to stand on rigid, shaky legs.

In the last hundreds years, he'd wandered the planets of numerous galaxies. Always alone but never lonely. Glancing at the sky, he longed to see his twin, know what she was thinking, what she was doing. Was she safe? Was his wraith serving her well?

He had finally found his twin. He would no longer be alone. But standing on this beach, in this forsaken universe, awaiting his demonic mother, he felt cold...and alone.

A behemoth of a two headed wolf with squid tentacles rose from the sea. Mist shrouded its lower half, but Galmoria could clearly be seen riding on its back.

She rode her mount onto the shore, still wearing her boots, but nothing else. The salt water dripped from her naked body and Isaac's cock throbbed with anticipation and need. The need to dominate her.

“Hello, Mother.”



Chapter Thirty-Four



A SMALL LAMP CAST A soft florescent glow on the bed where Amy knelt, dressed only in baby blue panties. Against her chest she held a black cowboy hat covering her small breasts. “It’s yours. I found it at the Shadowlin Booth Library fair.”

Never one to break tradition, Amy always had a surprise for him when he got home. Last time he was away, he returned to a bottle of homemade raspberry wine that she’d received in lieu of a tip. She drank it down in two nights, singing its praises in a girlish, cute as hell singsong tone. *O’Raspberry! O’Raspberry! Finest wine is mine O’Raspberry! O’Raspberry! O’Raspberry! Wine gets me horny every time.* So even though she drank the whole bottle it had still been a gift for him in the end.

The Lypsium cologne she’d gotten him last year was the best. He didn’t like it, but Amy loved it and he loved the way it smelled on her. That familiar scent of spiced peaches and sage wood went straight to his groin. And she’d obviously splashed some on tonight.

His eyes on the Stetson, he said, “Let me have it, baby.”

“Come and get it, cowboy.”

Shane discarded his clothes and dived onto the bed. From a kneeling position, he perused her from head to toe without missing any of the crevices in between. With the cutest laugh, Amy hung the hat on his erection.

He gyrated, before placing it on his head. “Yippie ki yay.” Using one hand against her chest, he pushed her to the mattress. Now she was sprawled out for him to really get a look at her petite body. Each and every time he towered over her little figure he felt like a giant about to devour a helpless little damsel. He covered her body with his, planting his fist on either side of her face; her smiling pink lips reflected the pale lamp’s glow. Gently as his patience would allow, he guided the length of his shaft toward her slippery sex. The tip of his cock had just begun to enter her when her hands suddenly retaliated with a barrage of slaps against his chest and flanks.

Amy shrieked. She shoved him aside and jumped to the floor. Underneath the bed, she rearranged her sneakers toe-to-toe.

Sprawled on his side, he patted the bed. “Hurry up and get that sweet ass back here.”

She pouted. “Tell Mr. Hokey Pokey to hang the heck on.”

“Don’t work that way, baby.” He thumbed at his bare chest. “Pilot.” Then pointed to his erect cock, impatiently twitching. “Copilot.” Shane wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked up and down, spreading precum along the length. “And I don’t converse with my dick.”

Her eyes rolled to the ceiling, as if in deep thought. Bringing her gaze slowly back to him, Shane could almost see the light bulb above her blonde head before she said, “But Carmen said that all guys talk to their penises, so it has to have a proper name.”

He continued stroking himself. “Debating Carmen’s infinite wisdom of cock wasn’t really what I pictured us doing tonight.”

She crawled toward him, an angelic smile on her face and the devil in her eyes. She lay on the bed beside him. As he crawled over her, she asked, “So no Hokey Pokey?”

“You cannot name my penis after a children’s dance. It’s just...fucked up.”

She laughed. “How about Colonel Zen?”

“Random. But better.” He leaned down and suckled her neck, tasting and smelling those spiced peaches as if she’d bathed in the pulp. With a tilt of his head, he gestured to the side of the bed where Amy had rearranged her shoes. “Baby, I’m gonna eat you alive. And I don’t need any superstitious ritual to make you scream.”

“I never scream.”

From the nightstand, Shane grabbed *Bastet*. He waved it like a scolding finger. “You ever scream for him?”

“Oh mercy! Put that away.” Amy grabbed for the toy. “And Bastet is an Egyptian goddess, not a ‘him’.”

Shane held it out of her reach. “Mmm. That’s some handy info. Maybe I’ll let her join us.” He flashed a wide grin. “But I want you to myself for round one.” He tossed the vibrator to the side before tugging her panties down her legs. Twirling the silk undies, he tossed them over his shoulders. The panties caught on the antlers of a deer head Shane had killed last winter, joining a lacy bra and chemise.

Shane shoved his aching cock against her slit. Kissing her deeply, he waited until she squirmed against him before thrusting.

Hard.

Fast.

His mouth covered a hard pointy nipple while her hands traced the contours of his ass and slid up and down his naked back.

When her shoulders stiffened, tensed, the first telltale sign she was about to climax, he ground his pelvis against hers and sent a silent thank you: *To Aunt*

Carol, love Colonel Zen.



STANDING ON THE EDGE of the sea, Isaac choked and coughed. Blood and amber vomit poured from his gaped mouth and pooled at the massive two-headed wolf's scaly seaweed-dripping paws.

Galmoria dismounted. "Did my baby catch a nasty bug?" She sauntered closer.

With the back of his hand, he wiped spittle from his lips. He wanted to snarl at her, let her know the fight hadn't fled him. But his broken, shallow breathing and hammering heart prevented him from making any sound but a gruff grunt.

Galmoria's boot slammed into his chest. He splayed onto his back. A jagged shell clipped his right shoulder.

More blood and venom drooled from his lips. He managed to crawl to his knees. "I w-will...have y-you."

Galmoria gripped his shoulders, her fur-covered groin at eye level.

The most stringent essence he had ever scented raided his nostrils. Isaac grappled her legs for support.

"That's it, my cub." Galmoria moaned as she swiveled her sex against his face, smothering him between her dripping folds. Her insidious nectar mixed with the salt water stung the back of his throat like tiny insect pincers.

Whimpering, Isaac jerked away. He balanced on his hands and knees and spat. "Never will I...please you." His canines flashed.

The back of her hand felt like a stone axe smashing into his cheek. With a puny grunt he rolled onto his back again.

Galmoria dug her heel into his chest, grounding against his Narkush stone that hardly held any glow. "You disgrace Mother, little Isaac. Such a weak and puny cub." Her fangs shot over her lower lip.

Little resolve remained in his mind, and none in his body. Vostrict's deadly cocktail weakened his muscles, turning them rigid, burnt and frost-bitten. His teeth chattered as an icy fever captured his body.

With a talon, Galmoria pointed to the sky.

In the lavender clouds, a visage formed of Ira sitting on a bed next to a fevered Lynn. Sweat drenched his mate's hair and her face was flushed, eyes closed. Isaac heard her soft purr.

Galmoria smiled at Ira. "Hello, dear. I command you to kill that pathetic whelp."

"N-no," Isaac uttered, hoarsely.

Galmoria snarled. "Don't sass Mother."

If Ira killed Lynn it would mean his own death, death by synchrony. It was not death that he feared most, but to watch his twin perish would be more punishing than any physical suffering Galmoria could inflict.

With Lynn enraptured in the throes of her metamorphosis, she would be helpless against Ira who acted under Galmoria's influence now.

His brashness to conquer Galmoria had led him to mount Vostrict and take enough poison to kill an adult Minotaur, and now he and his twin would pay for his foolishness and impatience.

Galmoria nodded skyward. "End her!"

Ira drew a slim blade, turned to Lynn and ran it through her abdomen.

Galmoria bellowed with laughter, her heel twisting into Isaac's chest.

Isaac felt no pain. In his soul, Lynn's life-force remained true.

Closing his eyes, he feigned a final breath.

"My poor, poor, child." Galmoria removed her heel. "You might have made a fine replacement for Adela." Standing over him, she kicked at his ribs.

Isaac's claws snatched her ankle, jerked and twisted; the bone snapped, and Galmoria toppled to the ground beside him. Shrieking like a vulture, Galmoria clawed with her talons. Isaac absorbed her blows, gritting his teeth, and wrapped both hands around her slimy throat before he twisted. Her shrieking stopped.

Paralyzed, her lips pursed like a drowning fish.

From behind, Isaac crept over her, his front to her back side, his cock against her asshole. He gazed toward the sky.

Ira grinned. She held her blade up. It vanished, a phantom knife.

Galmoria writhed beneath him, her head lolling on her shoulders. Before her broken neck could heal, he knotted his fingers in her hair and yanked her head backward. Empty, doll-like eyes met his.

"Look upon my face when I fuck you like the demon whore you are." Isaac's blood and pus covered cock stabbed into her vile black hole.

The sea-wolf howled at the purple heavens.

"I hate you, Mother."



BY THE ILLUMINATION of the small night light, Amy watched his silhouette, black cowboy hat and broad shoulders, rock back and forth. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself up, he rewarded her with a deep groan.

Her mom once said men weren't worth a damn and to invest in lots of batteries. But Aunt Carol had told her the right man would know how to reach those special spots that no plastic toy could touch. And every girl needed that

deep touch every now and again—that was what Aunt Carol had said, even though she'd never married.

Amy's nails dug into his back. The deeper they buried, the harder he pounded. Her sex milked him as she exploded with orgasm. His cock snug, she relished in the feel of his bulk and masculinity, grateful he'd been the one to take her virginity years ago.

With a feral growl, he nipped at her earlobe.

Her legs quivered as she crossed her ankles around the small of his back. A moan was all the response she could manage. A high-pitched rolling moan.

Lifting his upper body, he gazed down at her. "I love you, Amy Rae Baker."



Chapter Thirty-Five



THROUGH SOME COSMIC force that Atticus knew nothing of he'd been dropped inside of a lusterless world with only various spectrums of gray. The sign in front of the building read REEP's.

The doors slid open. A person dressed in a long unwavering robe clouded in smoky hues exited the building.

The figure came closer. His skin attempted defiance of the gray world through a ghastly slate-blue complexion.

Atticus rushed forward.

Rourn held up a red alder wood staff that had also retained its color. "All is going according to the correct path. But you are in grave danger now. We must hurry."

A metallic grinding sound penetrated the stillness. From mid-air, white rifts tore open. Arachnid creatures dropped to the ground with muffled clangs. Slender arched legs barely kept their bulbous bodies from scraping the ground.

"Time Reavers!" Rourn sprinted, waving Atticus along. "They must not get to you or else they will trap you within a timeless cycle." He raised his staff in the opposite direction of the general store. "We must make haste to the temporal gate."

"Screaming lotus!" Atticus raced after Rourn who appeared to glide over the ground. "You committed the unpardonable sin! Why?"

"No time to explain." Rourn waved him along.

Behind, Atticus heard the clanking sounds that could have been mistaken for rusted gears, but it was the screeching of the bizarre spider-urchins.

As fast as Atticus ran—and he could run fast—the world only crept by, like grains of sand sifting down an hourglass. Grain by grain.

They paused at a traffic light blinking black and white. The wind swayed a STOP sign as effortlessly as it would flutter leaves of an aged spruce. The metal pipe creaked in long drawn out whispers.

The air was dense on this plane. Atticus grimaced, heaving for a breath. He wanted to drill Rourn for answers...to so many questions. Well, actually one question. Why?

But instinct told Atticus that Rourn had not jumped from that ledge to dodge his duty to the Order. He was not a traitor or a coward. He had reason. Something deep and innate screamed this logic to Atticus.

Instead of asking why, he asked, “What do you mean by everything is going according to the plan?”

“The multiverse consists of our own world, time, and galaxy and the worlds, times, and galaxies of every other possible timeline. I have seen a dozen worlds since my transition. A world where Germany controls all facets of global life; a world where electricity was never invented and the church ruled a dark age America with an iron fist...well into the 21st century.”

“What does Germany and the church have to do with me or the Beast?”

“Everything and nothing,” Rourn said. “We must maintain the correct timeline for certain events to be triggered. If things do not happen in certain accordance the future of our universe could devolve into a dystopia of interstellar proportion—worse than anything ever written about by Herbert or Asimov.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Just know that the Dark Trinity has a plan to save our universe which will save his universe as well. He has contacted me from a distant world from a distant future within the same space-time plane that we preside in. If we fail in our mission to keep the timeline proper then his fate is as terrible as ours will be.”

A small army of spindly mechanical reavers appeared around them. They disappeared only to reappear seconds later, but this time much closer.

A spider lunged on Atticus’ thigh. Fangs pierced, lodging painfully deep into his flesh and dragging him through thin air.

Gray got grayer.

As if he weighed no more than a slice of parchment paper, he felt himself falling...floating...until his feet touched solid ground once more.

He stood on the terrace of a ziggurat surmounted by a chalk-white limestone temple. Though wisps of smoke trailed from bronze censers spread about the terrace, Atticus detected no fragrance. Buildings composed of sandalwood and dark grainy basalt sprawled around the mighty pyramidal structure. And all those buildings were aflame, crumbling and collapsing.

Men, some in loincloths, some naked, some still donning headgear of nobility and military, hurried about in an erratic manner while others embraced, kissed, and caressed each other. They ignored the city falling down around them. The only thing they seemed to care for was each other’s flesh. Crude short swords and curved blades lay scattered on the unpaved streets, along with shields and various pieces of leather armor.

Near one ruined roughly worked wall of cyclopean stones, Atticus spotted a man on his knees before another man. Atticus tore his sights from the

abomination only to spot another man inserting his entire forearm inside a young girl squatted in front of him, her bare back splashed with blood!

On enormous wings, ascended a black winged-cat that would have surely sent a fearless wyrm flying away with its tail between its legs. The cat's sudden shrieking brought the buttress of another building to join the heaps of burning rubble sprawled into the streets below. Billows of undulating smoke and dust swelled upward to meet the blanched heavens above. Head first, it soared high toward the smoke screened sun, embodying both breath-taking regalness, and hellish horror.

A Geminus Beast! Screaming lotus!

From an ebony-rimmed archway of the temple appeared a second winged-cat Geminus. The sheer massive size and powerful physique caused Atticus' heartbeat to still. The unearthly creature's golden-yellow eyes penetrated Atticus', impelling him to put distance between him and the Beast.

The terrace shook when the Geminus galloped, heading straight for Atticus with lips snarling and fangs bared.

Atticus ran, skipping down the steps two at a time. The Geminus circled overhead like the buzzard before Rourn's death. When it simultaneously dove and shrieks crescendoed, and the other Beast's maw snapped at his back, Atticus swung himself over the tarnished ledge of the sprawling staircase.

He dropped a long distance to the ground below, bending his knees to better absorb the hard landing. He rolled on the dirt as the winged-cats' talons clawed the terrace above; they both hissed and roared.

The men in the streets ignored him and continued their heinous acts of depravity. Atticus sped along the cobblestone road, through a burning marketplace. Charred timber and molten pools obscured the path out of the city. The wild rampant flames lashed at anything that moved.

Together, the two Geminus Beasts dashed into the air and perched atop the temple at the ziggurat's summit. They purred deafeningly, an obnoxious ear-piercing shrillness that made Atticus slap hands over his ears.

The men and women in the streets ceased their defilements of one another and all stared blankly up at the temple, at the two magnanimous, deadly but regal Beasts. With zombified dullness in their yellowed eyes, the crowd shifted their attention toward Atticus. At once the lot of them shuffled toward Atticus, picking up and reclaiming their weapons as they encroached.

A throng of the naked men and women closest formed a semicircle around him. Atticus snatched his long sword and placed his back against a charred sandalwood column.

His toes curled in an effort to grip the ground firmly, legs and shoulders apart, sword at the ready close to his person. When the first two, an older man and a younger man, both wielding crude spears, came into range, Atticus lunged forward.

His sword thrust with the speed of an angry serpent, the tip striking deeply into the old man's abdomen, before rebounding and swinging upward from underneath the younger man's arm, flinging the severed arm and spearing it into the dirt.

Atticus drove forward, shouldering the young man to the ground. His slender blade slashed furiously but consciously at the next wave of assailants. A heavy club swung at Atticus' face. He swiftly ducked before bringing his sword against a neck, rending the assailants head.

Whirling around, he parried a short sword before running the steel of his own blade clean through the naked man's ribs. As two more men flanked him, Atticus darted his sword from left to right, taking both the men's legs out with quick slashing swipes before he stepped over a dismembered corpse.

Atticus fled, jumping over a heap of burning debris, slaughtering two more naked men on the other side, and dashed out the bronze gates. Never slowing, he headed straight for the bleary mountain-scape shadowing the colorless horizon.

He climbed the rocky path and reached the top in what seemed like seconds. A tall bearded man in an undyed lambskin tunic gave him a nod.

Atticus asked, "Who are you?"

"Lot." He pointed toward the city behind them.

The Geminus soared into the gray skyline. Its wings spread, silver sunlight casting gleams off black fur. Evil. Pure biblical evil.

And the whole city lit up, turning into a column of white vapor. A black-and-gray mushroom cloud appeared soon after.

The winged-cat caught in the grasp of the fatal cloud, became ash, raining down into the flaming furnace that had been Sodom.

The wind carried the faint sound of familiar voices, like something out of dream.

"He's not ready..."

"What if it shall come to be and you are not prepared?"

"You must all be prepared for the Reckoning."

"He will not face the Beast alone."

Atticus felt himself being tugged. He staggered, sword in hand.

"We must hurry to the woods!" Rourn flung a Reaver away with a flip of his staff.

Atticus slashed at one and kicked another. They scurried away, popping in and out of time.

A sharp pain bit into his calf where a spider must have pierced him. Absently, he rubbed the aching skin.

“I saw Sodom,” Atticus said. “I saw the Geminus defeated.”

“The Reaver has shown you the past? Amazing! What did you witness?”

“There were horrible things going on in the streets. Men with other men. And there was a winged-cat creature...the Beast of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“The fall and destruction of the ancient cities of sin,” Rourn whispered. “The birth of the first Paladins and the last time Geminus mated on our world. If we do not stop the Beasts then all of Texas and the rest of the world could fall into the same immoral chaos that befell Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Side by side they raced down the streets, each block taking eternity.

“Why must we move so slow in this world?”

“It is a space-time warp,” Rourn said. “And if you do not return to current day Buckeye in due time then the proper timeline will be skewed and all hope for the future of any world will be lost.”



Chapter Thirty-Six



ISAAC HOWLED, HIS FACE raised to the darkened skies; his claws sliced the air as he reached for the violet clouds. In the distance, beyond a blackened mountain cliff soared a sky eel.

Galmoria lay sprawled on the sharp stones lining the beach. She breathed hard and slow, her eyes rolled back into her skull. Ribbons of blood and other fluids laced her pale jewel-encrusted naked skin. Nearby her sea wolf stood obediently.

“I receive your blessing, Galmoria,” Isaac snarled.

She purred. Lips parted, her forked tongue caressed her fangs. “Bless you, my son, and your bitch.”

Isaac snatched her by the throat and lifted her up. “You tried to have my mate killed.” He roared and flung her body far into the boiling sea. She splashed and sank like a stone. The sea wolf moaned toward the dark gray heavens above.

Good riddance to the cunt.

As he walked towards the sea, the large wolf began to shiver and shake. A painful barking-moan tore from its lips. The wolf's body split in half as though an unseen axe had cleaved through it.

With a loud thump and splash the wolf's entrails spilled across the beach and flowed into the sea. Standing between the two halves was Galmoria. Green pants and a green tunic clung to her curves. A green bandana circled her forehead. The wolf's blood and entrails had dyed her raven hair to scarlet red.

She approached, leather boots clomping loudly on the stone ground. When she was within arm's reach she drew a silver sword from her side. “Do you like mother's new outfit?” Galmoria untied her green robe to reveal a green bra holding her large breasts tightly against her chest. She trailed a finger between her breasts to her navel where she drew circles in her belly button. “You must find the one named Amy in that realm of Buckeye. She is the *beloved* and the key to our evolution.”

Galmoria twirled. “She'll look like this.” Her red hair turned blonde and she wore denim shorts and a white halter top. Galmoria stuck out her tongue, an oblong shaped black jewel embedded in the tip.

Isaac snatched the jeweled-tongue and tore it free from Galmoria's mouth. He glared at its midnight coloring. It should be crimson, not black. He pitched

the gem into the water and gripped her neck. “I want the Narkush you devil wench!”

The skin on her neck turned to flame.

Isaac roared and snapped his paw back.

“It is the Narkush, my foolish son.” She held out her open hand. The black devil stone appeared on her palm. “It is special and will grant you great strength. It bestows the gift of immortality and indestructability. With it, you will rule over all the Zodiacs. And none will dare challenge your authority.”

“And what if I refuse this ‘gift’.”

“Then I will bestow it upon another Geminus and you, your whelp and your future cubs will be enslaved by him, just as the rest of the Zodiacs.”

If only he could kill the fucking cunt!

Isaac heaved a deep sigh. He took the gem from her.

“Embed that Narkush onto your mate then have it transferred to the *Beloved*.” She leaned forward and planted cold bloody lips onto his cheek.

Recoiling, he growled. “I will not expire one of her nine lives without just cause.”

“If you wish to rule as the King of all then you will do as mother asks.”

Shedding her clothes, she sauntered toward the sea, still holding the silver long sword. Galmoria waded into the waters, turned toward him. With the sword lifted, she began sinking beneath the ocean.

The sky, beach and water dissipated, fading into white, leaving nothing but a distant still silhouette of the drowning blonde girl.



AS THE LANDSCAPE OF the sepia forest loomed closer, Rourn divulged wisdom that could only come from beyond the cosmic realms of life and death and beyond.

“The longer you remain in this space-time warp the threat for multiversal destruction is imminent. Remain too long before escaping and you will return to a distant future of the reality in whence you entered; or worse, you may never return at all. In either of those cases the timeline will be ultimately skewed and all universes may suffer beyond comprehension. It has been laid upon me now, a divergence in the proper timeline already, that I must guide you to the cosmic thread wherein you can return to modern Buckeye, Texas.”

“Won’t you return as well?”

“I cannot,” Rourn said. “The Dark Trinity kept to his promise in giving me the position as a Spirit Guide. It was always my destiny declared by the stars and

planets beyond the comprehension of mortal men. The Order mistakened me as a warrior, yet the universal forces beyond flesh and bone never made such follies.”

“Then alone I shall stand against the Beast who took your life and took you from me.”

“But you shall not stand alone, my brother. There is another and soon you will know him, and know his role within all of this threatening madness.”

The pale woodlands of Sacred Oaks drew near. The trees and shrubbery loomed more gloomily than any lost and forgotten ghost of antiquity. Forlorn and melancholy, concealed in dreary paleness, and mournful patience.

“Come quickly before it is too late,” Rourn urged as he dashed boldly into the beige forest.

Atticus sprinted after Rourn. Their pace accelerated the closer they drew to the woodland edge. Rourn’s wispy silhouette sailed into the somber thicket.

Before long Atticus stood beside the cloudy water that rested lifelessly and dull. Yet, upon the ashen wood porch of the nearby breezeway house was a behemoth scorpion that challenged the size of any stallion Atticus had ever beheld. It capered about the porch, stinger raised, beckoning his challenge.

“What monster is this?” Atticus asked.

Rourn said, “The gateway thread back to your time is beneath the pond. You must seek it out immediately.”

Below the depths of the still waters, Atticus realized, was where Rourn meant for him to go.

“I won’t leave you,” Atticus said.

The scorpion crept off the porch and hurried its way toward them.

“Destiny never meant for you to do this alone. You will find your allies in Buckeye.”

“But you are my Twin!”

The scorpion scurried along the edge of the pond; its beady eyes piercing Atticus.

“I am not your Twin.” Rourn shoved Atticus into the pond.



Chapter Thirty-Seven



IRA TOUCHED LYNN'S sweat-soaked forehead and glided her fingers down her new mistress' cheeks. Warm, shallow breaths exhaled from Lynn's parted lips as did trickles of saliva. Ira peeled the brown satin sheet from Lynn's naked body. The bottom sheet was saturated in sweat even though Ira had already changed the linens once in the last twelve hours.

Weakened not only by the metamorphosis but also by her mate's physical ailments from his battle with the demon mother, Mistress Lynn lay in a deep sleep.

But Ira knew that if she did not wake soon the metamorphosis would drain every ounce of her life and consume her.

When she finished cleaning the bed sheets, working carefully around Mistress Lynn's body, she dressed her in a clean silky red nightgown and soared downstairs to fetch a platter of raw veal.

Sitting the food on the foot of the bed, Ira plucked a piece of the tender meat and touched it to Mistress Lynn's lips. Red juices dripped onto the corners of her mouth, trailing down her chin, but Ira could not get Lynn to part her lips.

"Your life is fading without the nutrients it needs. You must eat. Please."

"No," Lynn replied weakly.

Isaac had generously given Ira asylum from purgatory for so many years. Ira would not fail him. "But Mistress, if you starve to death that will mean the death of Isaac."

"Isaac..." Lynn moaned. "Where is Isaac? I want Isaac." Lynn spoke but her eyes never opened.

"Isaac will return soon," Ira said. "But Master does not wish to return home and find a starved carcass of his mate." Ira forced a chunk of the meat between Lynn's lips. "If not for yourself, then for your mate."

Lynn's teeth clamped on Ira's fingers, but the wraith phased her hand out. Lynn gagged. Ira clenched Lynn's jaw shut and forced her to chew. "Please forgive me, Mistress, but this is the only way."

Tears formed in Mistress Lynn's reddened eyes and fell onto the ivory pillowcase. She grunted. Muffled moans from her upper torso filled her closed mouth.

Ira fed Lynn two more slabs of meat before retrieving a pitcher of iced water and assisting Lynn in drinking.

“Very good, Mistress, very good.” Ira patted Lynn on the forehead.

Lynn’s eyes flared yellow.

Flinging herself backwards, Ira hovered in the doorway. “Rest now, Mistress. Your metamorphosis is nearly complete.”



THE STILL WATER POSSESSED the consistency of wispy cotton rather than fluid, yet Atticus sank to the bottom. It was immediately evident that he did not have to hold his breath. The murky blackness flecked with slivers of ashen splotches surrounded him. And he made a graceful landing on the pond’s supple bed.

In the close distance beamed a phantasmic pale blue pillar.

The cosmic gate.

When he walked it was like stepping through air. There was no pressure from the engulfing water, nor any resistance to his forward motion.

As he grew closer to the glowing pillar the black murkiness gave way. The pillar, Atticus realized, cast a bright torch light.

When he was only mere feet away from the light several things registered to him at once. First, was the circular design etched into the supple pond floor where the beam of light emanated from.

Second, were the naked men and a few women bound to the circle with heavy iron ball and chains. Their eyes were nothing more than dread filled watery blisters and their mouths agape revealing severed tongues. Contrary to their ghoulish visages they reacted lively to his arrival by lashing out to the length their restraints would allow.

But the most frightening of all was the unbound aberrant creature that floated among them as though it was only affected by true water. Its body was the size of a crocodile, but with the physical appearance of a silvery catfish; multiple spindly legs more suitable for a spider shoved against the currents water. The bronze-skinned face of a rugged woman with catfish whiskers and a tangled mess of seaweed hair regarded him with curiosity.

“What wicked evil is this?” Atticus said, and realized he could speak normally.

Even the creature surprisingly recoiled when he spoke. Her skinny stem-like legs thrashed and she bared diminutive flat-edged teeth.

Atticus examined the bound men and women to discover they had countless tiny wounds covering every part of their bodies. Whatever this abomination was it had been slowly feasting on these wretched people.

The monster launched its repulsive body toward him.

Atticus dodged. He unsheathed his sword.

The creature doubled back. Its tail end swayed to and fro to gather momentum. Atticus held his blade at the ready, feet firmly planted, teeth clenched.

The fish-woman torpedoed straight for him.

Atticus ducked, but held his sword up so to split the creature in half. Instead, the monstrosity passed right through the blade.

Was it a ghost?

When it swerved around to counter strike him with two spider legs the gangly limbs passed harmlessly through Atticus.

Both Atticus and the monster held each other's baffled gazes.

"You don't even exist in this plane," Atticus said. "Yet, you very well do." He sheathed his blade and tittered. Stranger things than Rourn or he had ever imagined plagued the multiverse.

Without further delay, he stepped beyond the circle of chained ghouls and into the cosmic portal back to modern day Buckeye.

Back to battle the Geminus Beast.



Chapter Thirty-Eight



AFTER A NIGHT OF HOT and sexy fun, Amy woke with a smile. Wearing only Shane's over-sized Vultures T-shirt which draped to her knees, she rubbed sleep from her eyes. She walked to the back porch. A cane fishing pole in her hand, Amy padded barefoot across the lawn, through the woods along the well-cut path leading to Walker's Creek.

The creek ran steady with mostly clear water. Perfect day to catch some bluegills.

Amy grabbed the carton of worms from the ground. She dug her fingers into the moist black soil until she found a squirming night crawler. She sat with legs crossed on the bank of the creek and began threading the worm onto her hook.

Shane gave her a smile and cast his line into the water.

She pictured them forty years from now, doing this same exact thing. The years would take its toll on their bodies, making their bones brittle, their skin wrinkled and their hair silver, but time would only grow their love, not hinder it.

He was the man she promised to spend the rest of her life with, the man she could tell anything to, the man who would support her in the most trying of times.

A beast wanted her soul. Pretty gosh darn trying, she thought.

Shane would want to know if something or someone was trying to hurt her. He would want to protect her. If the situation was reversed, she'd want to know if he was in danger. She'd want to help him.

Reveal to Shane about my existence and the warning I bring.

Startled at Tobias' unexpected presence, she grimaced. Her mind was no longer her own. Embarrassed he heard her thoughts, she felt her face flush.

You want me to tell Shane about you? she silently asked. Why?

I wish for my father to know of me.

Amy's heart raced and felt as if it might jump out of her throat. *Shane's your father?*

Tobias remained predictably quiet.

Who the hell was Tobias' mother? Somebody he's cheating on her with?

And to think that she'd thought about them growing old and loving each other forever! Now she wanted to rip Shane's face off and stomp all over his balls.

Amy jumped to her feet and began muttering aloud, not giving a pig's twisted tail if Shane heard her. "You ask me to trust everything you say, yet you obviously don't trust me with the whole truth. I want to know everything. Who you are. Who I am. Where you're from. And what Shane has to do with all this. Start talking or I swear I'll ring the dinner bell and let this beast have his way with me."

Silence in her head.

The creek whispered softly.

Amy groaned. "Tell me who your mother is or I swear I'll do it. I'll give myself to the beast. Screw saving the world and all that bull crap. The game's over, Tobias, or whoever you are."

You are my mother.

Amy's vision blurred. The woods swirled around her. She took a deep breath and paced faster. "That's impossible. I think I'd remember if I gave birth. Stop lying to me."

She heard a rustling sound and the loud crashing of water, like a waterfall.

When Tobias responded his words came in a burst. *I am inside of you.*

"You're in my head. I got that already." The sound of water trickling resounded in her mind. "Are you near water?"

I am inside your womb. Splashing sounds followed the squawking of a large bird.

My womb? Amy gasped, her palm slipped over her stomach. *You can't mean what I think you mean.*

The one called Shane is my true father and you are my true mother.

Moisture filled her eyes. *How is this possible? My period isn't due for almost a week?*

I am eleven days into conception. And I have only learned the truth of my origins in recent weeks.

A nervous laughter trickled from her trembling lips. *You're quite intelligent for a fetus.*

My fetus serves as the conduit allowing me to speak to you from the future. Nineteen years from your present date.

Shane watched Amy pace. It was bad enough that she spouted nonsense about giving herself to a beast but to make matters worse, she spouted this nonsense to herself, or nobody or... somebody? *Who the fuck is she talking to?*

She looked pale and nervous. He set his rod against a tree and went to her. Gripping her elbow, he asked, "Babe? You feeling okay?"

Amy gave him a wide, shit-eating grin, which only escalated his concern. It was the same expression she had when she told him about the mind-blowing

orgasms her aunt swore to, just from placing her shoes toe-to-toe under the bed right before she got laid.

He frowned, gripping her arm tighter. "Talk to me."

She shook her head and raised her hands, as if surrendering to an unseen army. "Okay, here goes." She exhaled loudly. "I met a boy." She giggled. "Or a man, depending on how you look at it."

A flash of heat blazed throughout Shane's body. Queasy knots rolled inside him, twisting his nerves. Sweat bubbled on his forehead. "A man?"

"Not a real man. I mean he is real but he's only in my head. I know it sounds crazy. Really crazy. But he's real and he wants me to tell you..."

Shane held up a hand, palm out. "I've heard enough." He clenched his teeth, facial muscles hardened.

Her eyes grew wide. She shrugged away from his firm grasp. "Please. I have to tell you more. He's from the future."

Cupping her chin, he peered down at her. God help him, she was beautiful. So sweet and loving and passionate. But she might just be bat-shit fuckin' crazy.

Should he get her therapy? Would they lock her up like her aunt? What about medication? How would that change her?

He didn't want her changed. He loved her just as she was. Amy may be a loon, but she was his loon, and he'd be damned if he was going to let anyone drug her up or lock her away where he couldn't see or touch her without someone in a white coat observing their every movement.

So, she hears voices. Big fuckin' deal. She's not a threat to anyone or herself. Maybe Amy and he could keep this man-boy from the future their little secret. As long as this mysterious voice in her head wasn't telling her to burn down Roxy's or shoot Sheriff Bowden in the back there was nothing to worry about.

Nobody would have to know she was loco.

Amy wouldn't hurt anybody. Hell, she had to give every rodent a proper burial just to appease its spirit.

You've known she was a kooky broad since you first met her, Baker. Don't go acting all shocked now. Get your shit together! Better or worse you love her.

"This man that talks to you," Shane said. "Does he have a name?"

Her eyes lit with excitement and he couldn't help smiling.

"Tobias." Her voice shook, either from pride or from fear of his reaction.

Stroking the back of his hand down her cheek, he said, "Let's keep Tobias our secret."

She took a step back. "I'm not crazy. Tobias is our—"

He pressed a finger to her lips, shushing her. Choking back tears, he said, "Tobias." Shane's voice shook as he grumbled the name of the 'man' talking to

his woman. *Tobias the bitchass*. “Tobias is our secret. So if you love me, you’ll drop this now. I really don’t want to hear anymore.” What he wanted more than anything was to dropkick Tobias like he’d done Private Sanders at the rec hall.

Her fists balled by her side. “You don’t understand!”

“I understand if you go around telling everybody that you hear voices...”

“One voice,” she blurted.

He sighed. “Okay. If you go around telling people you hear a voice...”

Amy let out a huff. “Not ‘people’.” She made air quotes. “Just you.”

With his head cocked, he smirked. “And Carmen?”

Her brows furrowed, lips pursed. “She’s my best friend.”

Holy fuck! Who was next? Roxy? Birch? Scooter? Her mother?

Shane ran a hand over his head. Shaking a finger, he ground out, “If you go on like this, you’ll earn yourself a room at the asylum, right next door to your aunt.” Tears of frustration welled in his eyes. “You belong here with me, and Scooter and Alamo, not in a padded cell.”

Amy glanced at the sky. “What do I do now?”

Shane took her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. “Do nothing. I’m begging you.”

Amy narrowed eyes. “I wasn’t talking to you.” She turned on her heel and strode toward the trailer.

Hanging his head, he blew out a breath. The tears he’d struggled to keep at bay poured down his face. His fingers clenched into a tight fist. He eyed the trunk of a thick tree. Maybe if he broke every bone in his hand it would dull the pain of watching Amy walk away.

“Fuck you, Tobias!” Gritting his teeth, he slammed his fist into the trunk...which should have broken at least a bone or two. Growling, he punched with the other fist. Raw skin covered the knuckles of both his hands but no broken bones.

He turned and ran after her.

Long, heavy strides.

As she reached the trailer, he gripped her by the arm and swung her to face him. “Don’t ever turn your back on me...on us.”

She shrugged out of his hold. “You think I’m crazy, just like most people in this podunk town. Tobias is the only one I can count on. You say you love me but when I confide in you, you turn on me.” A look of disgust contorted her face. “You don’t know how to love. Not even yourself.”

Crushing his lips against hers, he pulled her against his body. His tongue invaded her mouth and she moaned, the sweetest, hottest sound he’d ever heard.

Tears circled their joined lips. He heard her whimper and opened his eyes. Amy was crying too.

He slid the screen door open. With his hands gripped on her ass, he lifted her off the ground and scooted her into the house. Shane lifted her shirt above her breasts. He pushed her against the living room wall and slid her up, until her groin was level with his hard cock.

He drove inside her.

“I’m not crazy.”

“I know.” With his hands gripped on her narrow hips, he gazed at her face, smudged with teardrops and dirt.

“Do you?”

Shane nodded and nibbled on her shoulder-blade, inhaling her natural perfume combined with her oatmeal and honey soap.

“I’m really, really not crazy,” she whispered against his lips. Her hands tangled in his hair.

“Just shut up and fuck me.”



Chapter Thirty-Nine



LYNN OPENED HER EYES and saw the empty room. Cold blood stains dotted the sheets while the sweet succulent aroma of fresh meat perfumed the air. A touch of divinity caressed through her body, starting at her core and stroking along her slender legs and her full breasts.

She slunk from the bed. Hard wood beneath her delicate feet, she reached over her head, stretching her muscles to discover newfound agility. Looking into the full length mirror that hung on the black wardrobe, she saw something she had not seen in over two decades: erotically slender legs; a slimmed down tummy; and perfectly proportioned breasts. Even her black hair had a fresh sheen as if it had been rejuvenated by the Fountain of Youth.

Instinctively, her tongue traced her lips as her hands explored her newly transformed body.

She pressed her face close to the mirror. “I am Beast.” She licked the glass. “Hear me purr.”

Musical notes caught her attention and her ears perked up. She felt the side of her head and realized her ears had literally twitched. The music came from afar but it sounded crystal clear: Bach Sonata No. 2 in E flat major for flute and harpsichord.

In an uncanny swiftness, Lynn descended the spiraling staircase. Following her ears, she made her way through the home and down a long corridor with walls adorned with statues inside niches and authentic oil paintings of grotesque beasts and humanoids with strange alien faces.

Large redwood doors swung open to a ballroom in dark shades. The gray walls were lined with gray statues, elaborately stain-etched floor-to-ceiling windows with a reinforced glass staircase ascending to a black marble balcony.

Oblivious to Lynn’s presence, Ira twirled and whirled on the floor. Her beige off-the-shoulder evening dress flowed about her. A lacy shawl did little to conceal her small breasts peeking from her low-cut neckline. Atop her bald head she wore a black bonnet.

The music beckoned Lynn. She had not danced since she was a child and her new muscles burned to be used and abused.

“You are looking splendid m'lady.” Ira floated toward her.

“I feel more alive than ever before.” She cast her eyes to the glass ceiling at least thirty feet above the dance floor. “And this ballroom...it’s beautiful and

open. I feel so free. I wouldn't have guessed this mansion could fit a room so large or corridors that seem to stretch for miles."

Ira giggled. "The house's exterior is only an illusion, Mistress. The inside of Master Isaac's home is not of this plane."

"How can that be?" Lynn asked.

Ira twirled and rose into the air. The music crackled and from thin air Ira plucked a cello. From the balcony appeared shadowy figures holding flutes and a violinist. The phantom ensemble played a lonesome yet romantic sonata.

Lynn's new muscles slid her along the tile, with the grace of an Olympic figure skater. Alone on the dance floor, Lynn pirouetted and entrechat with ease and little effort, like she used to twenty years ago.

The song ended and Ira clapped.

Lynn bent at the waist. Straightening she asked, "Why does a Beast need such eloquent things?"

"Master Isaac is not savage. Master appreciates the finer things that all worlds have to offer."

Lynn remembered her mother, or who she'd thought was her mother, and the many hours, days and years she'd spent teaching Lynn to dance. On the aged hardwood floor, in a living room probably the size of Isaac's bathroom, she was taught ballet, the waltz and her favorite, the tango.

Sunbeams filtered through high windows. Shards of glimmer streaked across the gray tile. But as wide open and spacious as the ballroom was, Lynn felt restricted, caged.

"Does Isaac have a car?"

Ira waved her hand toward a door in the corner of the ballroom. "It is in the garage down the long west wing corridor."

Lynn smiled. "Thank you for forcing me to eat. I'm feeling much better." She stepped past Ira but Ira floated around and in front of her.

"I want to see my mother," Lynn said.

Ira's head shook. "That's forbidden. I am sorry."



ATTICUS LAY FACE-DOWN on the edge of Sera's Pond. The forest once again replenished with vibrant chirping, hissing and cawing of wildlife, a welcome sanctuary compared to the nightmarish realm of the space-time warp.

A celtic tune played somewhere beneath him. His phone. Atticus bolted upright and snatched his phone.

"Atticus!' Elder Cai's voice was riddled with panic. "Where have you been, boy? I've attempted to call you several times with no response."

“I just spoke with you a few hours ago, Elder.”

“It was yesterday when we last spoke. You’ve been unreachable for nearly twelve hours.”

The time warp, Atticus thought. “I apologize.”

“A Seeker located in Buckeye has discovered another possible attack by the Geminus.”



“TO SEE MY OWN MOTHER is forbidden?” Lynn asked.

“Now that you have a mate your surrogate mother is no longer safe to be around you or you to be around her. You must promise not to leave the manor without Master Isaac’s permission.”

Lynn cringed at the dark. “I am not a prisoner in this mansion any longer. The walls and ceiling are closing in on me and I want out of here. If Isaac needs me so badly,” she purred and ran her hands down her body. “He can find me when he returns.”

“No!” Ira sped around Lynn. Her arms flapped as if hailing a taxi. “You mustn’t, Mistress Lynn.”

Lynn snarled, baring her elongated canines. “Back off spirit.” A strong scent fumed the air.

Ira visibly shivered, phasing in and out. The wraith shrieked as she flew rapidly to the ceiling and dodged somewhere behind the balcony railings. She babbled a string of nonsense.

When Ira poked her head over the balcony, she wore an old-fashioned gasmask. “Don’t leave the mansion, Mistress.”

Lynn laughed. “Why are you wearing that ridiculous mask?”

Ira remained on the balcony. “It is your essence, Mistress. It will drive a wraith insane.”

Lynn licked her lips as she strolled out of the ballroom. Her senses heightened, she knew the strong aroma had come from her own body. She breathed deeply and savored the scent of her own pheromones.

Lynn wandered down a corridor until she smelled motor oil behind a large double door.

Inside was a multi-car garage.

But Isaac’s car was locked and Lynn saw no keys inside, nor any switch or button to open the garage door.

Ira drifted in after her. “Please, Mistress! Listen to me for your own good. It is not proper for you to return to your surrogate.”

“Hush, you miserable ghost!”

Lynn dashed past the wraith and through a labyrinth of corridors before she reached the front door.

“Don’t go, Mistress Lynn!”

But Lynn was already gone. With incredible speed she fled the estate. Her legs carried her faster than ever before, down the street, and onto a state road before she tore into the woods. Yet she did not slow down as she raced along the shadows of the cypresses and the ash. Moving so quickly, she hurled past a napping coyote then by a doe and her fawn who slept in a thorny bush.

And when the sparse woods ended she was on another major highway. The sound of a growling diesel engine caught her attention. With her new keen sight she saw the biker speeding along the shadowy highway coming toward her.

Immediately, she let the straps of her flimsy silk gown fall off her shoulders, baring her naked breasts.

As intended, the biker slowed when he noticed her. He brought it to a stop a few feet away from her on the shoulder of the highway. He removed his helmet and approached, a big happy grin.

“Good God, woman. You got yourself one hell of a rack right there, baby. What the hell you doing out here like that?”

Lynn moved slowly toward him. A growl purred from her lips.

The man tossed his helmet to the roadside. He glanced around then back at her. “Mind if we step into the woods?”

“I just want to take you right here, right now.” Lynn stepped closer.

Again, he cast a glance up and down the quiet highway. A fist slugged Lynn across the cheek and a calloused hand grabbed her by the hair.

He dragged her into the seclusion of the trees where he shoved her to the firm ground.

He grabbed his zipper.

Lynn stood and threw her arms around the barrel-chested man.

Then she wrapped her hands around his neck and sank her mouth into his throat. Her strangling fingers muffled his screams. When she jerked her mouth away, a chunk of his flesh came with it. As she watched the life drain from his eyes, she chewed and swallowed.

She tore another chunk from the other side of his throat. Then allowed his body to fall to the ground.

Ignoring the helmet, she mounted the motorcycle.

As she sped away, the wind fluttered her hair and tickled her skin. She glanced at the wide-open sky, grateful to be free of the confines of that house. She leaned on the gas and threw her head back before howling at the evening sky.

Forbidden or not, she had to see the woman who raised her at least one more time. And no one could stop her.



Chapter Forty



AFTER THEY'D MADE LOVE, Shane apologized for not believing her about the voice. He'd prefer she keep Tobias to herself, but that was a fight for another time.

Amy was called in early for the second shift. The diner had got hit with another bus. Probably more damn tourists looking for evidence of the supernatural in Sacred Woods Forest.

Amy told him she'd explain all about Tobias after work.

Shane slapped her ass before she bounded down the steps. He could hardly wait, he had told her, and with any luck, she bought it.

There had been a glimmer in her eyes and a glow about her body. She definitely believed this Tobias was a real person living in her head. *Fuck.*

Shane spent the day working on his motorcycle, until he remembered he had to pick Scooter up from school.

Twice a month a forever-mile long train passed through the center of town and today just had to be one of those days. The bells dinged and the bar lowered. Stuck behind two cars and a long-ass train, Shane grumbled to himself. He'd told Birch he'd meet him around three-thirty for a bike ride and he was already cutting it close at 2:45.

With the way his day was going it wouldn't surprise him one bit if Scooter wasn't waiting for him but rather stuffed in a locker or getting the ever living snot beat out of him. Shane slammed his fist into the steering wheel causing the horn to honk. A car behind him beeped its horn twice and Shane flipped them off.

If only he could teach his brother to defend himself and not take crap from anyone, but the kid wouldn't listen.

Shane hadn't wanted legal custody of his brother, but after his folks split and their mom went off the deep end he'd lucked out and gained guardianship of one Scott Philip Baker.

And he'd not been worth a damn as a guardian.

Scooter was a good kid—got good grades and stayed out of trouble. He didn't deserve to get the piss beat out of him. Sad thing was, Scooter was just the type of kid Shane used to beat on when he was in school.

Somehow, beating on other kids made Shane forget what a piece of shit he was, but it was like putting a bandage on an amputated limb. So Shane drank lots

of booze, smoked lots of pot and fucked lots of girls. He had got real acquainted with Sheriff Rodney Bowden—minor enough shit. The U.S. Army had scooped his sorry ass up, shoved him into AIT and shipped him to the goddamn Middle-east.

Nothing could bring Vicki back and nothing could right his wrong. He'd own it but he couldn't fail Scooter, too.

When the last of the train car passed, the bar lifted and Shane floored the gas pedal. Minutes later he arrived at Buckeye High—or the BH as him and his buddies used to say. Three students stood on the grass, under the shade of an oak tree, waiting for their rides.

No Scooter.

Shane scanned the schoolyard across an open field and spotted his brother surrounded by a gang of boys in letterman jackets.

“Fuck.” Shane pushed open the door and raced across the freshly mowed grass. He jumped a chain link fence and arrived just as a lard-ass kid shoved Scooter.

“Fight me, you pussy.” Saliva squirted from the thick lips of the fatass bully.

“Hold up, chief.” Shane stepped between the punk and Scooter. “You kids scram. Get the fuck outta here!”

They scrambled, all except Fatass.

“You're a fucking pussy,” Fatass said. “Getting your big bad brother to fight for you.” The bully looked Shane up and down. “My dad said you're working the rigs in Pecos 'cause you couldn't cut in the Army.”

Shane clenched his fist, and glared at the kid. “Leave Scooter alone. Got it, asshole?”

He snatched a Buckeye Vultures cap off the ground and with a dismissive flick of his hand, started off the field.

Shane whistled at the kid. “And tell your daddy if he's got shit to say about me, he should fucking say it to my face and not to his pussy-ass fatass son.”

Shane clapped Scooter on the back. “For a genius you sure are a dumb fuck. Why would you take on all of them? Those guys would have kicked your ass inside out.”

“They told me to meet them and I had to show. I mean I really had to show. They're just losers who won't make it into Ivy League schools. But I had to show them I wasn't afraid.”

“Well champ, in your case, looking like a pussy is better than being a bloody smear on the field. Come on Schwarzenegger, let's go home.”

While walking toward the truck, another kid sprinted across the field. He wore a black T-shirt, baggy black pants, and his hair was gelled into spikes.

“Now who’s this assclown?” Shane muttered. “Do I have to whoop his ass?”

“That’s Zack.”

Shane smirked. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“No!”

At least a hundred degrees outside, Shane guessed, and not a drop of sweat anywhere on the kid’s body. He breathed naturally as if he’d just taken a leisurely stroll. *Weird.*

Shane had met Zack for the first time at Scooter’s sixth birthday party. He’d thought Zack was an odd one way back then, but now the kid was just plain freaky. Sometimes he sent chills down Shane’s spine, a feat not many people in this world could accomplish.

“Sorry I’m late,” Zack said. “Got held up in detention.”

“It’s alright,” Scooter said.

Zack looked Shane over.

Shane looked Zack over.

“Detention, huh?” Shane said. “Get caught praying to Satan?”

“Nah,” Zack said with a wide smile. “Principle Moss doesn’t think stink bombs in the girl’s bathroom are funny.”

Imprinted on Zack’s shirt was a laughing skull with a mohawk and flames surrounding angel wings.

Steering Scooter out the chain link fence, Shane said, “Let’s go.”

Scooter gave Zack a wave and followed Shane across the gravel lot. When they reached the truck, they climbed in and Shane turned up the radio. Glaring out the open window, he watched Zack leaning against the fence, staring up at the sun.

Shane floored the gas and skidded from the school parking lot, an overdriven guitar played from the speakers. “I can’t believe you’re still friends with that freak. No wonder the football team wants to kick your ass. Looks like one of those Cure freaks.”

“Cure?”

“What the hell are you doing hanging around with Zack Grouse?”

Scooter shrugged. “You don’t know him like I do. He happens to be very perspicacious.”

Shane turned down the volume. “Huh?”

“Sensitive and understanding.”

“Right. So, you two picked out china yet?”

“It’s not like that.”

Shane flicked his blinker and turned left onto Highway 1085. “That grandma Regina of his is about as batty as they come.”

Scooter's backpack slid across the bench seat into Shane. Shane chucked the bag onto the floorboard by Scooter's feet. "Why can't you be normal?"

"That worked really well for you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You were wrote up twice in the Army. Almost court martialled once. You did thirty days in county lock-up for breaking a guy's jaw and all because you didn't like the way he looked at your girlfriend. And there was that incident on Harper Top road."

Shane slammed a palm against the steering wheel. "I told you not to bring that up again."

Scooter flinched and looked out the passenger window.

"But don't stop now," Shane said. "You're on a roll."

"Fine!" Scooter snapped his gaze at Shane. "For a living, you mine a flammable liquid, a crude substance made of liquid organic compounds that has lain dormant and undisturbed, waiting for somebody like you to unearth it so a far-more-intelligent man wearing a suit, in a Houston or Tulsa high rise can make a few billion, and while he's at it, contribute to the destruction of our planet. But hey!" Scooter threw up his hands and slapped his thighs. "You were a football star in high school and slept with most of the women in this crappy town so that's gotta count for something. I sure wish I could be normal, just like you."

Shane jerked the wheel, pulling the truck to the shoulder. He stepped out and walked to the passenger side, yanked the door open. "Get the fuck out. We're walking home."

"It's like ten miles."

"Doing our part to save the planet. I did twenty mile hikes in the Army on a diet of eggs and orange juice. Let's see how far you make it, champ."

Scooter looked away.

Shane whispered in Scooter's ear. "Something wrong with getting your hands dirty for a living?"

Scooter shrugged.

Shane slammed the door and got back behind the wheel. Shifting to gear, the jalopy heaved before continuing down the remote country road.

Silence.

And more silence.

"Shane."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"You finally stood up to me and now you're going to ruin the moment by apologizing?" Shane shimmied the truck into third gear.

“But I didn’t mean what I said.”

Shane snickered. “Yeah, you did. It’s alright. I like my life, especially since I got engaged.”

“To Amy?”

“Yeah, genius. Who else?”

A familiar scent of pinewood and fresh cut hay blew in the open window. No better place to live, Shane thought as he veered into his dirt driveway and shifted to park.

A crazed fiancée who might end up in the asylum before their honeymoon.

A geeky kid brother who he had nothing in common with.

A twelve-year-old motorcycle that was in the shop more hours than it had ran.

And an old trailer set on the edge of a haunted forest.

All part of his American dream.

Scooter said, “I’m in love with your fiancé.”

Shane sighed and clapped his brother on the shoulder. “I know.” He squeezed Scooter’s scrawny arm. “Get some boxing gloves on, then meet me in the backyard under that big weeping willow. Gonna teach you how to deliver a good old-fashioned ass-kicking.”



ATTICUS PULLED HIS car in front of the house. No sirens, flashing lights or police vehicles. He had arrived before the crime had been discovered and the authorities alerted.

He crossed the porch and approached the hole where the front door should be. Long claw marks scarred both sides of the door frame. Outside the side of the home, a click resounded followed by a faint hum. Maybe the air conditioner.

Atticus had read about such contraptions in his contemporary studies class. Modern day America was consumed with technology that offered comfort and eased the difficulty of everyday living. Microwaves, automated washing machines for clothing and dishes, and contraptions that cooled and heated homes. He glanced at his energy-efficient, state-of-the-art vehicle with the seat warmer embedded in the bucket seats. Mentally he added automobiles to the list of modern day comforts.

Sword drawn, Atticus stepped through the threshold of the home. Blood-splatter decked the walls and ceiling and more collected on the floor in puddles and smears. Written on one of the yellow pastel walls in dried blood was: DIE BELOVED DIE.

Female body parts were strewn across the living room in a similar fashion as the man's body from the last crime scene. A ripped torso leaked guts on the blue carpet; a severed leg rotted in the corner and a severed arm rotted in front of the couch—all of it putrid and stinking.

In the kitchen, a woman's head gawked at him. Long bloodstained brown hair curled around the severed neck, mouth agape.

Atticus' stomach wrenched. Chunks of bile crept into his throat.

The woman's head wobbled. Her mouth stretched wide open and a thick transparent strand emerged. A knob on the end pushed and tore its way free of the mouth, splitting the lips.

Atticus lifted his sword, readying himself.

A lucent worm crawled from the woman's head. The slug squirmed along the wood floor, its body the length of the room, left a trail of gray sludge.

Translucent skin revealed puke green muscles and organs. The tail, still inside the skull, surged forward; the tail whipped the decapitated head.

The skull smashed into Atticus' ribs, knocking the breath from his lungs. He doubled over and the serpentine creature rapidly scaled the wall. The tail used the head as a flail, lashing and striking at Atticus.

Crouching, Atticus went prone as the head swung over him, crashing into the wall and leaving a gaping hole. Its movement stopped at eye level with Atticus. Blood dripped from the lolling head on the tip of the tail.

"What fiend of the abyss are you?" Atticus asked, taking a defensive stance with his sword crossed in front of him.

The eyes blinked. Bloody, blue lips parted as it spoke. "*Yaugass Paladinassi! Ssingoi-ssee Ska'thassass!*"

He swung his sword, slicing the head from crown to chin, splitting it open. A dozen tiny tendrils at the tip of the slug's tail had been tangled into the host's brain. Only one half of the split head fell to the floor, the tail kept a tight grasp on the other half, and Atticus could clearly see the remaining brain matter.

The front of the creature, hovering close to the ceiling, harpooned itself straight into Atticus' chest.

The serpent's head burrowed itself below the vee of his neck digging through his leather vest and under his padding. Teeth tore at Atticus' right nipple and chest. He ground out a scream. Forced to drop his sword, Atticus wrapped both hands around the cold, smooth worm. He yanked the serpent from his body, but not without the creature rending flesh.

He flung it to the floor and with his boot stomped on the slug's knob-like head. Atticus twisted his foot, crushing the skull.

When he lifted his boot the worm's skin flashed pale blue before it shot from the house.

Atticus checked his wound and saw it was only a superficial injury. He gathered his sword and gave chase.

Outside the night was still. The sting in his calf where the time spider had bit him throbbed. Rubbing his leg, he spotted a faint trail of blood leading down the road.

The trail soon went cold near some woods at the corner of the property.

When Atticus turned around, he spotted a man hiding in the shadows of a narrow alleyway.

"You," he shouted. "Did you see a snake come this way?"

The man waved Atticus closer.

Sword drawn, Atticus approached the shadowed figure.

The stranger wore black sweat pants and a matching oversized T-shirt. A cap bearing the logo of the Houston Astros was tipped low to cover his eyes. He held a plastic-bottled drink. "Lower your weapon, friend. I mean you no harm."



Chapter Forty-One



ISAAC'S CAR SPED FROM his mansion, spitting gravel into the wind. He'd returned home to find Lynn gone. Ira said she'd went to see her mother. His mate, the whelp that she was, was unaware her mother was actually a Nacilla worm in a human host. The Nacilla should already have been assigned to a new location—not of this planet—and a new cub to rear.

If the Nacilla still remained, Lynn's primal territorial instincts could drive her to injure or most likely rip the Nacilla's mortal shell to shreds. His mate was alone in a world she no longer understood. Enemies she knew nothing of hunted her, and her reckless impulses risked leading them to her. Isaac gripped the steering wheel tighter and leaned on the gas.

As he sped toward Lovecraft Lane, a pungent scent filled the car. Isaac jerked the wheel and brought the car to a stop on the shoulder. He jumped out and sniffed the air.

His nose served as a compass. Shifting into his natural form, his clothes ripping away from his body. His muscles morphed, growing leaner; his teeth sharpened and his skin sprouted thick, black fur. Spreading his wings, he charged into the sparse woods and rushed on all fours through the thicket of trees and shrubs. He burst through the dense greenery, across the highway and took flight.

Ignoring the polluting scent of diesel fuel from an eighteen-wheeler below, he reveled in her essence. His cock throbbed with anticipation. A growl echoed against the night sky.

He soared at tree height and spotted Lynn on a motorcycle speeding along a back road. Her sobs were barely audible over the roaring engine and wind in his ears.

Isaac's eyes glowed red as he dived and snatched Lynn from the bike. The Harley skidded, an unguided missile, crashing into the edge of the woods and erupting into a chaotic scream of bending steel, bramble and shattering force.

Lynn's yelp of surprise and protest echoed amongst the cries of a flock of blackbirds. Her feet dangled, swinging wildly.

He swooped, descending into the heart of Sacred Oaks. Before he touched ground, he dropped Lynn onto the field. And when he landed, he shifted to human.

Naked and furious.

He stepped toward her; she stepped backward, her hands raised. Bitterness growled from his throat as his bare feet crunched the dry grass. "You were forbidden to leave the mansion." He towered over her. Anger boiled deep, body temperature rising. The skin on his forearms and thighs bubbled.

Lynn wiped tears from her cheeks. She shook her head. "I...I just wanted to say goodbye....then she told me to leave and that she never wanted to see me again."

His mate shuddered and Isaac struggled to control his resolve not to string her from the nearest tree. He reminded himself she was still a whelp, young and naive.

"She was my mother," Lynn cried. "But she talked to me as if I was a stranger."

Frothy saliva dripped from his bared canines. He leaned close to her ear. With a snort, he said, "Your caregiver knew she was in danger." A roar welled from the pit of his being.

His mate stepped back, covering the sides of her face with her hands.

"Ira told you it was forbidden to seek out your mother, yet you did it, and endangered both of us."

The beast struggled to break through his human form. Claws returned to his fingertips. He gripped her by the neck, lifting her from the ground. Her feet swung while her hands clutched at his forearms.

"You will not disobey me again."

His mate closed her eyes and managed a slight nod and whimper.

"In time, you will come to know why obeying me is important for our survival. It is the way of the Geminus. I am the master of all creatures large and small, including you."

With a flick of his wrist, he slung her into a tree. She grunted as her body rolled down the trunk. Lying face first in the grass, he picked her up by her hair and held her at eye level, feet inches off the ground. "You are mine. And you will do as I command."

Another nod. More tears.

Lowering her to her feet, he palmed the back of her head and forced her to her knees.

She moaned as he thrust her head to the ground, in a low bow. With her face pushed against the top of his bare feet, he said, "You understand me?"

As she planted kisses on top of his feet, her essence rolled off her in waves, a delicious scent that shot straight to his cock.

With another growl, he said, "Time to complete the fusing." From around his neck, he removed the black Narkush stone Galmoria had given him. The stone

glowed, pulsing like an organ. He shoved the jewel into her chest. It burned into her flesh.

Lynn howled.

But it only took seconds before the stone was implanted securely into her skin.

“One final step remains before your Vixenhood is upon you.”

Trumpets should have resounded and festivities should have been planned to celebrate the glorious birth of a Vixen, but fate had other plans—a private ceremony deep within the forest.

His mate looked up, bewilderment clear in her expression. Isaac offered his hand and she quickly accepted. Lifting her to her feet, he eyed her red silk gown. The flimsy material clung to her breasts and hips. A deep rumble vibrated from his core. She responded with her own satisfied purr.

Wings grew from her back and the dress shed from her body. Her nose elongated, a beautiful, magnificent snout. Fur blanketed her body. Complete in her metamorphosis, she stood on four legs, snorted and shook her head.

Isaac morphed into his natural form. With an approving snort, he circled her, lips dripping with saliva, cock dripping with seed.

He sprang, tackling her. They rolled across the earth. With a snapping jaw, Isaac nipped at her neck while his paws parried her retaliating swipes.

From his nostrils, a heated snarl exploded. With one mighty jump he mounted her back and bit into her shoulder, pinning her in place.

And then he thrust, burying himself inside her, taking his Vixen as his mate. A prideful baying came from deep within his abdomen.

A pack of coyotes howled. A flock of crows cawed. Swarms of locust and insects hissed and chattered. The forest shook, a concert of animal and vermin alike.

A warm, humid breeze swirled and a cyclone of wind embraced him and his mate. Elemental air guarded their sacred consummation. Lightning flickered across the now blackened sky. Webs of electricity drew the archaic symbol of the Geminus.

The animals. The vermin. The winds. The lightning. Isaac and his mate had their celebration after all.

As his seed streamed inside of her, he licked the fur on the back of her neck. The barbs in his tongue drew a line of blood in her leathery skin.

Both his mate and he, shifted into humanoid form. Isaac kissed her gently and stood. “Come with me, my eternal mistress, we must find The Beloved—and your new vessel.”



WITH THE BACK OF HIS gloved hand, Shane wiped sweat from his forehead. He glanced at the eerie lightening in the darkening sky. “Not this freaky shit again.” His breath controlled and steady, he danced around the canvas bag hung from the weeping willow. “So the next time one of those jack-offs gives you any grief,” Shane said, jabbing the bag with several rapid punches, “you lay their ass out just like I taught you.” He tossed his gloves to the ground and from a low branch plucked his shirt. Rubbing sweat and dirt from his bare chest, he added, “Got it?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Scooter nodded.

The kid hadn’t exerted enough energy to even break a sweat. He couldn’t teach him more lethal moves, like how to strike the nose with a flat-handed jab, or where the vital pressure points were, but the basics would do. For now.

“Why do people have to fight?” Scooter pulled his gloves off. “Why can’t people be smarter than that?”

Shane sighed. “America wouldn’t even exist if no one fought and stood up for their principles.”

“Was it principles Americans were protecting when they stole this land from the Natives?”

“I’m not looking to debate the morality of war. I just don’t want people beating on you for the rest of your life and I want you to want that too.”

“I do want it.”

“Prove it.” With a lift of his chin, Shane gestured to the gloves on the ground. “Put those back on. Let’s go another twenty minutes.”

The sound of a small engine rumbled in the distance. Birch’s motorcycle sped down the driveway. He killed the engine, set the kickstand and dismounted. Lifting his Marvin the Martian helmet off, he asked, “We riding?”

“Just teaching Scooter how to beat some ass. Say, Jamie-boy, you look like a punkass, can Scooter show you what he’s learned?”

Birch craned his neck. He took a goofy stance and formed a blade-hand. “Waa yah! Young grasshoppers must know to not start fights that they cannot win. And Scooter-son may well perish if he dare touches Sensei Birch.”

Scooter laughed.

“How the fuck did I end up with you two weirdos?” Shane shook his head.

“Is Master Baker not pleased?” Birch bowed.

Shane thumped Birch’s skull. “Never lower your eyes to the enemy, dumbass.” He waved Scooter off. “We’re done for today.” When Scooter was out of hearing range, he said, “Not sure I’m up for riding.”

Birch sat on the hood of Shane's truck, his boots braced on the front bumper. "What plagues thee, Master Baker?"

Shane eyed Birch.

"Too much. Got it." Birch held up his hands. "Toning it down."

"Not in the mood. Not today."

"Let's play a game." Birch hopped from the hood and onto his bike. "Bet I got you beat."

"You lost me."

"Bet my life sucks more than yours."

"Sure. I'll play."

Birch put his helmet on and started the engine. "My wife is fucking my brother. How's that for messed up?"

Shane pictured himself wringing that cheating bitch's neck. He took a deep breath, trying to cool his temper. Not what Birch needed right now. "Amy's as crazy as Aunt Carol. She's hearing voices."

"Fucked up, but no contest. I got you beat."

Shane concentrated on the edge of Sacred Oaks, but all he saw was his fist pounding a faceless, imaginary man. A man named Tobias.

Birch killed the engine. "Voices, huh?"

"Yeah," Shane said. "She's losing it."

"Ya think it's that schizophrenic stuff?"

"Maybe I can have her committed for testing and they can figure out what's wrong with her."

"That might be best."

Shane straightened. "I'm going to grab a drink then we'll ride. I need to clear my head."

The trailer's door flung open. Scooter dashed down the walkway, waving a large knife. "You're wrong! She's not crazy. Tobias is real and he sent her this dagger."

Shane clutched his brother's arm and took the blade. "Where'd this come from?" The name TOBIAS was emblazoned into the handle.

"Abe gave it to her. Tobias is real."

Shane hurled the dagger across the yard. Abe was constantly filling Amy's head with heebie jeebie mumbo bullshit.



ATTICUS KEPT HIS STANCE against the man dressed in black.

The stranger took a drink and smacked his lips. "Good stuff."

"I'll take your word on that, sir."

The stranger lifted the bottle and swished the clear liquid. “Aren’t you curious?”

“Name.”

“Most call it water,” the strange said. “Some know it as H₂O. I just know it as boring as fuck, but the side effects sure beat that of a fifth of Tequila.” He gave a nod. “Sober now seven years, four weeks and three days.”

Atticus shook his head, sheathed his sword. “I have no time. Good day.” He turned and strode toward the street, away from the shadows of the alleyway. A loud wet noise immediately followed by a brief but high-pitched squeal made Atticus whirl around.

The man had placed a heavy boot over the remains of the fugitive worm. “How goes the hunt for the Beast?” asked the man before casually taking another sip from the bottle.

“What do you know of the Beast?”

“Come with me, Atticus. I’ve got something to show you.”

“Are you a Seeker?”

“Name’s Howard. Now come step inside my van and let me show you something that will interest you a great deal.”

Atticus followed the man down to a cul-de-sac at the end of the street. An unmarked black van was parked in the gravel lot.

The man threw open the back doors to reveal the interior. It resembled a cluttered office with a desk, lamp and coffee pot. Papers were scattered across the desk and more papers and charts were stuck to the side of the van, even on the tinted windows.

“After I learned that Rourn had passed from this world I began re-examining the astrological signs.” Howard pointed at a chart on the van wall. It was divided into several dozen slices with a secondary circle in the center of the main circle. “And I have discovered something that the Templar Courts missed seventeen years ago. Rourn and you were born the same night at almost precisely the same time. You were born under the sign of Champions when the sun, Mercury and Earth aligned.”

“That’s correct,” Atticus said. “All according to the prophecies of when the Twin warriors were to be born.”

“I studied yours and Rourn’s birth and the alignments of that night. You were born moments after Rourn, right as the sun, Mercury and Earth perfectly aligned. Rourn was born exactly one minute too early to have been born under the sign of the Champion.”

“That’s ridiculous! One minute should not change Rourn’s status as my Twin.”

“Not true,” Howard said. “Even a minute earlier or later would have changed the legitimacy of the birth.”

“Then who is my Twin?”

“I asked myself that same question. And so I studied another person’s date of birth. Someone who was born twenty-seven years ago. And I discovered that the day he was born there was also an alignment of the sun, Mercury and Earth.”

“A person born twenty-seven years ago? What in carnations compelled you to look at this person?”

“Because he is a Paladin and also my son. His name is Shane Baker and he lives right here in Buckeye.”

“Impossible! How can he be a Paladin if he is not a member of an order?”

“Because I defected with my family. I wanted him and my other children to grow up like normal all-American kids.”

Rourn was not Atticus’ twin. His twin was not even a member of the Order. He hadn’t been trained by the wisest of elders. He was an outsider who knew nothing of their cause, of their culture, of their values.

Atticus gave the charts on the van’s wall a cursory glance before his attention returned to Howard. “Have you been inside that house?”

“Negative. I’m only authorized to watch from a distance and report back. You’re the field operative.”

Atticus huffed. “They only sent me as a one-man reconnaissance team. They won’t let me slay the Beast alone, only track him to his haven.”

“Yeah?” Howard quirked an eyebrow. “But they gave you that fancy sword and a pretty pendant to wear around your neck. Me? I’m a washed-up Dick Tracy living in a rundown van.”

“How did you find out about the murder here?”

“It’s my job to follow bread crumbs from a comfy vantage point. After you reported back that an adult female was missing from the last crime scene I did some digging. The missing woman’s name is Lynn Renee Rice. And that house was occupied by her mother. Look here.” Howard pointed at his computer screen, clicked a few buttons and several high-quality images of a woman were on the screen. She was on a motorcycle racing down the street; she was standing on the doorsteps of the house; she was leaving the scene with fresh blood caked all over her body.

“That’s the Female,” Atticus thought aloud.

“That’s right.”

“Inside the house, there was a message written in blood: Die Beloved Die.”

Howard looked to the computer monitor. “A threat against something or someone...a ‘Beloved’ one.” He typed.

“What are you doing?” Atticus asked.

“I am Googling ‘Beloved’.” After a few seconds, he said, “My God. Beloved is associated with the name Amy, from Latin origins.”

“Why is that alarming?”

“Because,” Howard said, looking Atticus in the face. “She is Shane’s girlfriend.”

“The female Beast wishes to kill this Amy?” Atticus asked.

“It appears that way. Maybe they know that Shane is of Paladin lineage and want to kill her as an act of warning against all Paladins.”

“Do you know where I can find Amy?”

“Of course,” Howard said. “She was called in to work the late shift at Roxy’s this evening.”

“Then I must go immediately.” Atticus dashed from the van.

“Atticus!” Howard called after him. “Do not tell my son about me.”

Atticus nodded before jumping into his car. “Roxy’s,” he said.

The GPS lit up: “Roxy’s Bus Stop Diner.”



Chapter Forty-Two



AMY HAD BEEN WORKING for hours, her feet numb, her back burning with twinges, but she had given service with a genuine smile.

Tobias would have Shane's strong will, integrity, and strength. Tobias would have her passion and patience.

Amy rounded the corner and dumped dishes into a bin under the counter. She rinsed her hands.

Carmen pushed the glass against the Sprite tab on the soda machine. "If mini-Amy's got your looks and Shane's temper, she'll break all the boys' hearts and burn down this town before she's two."

Amy laughed. "I know." She glimpsed her purse under the stainless steel counter. The pee stick peeked from the side pocket, a faint but discernible plus sign.

Tobias was real.

Carmen reached for another glass and began filling it with Diet Coke. "Please tell me you don't intend to paint your nursery in Pepto pink."

"Shane would have a conniption."

"Finally. Something me and the gringo can agree on."

Smirking, Amy gave her a sidelong look. "He wouldn't go for it because I'm having a boy."

"I suppose some superstition told you that." Carmen took a steak knife from the utensil rack. She pulled at the collar of Amy's T-shirt, readying to drop the knife between her breasts.

Amy elbowed her. "You're supposed to drop a coin not a knife. If the coin rolls to the floor it's a girl. If it gets caught in the underclothing, it's a boy."

Shrugging, Carmen trayed her drinks. "Fresh out of coins."

"Seven!" Charlie set a plate topped with the special, shepherd's pie, under the warmer. The old, black man gave Amy a wink. "Mighty nice to hear about your news, Miss Wintry."

"Thanks."

A couple of roughneck hunters with their young sons took up a booth on her side of the diner. Mike "Cowboy" Bullock had stopped in on his way to the Bull. As usual he'd worn his white cowboy hat. He set it on a table near the door. She'd not seen him since he'd given her a lift home.

Mike twirled one end of his handlebar mustache with a toothpick. “Howdy there, Miss Wintry. I hear you’re getting hitched to that no-good Shane.”

“He finally roped me in.”

Mike pointed the tooth pick at her. “You tell Shane if he ever gets out of line I’m gonna tell everyone how him and Birch’s Plan C went awry in Laredo.”

Amy shivered at the memory of Shane and Jamie ending up stoned and naked in a Mexican jail, all while trying to smuggle tequila over the border. She had asked what the heck they had been thinking and they’d said, as if rehearsed: *We wanted the worm!*

“I think they’ve moved on to Plan H.”

Mike chuckled, his beer gut rumbled.

A young man entered the diner. A good-sized gash in the calf of his green leather pants revealed slim but muscular legs. Long red hair, pulled into a ponytail stretched to the center of his back. A narrow leather carrying case protruded from his hip and past his knees.

Carmen said, “He’s all yours. You still owe me for waiting on the last freak that came in here.”

“That was three weeks ago and I was only working ‘cause Valerie called in.”

Valerie, sitting at a nearby table crunching on pork rinds, piped up, “Sorry ‘bout that, Amy. I was sick as a dog that morning. My break is over so I can get this one.”

The Beast draws near.

Amy flinched. With Vicky, sharing her psyche was easy but with Tobias, his gruff and abrupt intrusions could be quite alarming.

“He’s coming now?”

Carmen looked at her. ““He’s already here.” Carmen nodded at the guy in leather.

The strange guy approached. His intense gaze moved from Carmen to Amy.

“I think you are the one I seek,” he said. His eyes met hers—a penetrating stare.

Or maybe he was looking at someone behind her. She glanced over her shoulder. Only Charlie cooking. Turning her focus back to the stranger, she found herself still under his scrutinizing gaze. Nervously, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

I must leave to prepare for battle.

The stranger said, “Tell me your name.”

She willed her racing heart to calm, lest she die from a heart attack before the Beast even had a chance at her.

Dear God in heaven. Was this strange man the Beast? He was the man she was to fear? She let out a nervous laugh. Couldn't be. He was just a teenager, for crying out loud.

"You have a strange aura about you," he said. "You must be of Paladin lineage."

"Um. No. I don't think so. None of my family came from France."

"I do not speak of those Paladins," the boy said firmly. "I speak of the ancient lineage of holy warriors that have protected this world since the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Yeah, still doesn't ring a bell."

"I see it in your aura right there." He pointed at her belly. "Blazing ghost! A most powerful strength is within you."

Carmen put down her tray of hot food. "Alright. Run along crazy aura person."

He brushed Carmen's hand aside. "Be gone wench!" He snatched Amy by the wrist.

"No you did not," Carmen snapped.

Chairs scraped along the wood floor as three gentleman, two hunters and Mike, stood.

"Amy? Carmen?" Mike said, "Everything alright?"

Unable to look away from the stranger's intense gaze, Amy said, "I'm not sure."

The stranger kissed the top of her hand and bowed. When he looked up, he said, "Your name, it means 'The Beloved'." He sounded as if he'd just discovered the fountain of youth and was ready to bathe in the waters.

She cringed, tugging her hand away. "I think you better leave."

The young man towered over her, his shoulders as broad as Shane's but his face smooth with youth. "You must come with me."

The beauty known as Carmen placed herself between Amy and himself. "Are you mental or something? Do I need to call the cops?"

Atticus felt himself grow hard and silently cursed his traitorous body. "I am Atticus, ordained Paladin knight of the holy Order of Abel; and a Twin warrior destined to defeat the Geminus. I have a divine mission, so I demand you step out of my way."

"Guess that answers both my questions." She leaned closer. "I demand you kiss my ass and walk up on outta here."

Her menthol-flavored breath wafted across his face.

The three men remained standing.

Atticus glared at Amy. “There is a child within you that harbors great power. Without proper training and discipline he will be dangerous to everyone around him.”

“How do you know I’m pregnant?”

“I can already sense him. Come give birth to your child within the safety of the compound. Allow him to train to be a mighty warrior.” He reached around Carmen, open palm. “Or else, the Beasts will kill him.”

The raven-haired beauty shoved his arm away. “The fuck you will.”

A man with dark, aged skin rounded the corner. He wore a black apron and white netting over his hair. In one steady hand, he held a butcher’s knife. “Miss Wintry won’t be goin’ nowhere with you, son.”

Atticus stepped backward. He drew his sword. “I will not leave without Amy!”

Gasps fell over the diner.

The click of guns resounded. A man took his cowboy hat off the table and placed it on his head. He leveled two pistols. “Well, let’s just see if we can’t persuade you to change your mind, young man.”

Two men dressed in camouflage stood from their dining booths. Both drew pistols.

From behind the cooking line, an elder woman wearing a hairnet thumbed the hammer of a revolver.

Carmen said, “You’re in Texas, dipshit. Should’ve brought a Smith and Wesson.”

A loud crack sounded. Above the dark-skinned man, the air tore open and out dropped a time Reaver, the size of a grown man.

Gunmen spun their weapons away from Atticus. Before they could get off a shot, the spider wrapped mechanical legs around the black cook.

And the man vanished.

“Charlie!” somebody screamed.

Atticus leapt into a high kick, landed on the counter, crouching. And dove onto the gigantic urchin’s bulbous abdomen. Gunshots rang, bullets ricocheted off its metallic hull. Atticus gripped the spider with one hand, pulled his sword back with the other.

The spider reared upward like a startled mare. The left leg pierced a hunter through the chest, through his ribs and out his back. The right leg plunged into the cowboy’s shoulder, pinning him to the wall.

More screams.

Atticus stabbed into the spider’s body. It collapsed beneath him and vanished. He thudded to the floor. A cold, sharp pain pinched inside his calf. He

looked down and saw a crystallized prong...or was it a fang. The spider fang twitched and wiggled. It fell to the floor. Atticus grabbed it. He untied the prayer satchel that was around his neck and dropped the fang inside.

Amy and Carmen rushed out the back.

The remaining hunter, a man as wide as a hay stack, blocked the front door. The man's fist drove forward.

Atticus caught the hunter's wrist before kneeling him in the gut. Gasping, the man bent. His arm cradled his abdomen. Gently, Atticus gripped his shoulders and helped him to the floor.

He panned the room of bleeding and moaning innocent souls. "My sincerest regrets."

As he dashed outside, he scanned the parking lot for the Beloved.

Quick footsteps pounded behind him. Something jumped onto his back. Arms wrapped around his throat. Legs clamped around his waist. A flurry of raven hair whipped at his face.

He grabbed a forearm and flipped his assailant over his head and onto the asphalt.

Grunting, flat on her back, Carmen climbed to her feet, righting herself.

His aura constricted around his person. The energy vibrated and hummed.

The Beast was near!

A small car drove from the back of the diner. Amy was driving. The Beloved gave him a quick glance before speeding from the lot.

"Jumping rats!"

A black car screeched by. Carmen and Atticus watched the vehicle nearly run Amy's car off the road. Amy's car accelerated but the other car matched her speed. It tapped her bumper. The car skidded slightly but Amy regained control. Both cars rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

Atticus waved Carmen off. "Be gone, you dreaded nymph." Inside his car, he mumbled, "Time is running out." His glorified scooter hummed to life. He threw it into gear. Moments from catching the Beast...

The passenger door flew open and Carmen slid into the seat. With both hands, she steadied a Glock. What a beautiful sight.

"I don't know who the fuck you are." She tilted her head, gesturing toward the diner. "Or what the fuck *that* was, but something tells me you know who's chasing my friend, don't you?"

"*That* was a time Reaver." He lifted his chin at the road. "And that is the Beast," he said, flatly. "The one which I keep telling you people of. No?"

"Well, get after him already! And respect the nymph with the gun."

Ignoring the spicy-sweet fragrance drifting from the passenger seat, Atticus sighed and gripped the wheel tighter.

The Beast was finally within reach.



Chapter Forty-Three



AMY'S CAR JOLTED AND skidded before she regained control. Glancing in the rearview to see what or who had bumped her, she spotted a luxury sedan inches from her bumper.

The beast?

Couldn't be. Two people, a man and woman were inside the car. Tobias had said there was a beast, not beasts. They bumped her car again. Gripping the wheel tighter, Amy slammed the pedal. *Damn!*

Whoever they were, they were obviously intent on pushing her off the road. Home was closer. Just take a left on Harper Top Road a mile ahead.

The car's grill bit at her rear fender.

"Who are you?" she screamed aloud, stomping the pedal so hard it might go through the floorboard. Bright streams from the setting sun blinded her with white and orange sunspots. When she reached for the visor her car whooshed out of control. She put both hands back on the wheel and squinted through the sun's glare.

The speedometer climbed past seventy, hesitating between seventy-eight and eighty-two. Amy had never gone so fast in her life. The car slipped and jerked.

Jesus!

Steering with her left hand, she rummaged with her right through her purse, fumbling for her phone. From her lips came a silent prayer that the beast did not bump her while she steered with only one hand.

Her trembling fingers punched in Shane's speed dial, but the asshole pulled up on her left and swerved. She hooked the wheel. The tires skidded onto the uneven shoulder and the phone bounced from her hands. It thumped onto the passenger side floorboard, out of reach.

She gripped the wheel with both hands again. Her foot slammed the gas pedal. The needle shot over ninety-five. The hayfields, barbed wire fences, and small stone houses rushed by.

But the Beasts still followed.

"Just leave me alone!"

Her pleading was futile. The creep matched her speed. She could turn left onto Harper Top Road just a half mile ahead and get home quicker than she could get to the police station.

But what if Shane was caught by surprise. Whoever was trying to run her down or maybe even kill or rape her, might kill Shane and Scooter, too.

No, she thought, shaking her head. Only one person would know what to do and he was nowhere around.

Tobias! Is this him? Is this the beast?

She could see her turn. Almost home.

All the warnings are making me feel crazy. Shane thinks I'm a nut job. Now you can't even be here when I need you the most? Damn you! Damn you Tobias! I don't need you or your future! To hell with you and to hell with the beast and that other freak from the diner, too. And to hell with Shane. To hell with all you bastards!

Tear streamed down her cheeks. With her forearm she swiped the moisture from her face. The car jerked again. She quickly grabbed the wheel.

The Lexus shot ahead and skidded sideways, barricading her intended left turn. She jerked the wheel and turned right onto Blackwood Road. The crumbling unmaintained road weaved its way straight into Sacred Oaks.

Abe lived off of Blackwood several miles into the reserve. Maybe she could make it to his place.

Her sweat-drenched hands slipped on the wheel, her ankle cramped from pumping the gas.

No matter how fast she drove, the sedan remained steadily on her tail. It was like he was herding her along, the way Mike herded cattle.

Her life was in serious danger and she might not see tomorrow, may never see Carmen again, or kiss Shane. But she had to stop panicking and start thinking.

What if she slammed on the brakes and let the asshole hit her then she'd take off. It would destroy the front of his car and hopefully incapacitate the vehicle.

What if it destroyed her car too? Bent the axle? And the beast got her anyway?

The shadowy brambles and forest of Sacred Oaks consumed the shoulders of the road. The asphalt gave way to dirt, mud and clay. Road signs were bent and rusted.

And into the mouth of Hell she drove.

Abandon all hope. The morbid thought whispered in her head.

What if she pulled over and made a run for it into the woods. She could lose him in the forest and double back around to Roxy's and wait there for the police.

Tobias. Help me, please.



ISAAC WATCHED THE BELOVED'S vehicle swerve and speed toward the forest.

"Perfect," he said. "She is ours now." He glanced at his mate.

"Who is she?"

"She holds the key that will allow our race to climb to the highest evolutionary chain. With her as a vessel, we will be able to enslave this universe and all others—including the other tribes."

"What other tribes?" Lynn asked.

"Not important right now, my twin. We must capture The Beloved and perform a ritual so that you may have her body and nourish the seed within her womb."

Isaac pressed his foot to the gas and the car lurched. In confident pursuit they followed the Beloved.

"She's getting away, isn't she?" his twin said.

"She cannot get away. Not from us."

"But what of that Paladin that you sensed back there?"

"I am not concerned with the zealot. He is young, weak, and no threat to me."

Isaac's car idled down Blackwood at a leisurely pace, dust motes trapped in the headlights like millions of tiny, lost spirits. In the Geminus tongue, Isaac uttered a string of archaic syllables. He rolled all four windows down and crooned a summoning lullaby.

Crows, hawks and other birds flew to the tops of trees and cawed in symphony with his voice.

Isaac continued his incantation.

The path appeared to sway as hundreds of snakes, small and large, slithered onto the road and darted toward The Beloved's vehicle.

"Come, my children of the forest and serve your king."

His mistress clawed at the dashboard, as if bracing for possible impact. She knew not of the strength her body now commanded. He had much to teach her. The Narkush stone embedded in her chest pulsed with a rhythmic beat, like a tiny heart.

"What is so special about this girl?" she asked.

Several crows dove to the ground and scooped up snakes in beak and claw. Isaac grinned at a diamondback dangling in the clutches of a rather small blackbird. Its wings fluttered, but it lacked the strength to ascend. Isaac pursed his lips and blew. His breath carried the bird toward the Beloved's car.

"She carries a Paladin child within her womb," Isaac said. "He shall one day become the prophesied Dark Trinity—the most powerful being to rule all other

beings. Part human, part Paladin, and part Geminus.”

The birds dropped their writhing and hissing cargo of serpents onto the Beloved’s hood and roof. Her car swerved, fishtailing out of control and veered into the ditch. Her grating screams sliced through the humid air.

Isaac pulled over. He smiled at his mistress. “Time for your first lesson.”

“Yes, master.”

“Time to hunt our prey. Together.”



“PUSH IT HARDER,” CARMEN yelled at him like a fevered banshee.

“This is the car’s top speed,” he snapped.

“I could get out and push faster than this.”

Atticus cut a glance toward her. She still held the gun but the weapon was trained on him more lazily. “Perhaps you should.”

She wagged the weapon. “I said not to get smart with me, Mr. Renaissance Man. You just tried to kidnap my best friend...and with a sword no less. And you think being a smartass to the girl holding the gun is a good plan?”

“The Geminus are after your friend. And they will stop at nothing until she is in their possession. I am here to protect her.”

“What happened? You get bored with your Warcraft subscription and decide to play for real?”

“I have no understanding of this ‘Warcraft’.”

“You ain’t shitting me, are you? That’s fucking scary. What did you plan to do with Amy if you’d gotten her?”

“I would transport her back to the Paladin compound.”

“The compound,” Carmen said. “Makes perfect sense. Probably lived your whole life underground and now you were sent out to kidnap new women for your sick and twisted cult brothers.”

“No.” Atticus shot her a stern look.

“Amy is like a sister to me and if you dare put a hand on her, you may as well be putting your hands on me.”

Atticus sighed. “I have given that serious thought.”

“What was that?”

“I said...I hope she’s not caught.”

“Look!” Carmen pointed. “They’re turning! Turn. Turn!”

“Yes. I can see, Miss Magellan.”

As Atticus turned his car onto Blackwood Road shrill cries filled the sky. Hawks, crows and buzzards, soaring overhead, dropped piles of snakes onto the car.

Carmen screamed!

And she screamed some more.

“Stop that!” Atticus said, having to raise his voice due to Carmen’s screams coupled with the loud clacking and thumping of the snakes.

A large tortoise shell struck the windshield and cracked it clean down the middle. A white web expanded across both the driver and passenger side. Luckily the crack over the driver’s side hadn’t created too severe of a blind spot.

A wide-eyed hawk soared straight toward them, dropping a twelve-point rack of antlers in the middle of the road like a makeshift caltrop.

Atticus jerked the wheel to avoid running over the sharp horns. The back of the car swung too far.

“Blazing ghost!”

The car whirled into the ditch, bucking up and down. Something smacked the passenger window and Carmen squealed.

“Shiiit!”

The car came to a halt.

“You drive!” Atticus ordered before shoving open the door.

“Don’t you fucking go anywhere?”

Atticus jumped onto the hood of the car. “Drive!”

Carmen scooted behind the wheel, a deep scowl on her beautiful maiden face.

“You can’t ride on the hood of the car,” she said.

“Just drive the rotten car, wench! There’s no time!”

Atticus fell to his knees on the hood, and stared down at the pendant. He had to think. Had to think quickly.

“You’re not Bruce Willis and this isn’t the next Die Hard movie, you insane idiot!” Carmen shouted at him through the lowered window.

Atticus racked his brain. Muttered some words.

Carmen reversed the car out of the ditch and back onto the highway.

Atticus gripped the hood with his palms, knees and toes.

Three large buzzards rose up out of the woods. Two carried angry copperheads, the third carried an armadillo.

The buzzards circled overhead and in front of the slow moving car.

Summoning the powers of Earth and Mind, he shouted an ancient battle cry.

The two copperheads dropped.

His sword tore from its sheath. He sliced through one of the snakes in midair. The tip of the blade burst, releasing a solid beam of gleaming onyx; the stone bar struck the third bird carrying the armadillo. Both bird and armadillo imploded into feathers and bloody gristle.

Carmen screamed again, and the car swerved. Losing his balance, Atticus fell. His face smashed into the windshield. In horror, he gawked inside the vehicle. Between Carmen and him, divided only by glass, Atticus watched the Copperhead writhing on the column of the steering wheel.

The snake suddenly arched straight into Carmen's face, piercing into her skin. Both her hands flung to her face. The car skidded chaotically along the asphalt.

Atticus braced for the inescapable wreck. The tiny car careened left, rocketing over the ditch and slamming into a tree.

Atticus was hurled from the hood. He tucked himself into a ball and rolled onto the ground.

Regrouping his faculties, and steadying himself, he stood several yards from the car.

The crash pried the driver's door open. Carmen lay slumped halfway in and halfway out of the car. The copperhead coiled within her hair.

"Carmen!"

No response.

Rustling prompted Atticus to whirl, facing the woods.

A pack of coyotes stood on the edge. Foam poured from their open maws and their paws scratched threateningly at the soft pliable ground.

Six of them. They had already begun to spread out in an attempt to flank him.

"Bloody lotus," Atticus muttered. Here he stood, a champion of holy warriors sent to track down the greatest Beast known to this world and beyond. He would not succumb to death by the teeth of mangy coyotes as a beautiful maiden lay dying only feet from him.

Carmen uttered something.

Atticus gripped his sword.

Coyotes bound toward him. Atticus turned his side toward them making himself a smaller target.

He charged. His blade slashed, thrust, and sliced; his body danced side-to-side, but always forward.

Two coyotes fell.

Two more on either side. They circled. The sound of snapping jaws and yelps only served to fuel his rage.

Atticus raced forward and turned.

The four canines charged.

The blade jumped forward, swooped. Atticus kicked one of the coyotes in the ribs, hard, deadly. And his sword finished it, plunging into its neck.

The last coyote backed away.

“Run,” Atticus said. “Or perish.”

The coyote let out one last defiant howl before whimpering and scurrying into the forest.

He glanced to Carmen and his electric vehicle. A faint but sickly whirring from the engine pierced the fury coursing through him. Raising his sword, he ran to aid her.

Swiftly, he stabbed the snake still writhing in her hair and flung it aside. Gripping under her shoulders, he carefully slid her from the crumpled vehicle.

Her bosom heaved as her wheezing breaths came in frantic spurts. Pressing two fingers to her neck, he checked her pulse. Barely discernible. Swollen face. Lips a pale shade of blue.

Two points on the pendant had burned out. The last one during his attempt to kill the birds.

He called upon the realm of Heaven and the healing power of the Heart. Dusty pages of archaic grimoire passed through his memory as he tried to recall the proper incantation. Placing a hand on her forehead, he began to chant.

White glow radiated from his hand and pulsed through the dark skin on Carmen’s face. It was only a minor healing spell, a physical detox of sorts. But Atticus prayed it was enough to rid the snake venom from her bloodstream.

The glowing point on the pendant abruptly faded, and turned black, charred. Carmen remained limp on the ground.

Not since Rourn’s death had he felt such sorrow. This maiden of such beauty, intelligence and spitfire was one of the most astounding people he’d ever met.

“I failed you, Miss Carmen...but I cannot fail Amy.” Atticus stood. He lost the battle but the war waged on.



Chapter Forty-four



ATTICUS PUMPED HIS legs faster and faster. Something deep inside his core told him he was about to face things far greater than coyotes and giant worms. The Glorious Seal only had one point remaining.

Atticus came upon Amy's car. He circled it, panting, and searching.

Footprints led into the woods.

Followed by animal tracks.



AMY TRIPPED OVER A thick root. Her shoe sailed into a thorny bush. A strip of blood trailed down her left cheek. She picked herself up and continued tearing through the forest, her pace slowed with only one shoe.

A bird cawed from the left, locust chattered behind her; a snake rattled to her left then her front. Branches and bushes stirred with movement.

She'd lost her sense of direction. The plan had been to ditch her car and shoot through the woods, double back to the road and head back to Roxy's. But she wasn't sure which way led to the road.

Everything looked the same—oak, cedar and Buckeye trees, dead brown leaves, root-infested soil, slanted hills and deep creeks carved through the earth.

When she was a little girl she used to spend hours in the woods. She was Indiana Jonah, always on an exploration into jungles in search of lost ruins and relics. Her worst fear was her mama when she would threaten to blister her bottom if she got her new clothes dirty.

Indiana Jonah had never gotten lost.

She sure missed that girl.

Snorts and snarls came from behind. Amy's lungs were sore, her heartbeat refused to slow.

The trees became a palisade fence. She had no more of a chance to live, than a rat cornered by Freya. There was no more running left in her body. The adrenaline in her blood had depleted, and she was left with the bitter truth of the inevitable. Whatever that might be. Whoever that might be.

She clutched a tree...and cried.

Tobias...what do I do?

"Come to me," a man's voice spoke. "Come to me, female."

A tall naked figure stepped toward her. The moonlight glittered off his tanned stone-like skin and deep green eyes. His grotesquely large uncircumcised penis dangled between his bare legs. And a stone jewel in his chest shimmered bright as a ruby star.

Amy's breathing quickened. Her heart caught. She backed away, but a snorting sound caused her to glance back.

A large black cat with wings and green eyes blocked her retreat. Yellow saliva dripped from teeth as large as her forefinger. The glow of a ruby stone also flickered from the creature's underside.

"There is nowhere for you to go, Beloved one," the man said. "Fear not, for I have come for your body, nothing more."

#`

Shane felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He stopped the bike and cut the engine. Birch did the same. Sliding it from his jeans, he checked the caller ID. *Carmen.*

"Hey," he said.

"Amy's gone!" Carmen screeched. "She's gone! Some car chased her and she's gone!"

"Take a breath. Slow the fuck down. Start from the beginning."

"I found Amy's car but she's not here. I don't know where she is!"

Shane gripped the cell phone with a sweaty hand. "You lose an earring, Carmen! You don't lose a fucking person, especially my fiancé." He kicked a fallen tree and the rotten trunk crumbled. "Where's her car?"

"Blackwood Ave. Just outside Sacred Oaks."

Shane hung up. He shoved his phone into his pocket. "Amy's been in some kind of accident," he said to Birch.

"She okay?"

"Don't know." Shane inclined his head gesturing toward the path leading back to the trailer. "Meet me just past the fork on Blackwood."

"We'll find her," Birch said and sped away.

Shane straddled the leather seat and kick-started his bike. He weaved through the narrow wooded passage until he came to a gravel road bordered by a worn-out barbed wire fence and rotten posts. Stringy weeds climbed the length of the fence.

Shane swerved his bike, almost spilling onto the ground. He shot down the road. Hot wind smashed into his face and torso.

If someone hurt Amy he was going to kill them and he was going to prison for first degree murder. He had made that decision before he'd even gotten back

on his bike. He regretted not carrying his .40 SIG on his bike instead of in his truck. Sighing, he conceded to borrowing Carmen's Saturday Night Special.

Shane finally arrived about ten minutes later. He skidded to a stop beside Amy's car where Carmen paced on the shoulder, gun in hand.

Shane killed the engine and hopped from the bike. "Still nothing?"

"Atticus went looking for her."

Who the fuck is Atticus, Shane thought.

She squeezed his hand. "He's trying to help her."

Shane snickered. "Did he you tell you that before or after you fucked him?"

"Fuck you!"

"Where'd he go?"

"He saved my life. He's not the bad guy."

Shane eyed Carmen's swollen face, bloody lip and unkempt hair. "Where did he go?"

Carmen shook her head.

Shane gripped the front of her shirt. He clenched the fabric, twisting, tightening the collar around her neck. Leaning closer, his face inches from hers, he gritted, "Where the fuck did he go?" Spittle sprayed Carmen's hard glare.

She pushed off him. Straightening her arm, she pointed the gun at his crotch. "Don't you ever put your hands on me again...or I'll shoot your fucking dick off."

Scoffing, Shane snatched the gun from her grasp. "Not today, sweetheart."



Chapter Forty-Five



KNEELING ON A JAGGED cliff, Tobias glanced across the raging tides of the Gulga Sea. A sky eel soared about the violet clouds. He heard the drums and chants of the cannibals deep within the jungle far behind him. The Zawau tribe never came close to the sea for they feared the elemental shades that possessed the waters.

At Tobias' feet lay the remains of six white birds he had fallen with a sling. Positioned in a star formation, their heads pointed outward, beady eyes gazed blankly in all directions. From a flask, Tobias sprinkled a circle of salt around him and the doves.

A cold breeze whipped his long hair about his face and he snarled. He pinned his hair back with a piece of ratty cloth. It had been sixteen days since Galmoria abandoned him on the jungle world of Zlldoseus with the instructions to reach the peak of the tallest bluff by the next full moon. It was part of his rite of passage she had told him.

But that was before his encounter with the enchantress Sengyla, and she revealed the truth to him.

"You possess the blood of human, Paladin and Geminus. You are destined to become the Dark Trinity—a force of insurmountable power."

"Lies, all lies," he had protested. But Sengyla had shown him his true mother and true father and he had known then that Galmoria was the Deceptor.

Tobias took a clay vial from his leather vest, and drank the contents, a thick bitter oil. He took a pipe with a long curved stem and touched the bowl that hung close to his navel.

Smoke rose from within.

He closed his eyes as a higher state of consciousness seeped into his mind and veins. A divine sensation swam over him. Every nerve and cell in his body danced, like millions of fiery sprites, readying his body for battle.

If he failed then he failed the future, all futures and Galmoria's schemes would flourish, and all the universes would belong to her and the Beasts.

He had one chance to save all life, and to save his own humanity.

He had to be ready for this was a critical moment in the proper timeline. He had one chance now to preserve the future.

He exhaled a twist of purple smoke and searched the cosmos for the realm of Buckeye, Texas.



Chapter Forty-Six



THE NAKED MAN SHOVED Amy against a tree. She watched as the large panther became a nude woman right before her eyes.

It was all real, Amy thought. Tobias was real and the beasts were real. And she was going to die.

With thorny vines and sturdy roots, the woman helped fasten Amy to the tree. Squirming, Amy cried out. Hot tears streamed down her filthy cheeks. Strands of stray hair obscured her sight. As if she really cared to look upon the monsters anyhow.

It had all been true. The bad vibes Sherry felt; Cinder's ravings about a coming war; and all of Tobias' warnings. This man and woman...they were the Beasts.

Determined to keep her fear hidden, she steadied her voice, forced herself to stop sobbing. "What do you want with me?"

Neither one responded.

A curved claw released from the man's finger. He turned toward the woman.

"You are my eternal twin," he said flatly, and kissed her mouth. He held her chin with one hand. The claw swiped the woman's throat.

The woman-beast gurgled and from the look in her bulged eyes Amy knew she had been surprised.

As blood bubbled from the woman's neck, the man gently laid her to the ground. Claws tipping each of his fingers, he dug into her bare chest, and ripped the stone from her.

When he neared Amy, she smelled the stench of animal pouring from his skin. He sliced open Amy's shirt, exposing her breasts.

He held up the pulsating stone. "My eternal twin's soul shall live forever inside you." With a flat palm, he embedded the stone into Amy's chest.

Like hot ember, it melted into her skin. Amy's screams cut her throat raw.



A SCREAM PENETRATED the woods and echoed around Atticus.

I am too late, he thought. Hell horns! Pausing he closed his eyes, opening his senses and his mind. He inhaled a deep breath and let it out. Both an advantage

and disadvantage, the Paladin and Geminus races could sense one another when in close proximity.

To the left a strange scent tainted the air. The Geminus was close. And the closer he got to the Geminus, the tighter his vibrating aura constricted.

The screaming had grown weaker, hoarser, but still persistent. Atticus struggled to keep his mind clear of the sort of devilry being forced upon Amy. From the sound of her horrific cries she would not last much longer.

Atticus shouldered his way through a wall of thorn-ridden shrubbery.

There the Beast stood, only a few yards away. A woman's body lay on the ground at his feet and Amy was bound to a tree. Her head wobbled from side to side, as if she had no control over the movement. Her sobs were faint.

Behind the Beast, a shadowy figure materialized and stood, predatory eyes hollow with darkness. A savage black mane framed its barbaric physique and face. A vest adorned with shrunken heads and bones covered its chest, spiked gauntlets on its arms. Its matted fur glistened wetly with...

What? Atticus wondered. Some sort of shiny, sticky substance, as if the creature had bathed in it.

Fear gripped Atticus. Unable to move or speak, he watched as the being grew to twice the height of an average man and as broad as a bear. Claws grew from its fingertips. Teeth, black as graphite stone, elongated, like that of the extinct saber tooth tiger.

In silence, its ominous presence loomed over the Geminus.

Small white phantom birds fluttered around the being's shoulders, their song muted.



IT BURNED! THE GEM seared the skin on Amy's chest. Gritting, she glared at the monster of a man before her. He killed the woman with him and now he was probably going to kill her.

But why the jewel? What did it mean? Some sick ritual?

Through tear-blurred vision, Amy stared over the naked man's shoulder where a naked grotesque being appeared, the same as the one in the mirror at The Bull. Innately, she knew it to be her son.

Thank God!

But Tobias just stared at her. What was he waiting for?

Female...ma'am...I am...deeply saddened...but...

"Help me!"

The naked man looked at her. His gaze held a fraction of sympathy, dare she think it. "It will all be over soon."

Tobias!

His voice resounded in her mind. *It is as I have foreseen. It is as it should be.*
The gem sizzled. Her limbs vibrated with what felt like electricity. Her eyes burned. She squeezed 'em shut. Then everything went black.



A LUMP GREW IN ATTICUS' throat. He swallowed, lifted his sword high, and...charged!

A fireball, large enough to swallow a vehicle, sparked from the darkness and took the form of a monstrous skull before engulfing the Beast with a crackling chomp. An agonizing roar bellowed from the Geminus as he fled, blazing, into the forest.

Atticus froze.

The forest silenced. The shadowy figure was gone. The Beast was gone.

The woman's body remained on the ground and Amy remained bound to the tree.

What had happened? Had Atticus somehow unleashed a raw power from within himself? A power capable of obliterating the Beast in a fury of holy flames? Do holy flames generally take the form of a demented skull?

What was the shadowy visage, that savage beastly being?

He ran to Amy and set to work on freeing her. A strange stone throbbed frenziedly in her chest. It pulsed with a dim bluish light.

Atticus sliced the vines and roots securing her to the tree. When he scooped her up, a hand under her back and the other under her knees, blood spilled from her nostrils and streaked her cheek and chin. Her feet and arms dangled as he carried her through the woods. Her moans stopped but the heat radiating through her clothing told him she was still alive but burning with fever. Sweat drenched her long blond hair. Dirt and leaves speckled her long strands.

When Atticus neared the road a voice called from behind.

"Asshole! Put her down."

Atticus turned to see a muscular male in a sleeveless gray shirt and grease stained denim pants. He pointed a gun.

A strange warmth of divinity washed over his aura. A wonderful yet awkward sensation. He stared at the man holding the gun...the man he knew to be his Twin.

"What happened to her?" Carmen said. She sat beside Amy's car, back against the front tire. She was alive!

Atticus approached Carmen. "Amy's alive."

His Twin strode toward him. "I said put her the fuck down."

“Shane, I suspect.” Atticus gave a curt nod. “Amy needs to come with me for protection.”

“The fuck she does.” Now only feet from Atticus, Shane pointed the gun. “Put. Her. Down. Now!”

“At least allow me to place her inside the car. She is injured.”

“Fine.” Shane said, waving the gun at the car. “Put her in the car then step the fuck away.”

Atticus lay Amy across the back seat, then ducked out of the vehicle. “Shane, there is something of utmost importance I must tell you.”

With the muzzle of the gun, Shane gestured toward the ditch. “I don’t know how the hell you know my name, and I don’t really give a shitpie either. All I fucking know right now is that Amy is fucking unconscious, and I catch you bringing her out of the goddamn woods. And her goddamn shirt is fucking ripped open! What the fuck am I supposed to think, you motherfucking asshole!”

Atticus complied and stepped further into the ditch, away from the car, away from Amy. “I am not the enemy. I am your ally. And I am your—”

“Just shut the fuck up.” Shane held the pistol on Atticus with one hand while his other raked through his buzz cut.



Chapter Forty-Seven



SHANE GLANCED BACK at the car where Carmen and Birch stood. Birch had an arm draped over Carmen's shoulders. "I'm seriously thinking about just putting a bullet through this bastard's skull right now. I swear to God."

"Don't," Carmen said pleadingly. "He's telling the truth. He's not the one who did this."

"It was the Beasts," said the bastard.

Shane shot him a cold gaze. "Don't speak again, got it?"

The bastard nodded.

"Don't kill him, man," Birch said. "Let the sheriff department handle it from here. Amy's gonna be alright but she ain't gonna be a happy camper if you're in prison."

Shane nodded. He approached Birch's car but never took the gun off the bastard.

Carmen stepped toward him. She cautiously extended her hand out. "C'mon, Shane...don't do anything crazy, please. Hand me the gun and we'll wait for the police together. You, me and Birch."

Shane inhaled and exhaled a deep breath. He grabbed Carmen by the shoulder and shoved her away.

Shane leaned over Amy's motionless body in the backseat. With an ear pressed against her chest, he listened. Her heart thumped but it was faint. He felt something hot and hard against his cheek. Some sort of reddish stone was glued to her chest. It suddenly glowed bright as if somebody hit a switch and Amy's body lurched.

"Shit! What the fuck?" He ducked out of the car. "Where'd this weird stone come from?"

Carmen shrugged. "What stone?"

Shane lifted his chin, gesturing toward the psycho that hurt Amy. "You give her this?"

The guy shook his head. "I gave her nothing."

With a punch to the roof, he ducked back into the car. Shane kissed Amy's forehead, her cheek, the bridge of her nose and those sweet, sweet lips.

Nothing. Not a moan or even a fuckin' twitch.

With sweaty hands, he framed her face. "Open your eyes, baby." He picked a leaf and a twig from her hair. "Snap out of it!"

“Is she okay?” Carmen asked.

“Call an ambulance.” Shane kissed Amy on the lips. “Please, babe. Look at me.” He let his forehead fall against her forehead. “I’ll kill him. I swear to God, I’ll kill him.” Straightening, he handed the gun to Birch. “I’m gonna kill him, but I’m gonna do it with my fists.”

When Birch took the gun, Carmen put a hand on Shane’s shoulder. “It wasn’t him.”

Shane brushed her hand away. “Carmen, if you’re gonna keep defending this psycho-asshole then you fuck the hell off, you goddamn whore!”

Birch took Carmen by the wrist. He dragged her to the other side of the car.

Shane snickered. “Try not to fuck Birch while I’m beating this bitch to death.”

As Shane walked away, Carmen said to Birch, “It’s a good thing he gave you the gun.”

Cool night air caressed Shane’s bare chest as he tossed his shirt to the ground. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he caught Birch’s gaze. “No matter what happens, you two don’t interfere. We clear?”

“Got it, chief,” Birch said.

“You’re making a mistake,” Carmen said, tears running down her cheek, but she maintained a steady voice.

Taking a defensive stance, fists in front of his face and body, Shane waggled his fingers. “Let’s do this.”

The guy faced Shane. “I mean no harm to any of you. I come for the Beast only.”

“She’s not a beast, she’s a woman, you crazy fuck.”

“She’s not the Beast that I seek.”

“Well, I’m all the fucking beast you’re getting.” Shane took long fast strides toward him.

“I won’t hurt you,” the guy said.

“But you have no problem hurting a woman?”

Shane drove forward, intending to pummel his face.

A soft, invisible wall bounced him backwards.

“Sonuvabitch. What the hell?”

The guy remained standing without wavering in his position.

Shane charged faster this time, and speared his fist forward. At the moment before impact his body and fist were diverted to the right.

“I can’t hit this sonuvabitch!” Shane bellowed.

“We cannot harm one another,” the guy said. “It is impossible.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Shane stood, fists at his side.

The psycho extended his arm out. "Take my hand."

Shane clenched his teeth. "My pleasure, asshole." Shane clasped the outstretched hand.

Multi-colored sparks exploded inside his head, showering his mind with a billion rapid images; and a sensation like a thousand tiny tendrils of lava rooted through his brain, down his spine, igniting his blood.

Atticus let go of his hand.

Atticus...his Twin warrior.

"What the fuck is a 'twin warrior'?" Shane roared. "And how the fuck do I know your name?"

"Because the stars have chosen us to slay the Beasts together."



Chapter Forty-Eight



THE LOW WAILING OF a siren grew closer.

Atticus bore unblinking eyes into Shane's, causing Shane a moment of uneasiness. "It is imperative that Amy returns with me. And you as well."

Shane shook his head and took a step back. *This is some straight up freaky bullshit here.*

"I don't know who—or what—you are, but I ain't goin' anywhere with you and Amy sure in-the-hell ain't goin' anywhere with you."

First the headlights beamed through the darkness before the black and white squad car parked behind Amy's sedan where Amy rested in the backseat.

"You boys break it up," Sheriff Bowden hollered. The broad man shuffled in front of his cruiser before he advanced on them with steady strides. "Put your hands up and step away from one another." His fingers flexed around the holstered .357. "We don't want this to get nasty."

Shane glanced at the Atticus, Carmen and Birch then at the Sheriff. "C'mon Rodney, just shoot this fucking asshole...goddamn, man, he messed Amy up. Fucker hurt her. Just fucking shoot him, Rodney!"

"Son, from the vantage point I got here you better start addressing me as Sheriff Bowden."

Shane laughed in hysteria. Bent over, hands braced on his knees, he cackled like a drunk maniac. "Fuck all of you! Fuck!"

He'd always prided himself on being rational, practical even, but sanity and reality were sadly slipping away. He thought of asking Bowden for a ride to the nuthouse. A rage like nothing he'd felt before seethed inside him. A feeling so overwhelming, so intense, almost a tangible barrel of force bloating in his gut. Why couldn't he touch that freak?

An ambulance raced toward them, lights flashing, siren howling.

Shane stopped laughing, and he snapped his attention toward the car.

Birch cautiously approached him. "You want to go to jail or to the hospital with Amy?"

Sheriff Bowden shambled around the shoulder of the road. "Somebody 'round here is gonna explain to me what the devil is going on. All you kids smoking dope?"

Carmen pointed at Atticus. "He might know."

Shane snatched the pistol from the waist band of Birch's jeans, and leveled the gun at the bastard.

The noise around him muted. Nothing existed at that moment. Nothing and nobody.

Except Shane.

A loaded gun.

And the freak he was going to blow away.

The gun bucked in his hands. One bullet. Two bullet. Three bullets. Clean through Atticus' face, obliterating his skull, showering teeth onto the ground.

Sheriff Bowden's .357 thundered.

Once.

And Shane slammed face first into the dirt.

Shane shook his head, he was still standing...Atticus stood before him.

"Put the gun down, Baker!" Sheriff Bowden shouted.

Fingers trembling, Shane dropped it.

He sobbed as Birch and Carmen cradled him from either side.



Chapter Forty-Nine



DENIAL WILL CONSUME you.

The river flows one way. Dare you swim upstream? But perhaps if you swim against the current, it will take you to a paradise the naysayers lacked the foresight to envision.

And if you bend to the will of others, the consequences may eat you alive. Be wary of the barracudas that will chase you downstream.

For if you swim with the rest of the fish, you may very well live to see another day and be revered by your fellow swim mates, but at what cost?

Ignore the masses who command you to act within the confines of societal acceptance. For their reasons are selfish and without common sense.

Question the motives of those who ask you to abandon your tendencies. Trust in who you are and in those who revere you as you are. Be wary of those who ask you to alter your thinking or behavior.

Or...

Denial will consume you.

~Rourn



ATTICUS HAD FOUND HIS twin. And his twin tried to kill him.

He couldn't blame Shane for not recognizing their cosmic connection, since until now he hadn't known of it either. Nobody had.

Not even the Templars.

The cosmic forces must have a sense of humor.

Atticus sat in the backseat of the sheriff's car. Blue lights flashed against the dark sky. Healers—paramedics, he corrected—carefully removed Amy's unconscious body from the back of the car, placed her on a gurney and rolled her away.

With his head hung, Atticus had surrendered. The Beast had fled. Amy had been injured. And Shane almost got himself killed by the sheriff. There was no reason to put up any resistance. He would cooperate with the authorities as much as he could.

Something else weighed heavy on his mind. There had been a dead woman at the feet of the Beast. Had it been the female Geminus? Why had she been

slain?

Where is the Beast now? In a burst of flames the Geminus had fled into the woodlands, but Atticus' instinct told him the Geminus was far from defeated.

Where had that fireball come from? Amy herself? Perhaps she'd drawn from the incredible power stored inside the babe in her very own womb.

Or maybe the hideous dark man that was adorned with heads and bones conjured forth the flaming skull. But who or what was that being?

Something had protected Amy; that was all Atticus knew for certain.

The sheriff entered the vehicle. He shifted to drive. "Son, I don't know what in tarnation happened out here tonight, but we're gonna have to take you down to the station for questioning."

The vehicle pulled away from the scene.

"Did you find a burnt body?" Atticus asked.

The man glanced at him in the rear view mirror. "No. Will we find one?"

"The Beast," Atticus said, "he was set aflame."

"You'd do well to be forthcoming with whatever information and involvement you had."

The dark woods blurred past the window. "There is also a woman's body in the woods," Atticus said. "She is the missing female from the recent murdered family."



"SLOW DOWN," BIRCH SAID, gripping the dashboard. "Or we're gonna need an ambulance to come pick us up."

Shane's foot remained hard on the gas pedal, and he barely let up when making turns.

His phone dinged, indicating he had a text. A message from Scooter.

What time will u be home? Can u pick up pizza? And can I have the truck tomorrow?

Shane stifled a groan. He tossed a look to Carmen sandwiched between him and Birch. "You mind catching Scooter up on everything?" Shane said, dropping the phone in Carmen's lap. "Can he stay at the Valles plantation tonight?"

The plantation was two hundred acres surrounding a four-story plantation home where fifteen of Carmen's closest relatives lived and worked the family farm. "I just don't want him being alone."

"I need a lift to Roxy's to get my car." Carmen rested her head on Shane's shoulder. "Whatever you and Amy need, I'm here for you guys. I'll even forgive your recent assholeness."

Shane nodded, swallowing a lump rising in his throat.

Town lights shined. Paved streets weaved through downtown Buckeye. Buckeye Memorial Hospital sprawled over a few dozen grassy acres. A circle drive led to the emergency entrance where the ambulance unloaded Amy and rushed her into the building.

Shane reached the sliding glass doors right as the gurney vanished around a corner. Inside, his boots thudded down the tiled hallway. Birch and Carmen trailed closely behind.

A man in a white coat blocked Shane's path. "Hold it, mister." He held a hand up.

Shane stepped to the side. "Move."

The man moved to block Shane. "You're not permitted beyond this area. We will notify you when we know anything."

Birch tugged on his shoulder "Come on, dude. I'll wait with you."

Shane shoved his hand away. In the waiting room, he paced back and forth. "What did that punk do to her? She was unresponsive, but she didn't look beat up. And what was that fucking stone? This is some messed up shit."

"Relax, buddy. At least Sheriff Bowden let you come to the hospital instead of locking you up. Let's be optimistic here."

In the corner of the waiting room, he heard Carmen on the phone giving Scooter the run down.

Pausing, Shane clasped his hands on top of his head. "I wanted to kill that freak." He remembered the invisible wall, soft and spongy. And how his fist was diverted. "But I couldn't touch him. Something wouldn't let me touch him. It was seriously fucked up."

The kid acted strange, and like he knew him, like they were long lost friends. Something about him didn't sit well with Shane. And his demeanor. Cool, calm, and collected. Wasn't too often Shane met someone, especially young, that weren't afraid of him. Shane had seen that same behavior in hardened soldiers in the Middle East—guys who'd lived through IEDs and ambushes, men who weren't afraid to grab a bull by its horns and spit in its face when it snorted.

Who is that punk and where the hell did he come from? Did he have some sort of twisted crush on her? Had he been stalking her and for how long? And what'd he mean by calling me his 'twin warrior'? That fucking freaky mind-trip he gave me when we touched...

Carmen closed her cell and hurried over to him and Birch. "Any word? Is she alright?"

Birch frowned and shook his head. "Nothing yet."

Carmen folded her arms around Shane and patted his back. Shane fought the urge to recoil from her touch. He didn't want to be comforted. He just wanted to

be pissed off.

But she squeezed him tighter and he found himself wrapping his arms around her, burying his face in her hair, hiding the anguish and tears threatening to overcome him.

“Amy Rae Wintry.” A doctor with salt and pepper speckled hair and a five o’clock shadow called from in front of the double doors.

Shane released Carmen and rushed toward the doctor. “Is she okay?”

“Yes.” The doctor smiled. “She’s perfectly fine. All vitals are good but she’s in a catatonic state and we’re not sure why. It may be psychological, her body’s way of defending her mind from a traumatic event.”

“Will she wake up soon?” Shane asked.

The doctor’s smile faded. “I cannot say for certain. But in most cases like this, it only last a few hours.”

Shane sighed. “Okay. Everything’s going to be okay. She’ll recover. She’s a tough cookie.”

“There is one thing,” the doctor said. “There’s a stone embedded in her chest. We attempted to remove it but it caused too much biological stress and induced a seizure.”

“What is it?”

The doctor tilted his head. “I’m not sure, but my guess is that it’s organic. I scraped a sample off the surface of the stone and sent it to the lab for testing.” The doctor shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It seems to be surgically embedded into her skin.” A concerned expression panned the doctor’s face, and he lowered his voice. “I realize this is going to sound strange, but the only thing that comes to mind when I see that stone is that it’s some sort of satanic ritual.”

An uncontrollable shudder took Shane from head to toe. “When can I see her?”

Carmen pushed herself in front of Shane. She eyed the doctor. “What about the baby?”

The doctor lifted a brow. “What baby?”



ISAAC CLAWED AT THE soil, dragging his burnt hide over the bramble littered ground. He sucked in a painful gulp of hot air. His hand, his arm, his whole damn body was blackened. His lungs struggled to inflate. Legs, charred to the bone, scraped painfully across the dirt. Sloughs of flesh fell away with every inch he crawled.

And what about his genitals? A shiver slithered through him.

He collapsed. The Narkush faded from its vibrant crimson color to a pathetic translucent pink. Isaac pressed his bleeding lips against the cool soil. A few yards away he heard shuffling feet and voices.

Humans. They were scouring the woods. What would they do if they found him?

Even in his current state Isaac readied his brittle claws, believing he could kill at least one or two of the humans before they delivered death onto him.

Or would they transport him to a hospital to attend to his wounds? A sneer pulled at his split and blistered lips. He'd certainly prefer death before allowing human mortals to save him.

He only needed to get back to the mansion.

Isaac grunted and instantly regretted doing so when his throat, chest and abdomen imploded with excruciating tightness, and what felt like one of his internal organs burst.

He kept motionless for several long hours listening to the humans trampling through the woods, and praying to Galmoria not to die. Nightfall shielded him and the path he'd left behind when he drug himself the last few yards. A few times a spotlight glided by but never caught him directly in the beam.

His smoldered remains blended well with the soil and darkness. Even if they had found him, they'd probably mistake him for a charred log.

Fading in and out of consciousness, he struggled to keep his moans silent. When the humans finally disappeared, the sounds of the forest echoed. Hissing insects. Chirping crickets. An owl hooted.

So he moaned. Loud and desperate.

He listened to that owl for a long while. Then the bird burst through the canopy and left in a flurry of hoots.

Crunching noise.

The noise got closer. A growl followed, like that of a bull or a boar.

Two eyes, like shards of red-hot diamonds, peeked through the dark trees. The pungent scent of brimstone followed.

A black dog, larger than a truck, approached him. Its head lowered and it picked Isaac up in its massive maw. He felt the warmth of its breath and tongue beneath him. The comforting firmness of its teeth gently cradled his burnt body. And its warm jellied saliva anointed his burnt flesh.

As the hound carried him out of the woods, Isaac closed his eyes and thought peaceful thoughts, knowing that the hound was his offspring, spawned as a result of his dominating of Galmoria. A gift from his mother.

And the pup would save his life.



Chapter Fifty



SHANE PACED WITHIN the tight confines of the snack room that featured nothing more than a Coca-Cola machine with a dimmed light, and a tiny table with a grease-coated microwave. Doctor Midgard said he could see Amy soon. Her room number was 156. She was just a short walk away.

The doc also promised to do a pregnancy test.

Shane had shook his head at the doctor, silently telling him the test was a waste of time. Amy wasn't pregnant. Crazy? Maybe. After all, she had conversations with his sister's ghost and imaginary men.

But she wasn't pregnant.

Was she?

Dr. Midgard told him they'd run the test just to be certain because the doctor himself needed to know if he was caring for one or two lives.

Walking a ditch into the beige tiles of the tight room wasn't much better than sitting in one of the hard chairs in the waiting room. But at least he was moving and, his blood was pumping, hot and fast.

The face of the freaky fuck in the green leather pants flashed in his mind. Who the hell was he? Had he made the lights bounce in his mind? Or was Shane suffering from PTSD?

Too much shit!

Amy missing.

Amy hurt.

A strange jewel stuck in her skin.

Satanic ritual?

And a boy that seemed so familiar to Shane...more like a brother than Scooter, his own blood.

More like a brother than the soldiers he fought beside in Iraq.

Some seriously fucked up shit.

Birch and Carmen followed him like baby birds following their mother, or hunters trailing a rabid dog, readying to put it out of its fuckin' misery. "I should've never took that job in Pecos." His fists clenched tightly by his side. "I should've found a job here. Could've been a mechanic...or something. Anything. Could've worked for the highway. I could've picked up dead chickens at the Valles farms." He sighed. "Should've been around more often..."

Birch snorted. “Don’t do this. Don’t take the path of self-blame. None of this was your fault.”

“She needed me here and I wasn’t around.” Shane stared blankly at the dimmed Coca-Cola machine, fingers flexing. “Who was that crazy sunuvabitch guy? I want to know who the hell he was and why the fuck he was stalking her.”

Standing in the threshold between the snack room and waiting room, Carmen cleared her throat. “I’m going to play devil’s advocate and suggest that maybe that guy wasn’t talking all bullshit. He did bring Amy out of the woods and I..”

With large strides, Shane crossed the room. He peered down at her. “Was Atticus a good fuck, sweetheart?”

Carmen grimaced. “I didn’t fuck him! But I was with him and we saw some freaky shit—hundreds of birds started dropping snakes and turtles—and Atticus —”

Shane punched the Coke machine. The glass cracked diagonally from bottom to top. “Fuck Atticus! Don’t even use that name in front of me.”

“Amy needs you,” Carmen said. “Let’s just go see her.”

“She doesn’t need me. She needs someone to hold her hand and tell her everything is going to be alright. And that’s not me. I just can’t do that right now.”

Carmen got in his face. “None of us want to go in there and see her broken body, and we all want to find the deranged creep who’s responsible. But Amy is what’s most important right now and she needs us. And she needs us to keep it fucking together.” She jabbed a finger into his chest. “So man the fuck up, grow a set and get your ass in that hospital room, where you belong.”

Visions flipped through Shane’s mind, like an old fashioned slide show, but at high speed. Amy beneath him, writhing with pleasure as he made sweet love to her. Birch and him on bikes, speeding down the trails surrounding Sacred Oaks. His vision blurred, mind fogged with incoherent thoughts. Amy had asked him to pick up a gallon of milk and he had forgotten all about it. Did he feed Alamo? He needed to get to the junkyard and find a carburetor for the jalopy.

Birch placed a hand on Shane’s shoulder.

Shane spun and rushed Birch against the rutted cement wall.

“You need to fight?” Birch asked. “Get it out of your system.”

Shane sneered.

Birch’s lips twitched with a smirk. “Carmen’s right. Get it together, Baker.”

Carmen stepped behind him. “You can’t keep taking this out on us or yourself.”

Shane released his grip on Birch’s collar.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want to fucking do.”

A shuffling noise caused them all to glance back.

The automatic doors slid open, revealing a dark parking lot. Abe, the crazy fuck, dressed in a charcoal gray trench coat and a floppy hat, stepped into the hospital and toward the vending machine. He inserted several coins and made a selection. A package of crackers dropped.

With a dull expression, Abe opened the bag. “That there Beast finally caught up to her, eh?”

Shane opened his mouth, but Carmen silenced him with a raised hand. “I got it,” she said and turned to Abe. “You heard what happened to Amy?”

Shane grumbled. “I guess you heard about all this through some talking bush or puddle of mud shit?”

Abe said, “Done heard it over the scanner while skinnin’ a fat possum for supper.”

“What did you say about a Beast finally catching Amy?” Carmen asked.

“Just more bullshit.” Shane snorted. “Old man’s been flinging bullshit his whole life.”

Abe stuffed two crackers in his mouth and munched. “She’d done said was a Beast gettin’ after her. I don’t doubt it either. Not after that there strange one brought me the knife in my vision.” Abe pocketed the empty cracker wrapper. “I’d figure it was meant for her. I figured right, too, didn’t I?” His lips formed a cocky sneer. He turned to mosey out the way he’d come.

“Who’s Atticus?” Shane hollered.

Abe paused at the automatic doors that led to the parking lot. He glanced over his left shoulder, his dark eyes peering at Shane from between the brim of his floppy, old hat and the gray of his beard. “Fuck if I know.”

“Somebody better start making some sense here,” Shane said. “I’m sick of all this devil-worshiping satanic cult, cursed woods mumbo-bullshit.”

“I hate to say this,” Carmen began, “but I might have to side with Abe on this one. Amy might not be crazy and there may actually be something after her.”

With his back toward them, Abe lifted a hand over his head and waved. “I’ll be by later to check on her. Sure hope she’s alright.”

As Abe disappeared outside, Shane thundered, “Fuck!” With both fists, he pounded the Coca-Cola machine. When the face of the machine shattered, when his knuckles bled and even when his vision went red, he kept hitting...again...and again...

Carmen and Birch shouted but their voices sounded distant. Shane grabbed for the vending machine and tipped it over. Birch and Carmen darted out of the way. Chips and candy bars spilled onto the floor along with shards of glass.

Several orderlies ran into the room.

Shane clipped one in the jaw and sent him to his ass.

Three men in scrubs struggled to restrain him. One yelled, “Tranq!”

Shane felt a prick in his left shoulder.

“I’m gonna beat all you muther—” Shane’s legs became jelly. The room spun. Voices dimmed, now even more distant and incoherent.

And then...



Chapter Fifty-One



ISAAC LAY SPRAWLED on the floor of his master chamber, wide jungle leaves beneath him. Dozens of exotic jungle trees and bushes surrounded the edges of the room, creating an artificial environment. Had it not been for his hellion offspring, he would surely have died and rotted in the woods.

And his mate would've died shortly after.

It was unclear how long he had been lying unconscious before opening his eyes and realizing he was back in the mansion, his temporary lair while in the realm of Texas.

Texas, he scowled. Forsaken refuge of wretched mortals!

Galmoria had promised to make him King of the Beasts, giving him domination over all realms and all the Zodiac tribes. He would reign with pride and serve his mother well, but this land called Texas was a prick in his thumb, an insignificant realm littered with imbecilic and primitive human peoples.

Once he found and recovered his twin, he would leave this place. But not before devouring the Paladin that scorched him.

He needed little more than to feed and bed his Lynn. But where was she? With Amy's people?

Galmoria had informed him of Amy's habits, where she worked, how old she was, where she lived and who she fucked. Was Lynn with Amy's mate?

Isaac's head lolled. A low rumble vibrated from deep within. If the man tainted Lynn, he would skin the male alive and chew on his bones.

A pungent scent of burnt flesh mixed with sweet acai permeated the room, with a foulness that induced vomiting. Air squeezed from his lungs in shallow gasps. He coughed and choked. Chunks of half-digested deer spilled onto the foliage.

Whatever had attacked him had wielded cosmic flames like nothing he'd ever encountered. The fires of his assailant made the holy flames of angels cool in comparison. Geminus were of the strongest among the tribes, but Isaac had been reduced to a crisp shell by a single strike.

He could stand and he could walk, but his essence felt sapped. The energy strained to mend his ruined body. He was as weak as a mortal man, he thought with a snort. Now, in his current state, even a gunshot to the gut would put him down just as it would a doe.

“Master Isaac,” Ira whispered from near a fig tree. “You have awoken!” She glided closer, but he shot a hand out.

“At bay,” he snapped. “I need no assistance.”

“Yes, Master.”

Isaac struggled, writhing and squirming, and managed to rise to a standing position. Craning his neck, he exhaled loudly. “You did well.” If it hadn’t been for Ira’s cunning illusion then his mate would certainly be dead or the very least critically wounded, but it had all been part of Galmoria’s test. “You served me well.”

“My honor and my pleasure, Master.” She bowed.

“I must find my mate.”

Isaac slipped a new suit from a hanger in his closet. Each piece of clothing clung to his blistered, pus-ridden limbs. Grimacing, he ground his teeth. “I have given her a new vessel to occupy. But it is crucial that I find her, for she will come into heat soon and require my seed.” He shuddered. “If she cannot acquire my seed she will become frenzied.”

“You cannot leave yet, Master,” Ira begged, shaking her head. “You are far too weak.” Ira reached out to steady him.

“I have no choice.” He flicked his skeletal hand at her. “Lynn’s essence will send the local humans into chaos. It will be Sodom and Gomorrah in Texas.”

“What do you care of this Texas?”

Isaac took a cautious step. “Chaos will attract the attention of the ill-begotten slayers. I must find her before they do.”

Ira floated in front of him. “I beg you Master! You should not leave your haven.”

Isaac snarled, his arms twisted and bent, his gait wobbly. “Move out of my way.” He fell onto his face. Wetness bloomed across his forehead and cheeks and he tasted blood. Muscles and tendons screamed with renewed pain. He hissed and howled.

Isaac pushed himself, strained and summoned all his might but only managed to roll to his side. “She won’t make it without me, Ira. She needs me.”

Ira knelt beside him. “You will only bring about your own death if you try to leave. Let me fetch Mistress Lynn for you.”

Isaac closed his eyes and breathed deep. “She will be rabid with lust and possessiveness. The moment you turn corporal to grab her, she will destroy you like paper mache. A vixen in heat cannot be reasoned with.” He coughed and vomited pieces of reddish-brown goo. “I cannot send you. I would be sentencing you to your final death.”

Ira nodded, for all wraiths knew the Geminus possessed the power to banish them back to Purgatory in an excruciating fashion, even recently born vixens like his twin possessed the innate ability.

Isaac motioned Ira forward.

Ira offered herself as a crutch and wobbled Isaac to the greenery where he had lay earlier. “What of Lynn? What do we do?”

“We wait until I am well enough to pursue and meet her need. Until then, may whatever god the humans pray to bless this wretched land of Texas.”



Chapter Fifty-Two



SCOOTER TURNED OFF the television and shuffled into his bedroom. Knights and soldiers readied for battle, strategically placed on the white card table, waiting for Scooter's next command. Centered on the battlefield was a clock tower, along with two die cast car models. Scooter recalled Amy's expression of confusion as she listened to him explain the rules and her teasing that it was a kid's game.

He paced around the table, eyeing the soldiers, the structures and the '69 model Corvette parked in the shadow of the clock tower. The scales didn't match so the car was actually five times wider than the clock tower.

Scooter held the car at eye-level. The blue flame sticker on the sides of the car were wrinkled and crooked. What must Amy's car look like? Was it as crumpled as the sticker on this model car?

How bad was she hurt?

Who hurt her?

Would she die?

What would Amy's death do to his brother?

With a dramatic roll of his eyes, he let out a deep groan.

Amy wasn't going to die. She couldn't die. If she did Shane would become more of a jerk and be unbearable. Scooter would have to stay in L.A. permanently. The thought made Scooter want to hit something. But that was Shane's style, not his. And Shane was the last person in this world Scooter wanted to emulate.

Shane was arrogant.

Crude.

Impulsive.

Selfish.

Reckless.

And if something happened to Amy...Shane would be devastated. He had been beating himself up for years since the accidental death of their sister. Shane never spoke to Scooter about it, but Amy had told him the story in private a couple years ago, after Shane had gotten real drunk and started throwing tools and screaming for no reason. Scooter had only been five when the accident occurred, and his parents had shielded his young ears from the true reason

behind Victoria's death. He could barely remember anything about his sister, but the accident had obviously affected Amy a great deal.

For a flicker of a moment, Scooter thought about falling to his knees and praying to God. But he knew that was a useless gesture. Only the doctors could save her now.

Scooter closed his eyes. Gripping the model car in his fist, he pictured their small-town church filled to capacity. Neighbors, diners from Roxy's, Mike Bullock from the Rising Bull, and Carmen and Shane all readying to say goodbye to the most beautiful, intelligent, sensitive and fun person he'd ever known.

Ivory satin cuddled Amy's lifeless body. The capering flames of candle light shimmered off the black casket. Stillness would forever afflict her sexy body.

Still circling the table with the pride of a wealthy collector eyeing his trove, Scooter scoped the mock battleground and the knights and army soldiers, all prepared for war.

He gave the Corvette a hard shove. It rolled over a squad of soldiers but stopped in front of a tall metal figurine. Scooter focused on the single black knight that stood alone on the corner of the battlefield. Red eyes and a sharp scythe defiantly challenged Scooter's bad mood. Those red eyes glared at him as if looking for an answer. But what was the question?

His cell rang. Zack's ring tone. "Sympathy for the Devil" by the *Rolling Stones*.

Zack said, "Ready to battle for the fate of the universe?"

"I can't tonight. Amy was in an accident."

"Dang dude. That sucks. Why don't you come stay over?"

"Sorry but not tonight."

"You know I'm always here for you, dude. We'll get through this together."

"Thanks," Scooter said. "I just wish I knew if she was okay. If I could just talk to her."

"You can talk to me," Zack snapped.

Taken aback, Scooter said, "I know. And I don't take that for granted."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Of course," Scooter said, feeling strangely defensive.

If it wasn't for Zack, Scooter would've been eating lunch in the corner alone for the last two years of high school and been the biggest dweeb at Buckeye High. Somehow, Zack pulled off cool, even though he was really a nerd to the bone, just like Scooter. In fact, Zack was smarter than Amy and Scooter put together. Zack was a god of mathematics and an encyclopedia of world history.

And made advanced physics, seem like child's play. Although, he'd never admit that to Zack. Being friends with Zack made being smart look cool.

And the greatest things about Zack and Amy were that they both accepted him for who and what he was and weren't constantly trying to change him.

"Maybe I can get your mind off things," Zack said. "How'd you do on the English lit exam?"

Scooter paced next to the game table. "Solid B+. I think."

"You know you got an A."

"You know, that new girl Hillary is in our lit class. She's real smart and reminds me a little of Amy."

"The blonde girl who sits two seats ahead of you, right? But she's got bigger tits than Amy." Zack chuckled.

"I guess so."

"Stay away from those types of chicks." Zack's voice took on a deep guttural sound.

Scooter remained silent for a few moments. "Why? She seems nice enough. I think she might even like me."

"She's a skanky whore," Zack said in a harsh tone.

"Really? How do you know that?"

"Cause I fucked her last month."

"Are you serious?"

"Come over to my place tonight and I'll give you all the dirty, wet details you can handle," Zack moaned, as if reliving the moment.

A strange discomfort wiggled through Scooter's head and body when he heard his friend moaning. A visual of Hillary's and Zack's bodies entwined flashed in his mind. He stifled a groan. His jeans tightened around his groin.

"So I guess you guys broke up?" Scooter asked.

"Don't even think about. She's used goods. Sloppy seconds. Ever seen a half-eaten rotten cantaloupe?"

"Gross," Scooter said, but the straining in his pants only got worse.

"Swear you'll stay away from her."

"Sure."

"Swear on your soul!"



AMY BLINKED HER EYES open. The blurred silhouette of Carmen cleared into focus. Her body felt heavy as it lay on a firm mattress. A thin white sheet and multiple ivory blankets warmed her body. The sound of a rhythmic beep

resounded from beside her. Glancing down, she noticed a tube protruding from the back of her hand. An IV.

She was in a hospital bed.

Opening her mouth, she called for Carmen but her dry throat muffled her voice. She took in a deep breath to try again. Carmen slid from the end of the bed and took her hand. With furrowed brows and a deep scowl of concern, she said, "Amy?"

Amy tried to smile but her skin felt heavy on her face just as her body felt on the bed. She looked around the room for familiarity.

Carmen asked, "Do you remember what happened?"

Amy shook her head.

Carmen smiled, but the gesture seemed forced. She was never good at masking her emotions, one of the things Amy loved most about her.

Amy opened her mouth again. Through a dry throat, she muttered, "Carmen."

Carmen held a plastic cup of water to Amy's lips.

Amy savored the ice cold fluid on her tongue and throat. "Thank you."

Carmen patted the blankets over Amy's legs. "I'll get the doctor."

Before Carmen could take a step, Amy grabbed her wrist. "Shane?"

With a small shrug, she said, "He's detained at the moment."

Amy shook her head. Her gaze drifted to the corner of the room at a plant. Purple flowers spilled over the sides of the ceramic pot.

Carmen sighed. "I promise he'll be by later."

She must have seen disappointment in Amy's face, disappointment Amy hadn't realized she even felt. Shane had a good reason for not being here. She read the trepidation in Carmen's face and stifled a groan. Hopefully Shane's absence had nothing to do with being drunk, indecent exposure or a jail cell.

As Carmen left the room to find a doctor, Amy tried to recall how she'd ended up in the hospital. Last she'd remembered, she was at Roxy's, about to wait on the strange, young fellow in green leather pants. And then commotion. Something had happened but she could only see glimpses of the highway, trees, and birds.

Lots of birds.

And snakes!

Then she woke up here in the hospital.

She heard a light knock and glanced to the doorway. A short middle-aged man stood in the threshold. He was dressed in beige slacks, a striped shirt and loose tie. He held a clipboard to his chest as he approached.

Carmen stood at the end of the bed as the doctor checked Amy's heart monitor.

"Are you in any pain?" he asked.

Amy shook her head. "What happened to me?"

Carmen and the doctor exchanged a quick look. He turned back to Amy and smiled. "That's an excellent question. We were hoping you could tell us."

Tears pricked at the back of Amy's eyes. She looked to Carmen, hoping Carmen knew something.

The doctor said, "It is likely your memory will return. Try not to worry yourself. The good news is that you are in excellent physical shape."

"And the bad news?" Amy asked.

The doctor sat on the side of the bed. He reached for the lapels of Amy's hospital gown. Amy resisted a cringe and nodded at the doctor to continue his examination. He smiled and gently lowered the neckline of her gown, stopping short of revealing her breasts.

A light shimmered and Amy looked at her own chest. A gasp took her breath as she saw a reddish stone embedded into her skin. She sat up. Using her hands she opened her gown further, all modesty gone. With a shaky finger, she touched the stone. A blistering sting bit at her fingertips. She jerked her hand away, letting out a cry.

Looking up, she frowned at the doctor, then at Carmen. "What is it?"

The doctor said, "We just don't know."



HIS HEAD THICK WITH haze, Shane opened his eyes. He lay on a stiff mattress. Crisp, thin hospital sheets covered his legs. No one else appeared to be in the dark hospital room. How long had he been out of commission? Where was Amy? Was she okay? Hadn't the doctor said that she'd be fine?

How could he have lost it like that? The woman he loved lay critically wounded while he pitched a fit like a snot-nosed child. Shane ran a hand down his face, mind still bleary from the tranq.

He tore the blood pressure cuff from his arm and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The obnoxious fumes of disinfectant seeped and bled from the hospital walls and the odor made Shane want to whisk Amy home and get this whole damn day behind them. He strode down the hospital corridor. The taunting stench followed.

He came to an intersection of winding hallways. As he scanned for a sign pointing toward ICU, he spotted Birch and Abe sitting in the waiting room.

Birch approached. “Sensei Baker need to think happy thoughts and Amy-girl be just fine.” He clasped praying hands beneath his chin.

Shane allowed himself a smile, before turning and heading for room 156.



Chapter Fifty-Three



FREYA JUMPED ON THE game table then pounced on Scooter, knocking the phone from his grip and to the floor. He scrambled and put to his ear. “Zack? You still there?”

“Swear on your soul!”

A beep resounded. Call waiting. “Gotta go. Another call. Might be news about Amy.”

“Swear on your goddamn soul!”

Unnerved by Zack’s throaty tone and talk of Scooter’s soul, he hung up and picked up the other call. “Hello?”

“Amy’s alright,” Shane said. “Thought you’d want to know.”

Somewhere outside, Alamo barked. A long whiny howl.

“Yeah,” Scooter said. “Thanks. That’s great news.”

Alamo howled again.

And again.

Three howls.

“Be home soon,” Shane said.

According to Amy’s superstitious beliefs, three howls from a dog meant a death was imminent. “Yeah. Yeah. Good.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”



WHEN SHANE ENTERED Amy’s room Carmen was standing next to the bed. Seeing the fresh tear stains on her cheeks caused an uncomfortable lump in his throat; it was a familiar lump that he’d known a few times before, back while he was in the desert when he watched grown ass soldiers lose their wits.

He folded his arms over his chest.

Carmen wiped at the corner of her eye, her lower lip quivering. “She’s going to be fine. I know she is.”

He gave a curt nod toward the door. “I need the room.”

She tried to smile, but it didn’t hold. Carmen threw her arms around him, her warm face buried into his shoulder. “I used to constantly warn that crazy ass girl about you. I told her you were going to love and leave her. She was going to end

up another notch in your belt.” Carmen pulled away. She wiped fresh tears from her eyes. “But I was wrong. I know how much you love her. And I damn well know how much that girl loves you.”

Shane inhaled. “Look, bubbletits, I really need you to get the fuck out of here with all this sappy shit.”

Carmen gave him a playful slug on one shoulder. “No problem, cockbrain.”

After Carmen left, Shane crossed the room and stood over Amy. A teardrop escaped his eye and rolled halfway down his cheek. “I’m here, baby.”

Amy’s eyes fluttered. She groggily spoke, “Shane...you’re Shane...”

“I’m here.”

“I-I want to go home.” Her eyes opened wider.

“They’re going to bring in a specialist next week to reexamine the abnormality on your chest, but ‘til then I’m free to get you the fuck home, babe.”

Sitting on the bed, Shane swallowed hard, pushing that lingering knot further into his gut. “I’m going to fix you the biggest bowl of mac’ n’ cheese with all the fixings. Even real bacon.”

Amy pushed herself further up into the bed. “That sounds perfect.”

He took her face in his hands and tapped his forehead against hers. “I love you. God, I love you.”

Tears sprung from Amy’s eyes.

He said, “I’m going to treasure every single moment of our lives together, and cherish every random gift you give me, and I’ll never, ever, ever get tired of your quirky superstitions; and you know, when I get you back home I’m going to arrange my boots under the bed right next to your shoes.” Shane wiped tears from his face with the tail of his shirt. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m not good at this...stuff.”

She smiled. “You’re doing great.”

“I just want to get us back home and get back to a normal life. At least more normal than these last couple days have been. We’re going to put all this behind us.” Shane leaned over the bed and kissed her lips.

“Nothing will be the same as it was,” Amy said. “Our new lives are ahead of us.”



Epilogue



ELDER CAI RESTED HIS hands upon the stone parapet of the Tower of Tribulations and met the gaze of the crescent moon hanging over the New Mexico desert. He tugged gulps of brandy from the flagon hanging around his neck. The lavender liquid scorched a somewhat painful but pleasant trail down his throat.

“Elder,” came a stern voice from behind.

Elder Cai stared at the moon and took another swig before turning to meet the Prefect and his rigid stance. “You summoned me here in this devilish hour, Cauldrick so get on with it.” A frigid desert breeze sifted through his long hair. Somewhere in the distant hills of Red Rock Bluff the mournful whines of a coyote crawled through the canyon walls.

Prefect Cauldrick’s blood-red robe flapped as he strode across the gray stone tiles. “It appears my reservations concerning your pupil were unfortunately correct.”

Elder Cai looked to the sky, before pinning Cauldrick with an annoyed glare. “Elaborate.”

“Atticus has been arrested and placed in the custody of the Buckeye authorities. The Templars fear the Beast still lives, and has mated with the Female. And we still have no knowledge of the location of its lair.”

“Get him released and let the warrior finish his mission. The decision is most simple.”

Prefect shook his head and met Elder Cai’s gaze with cold green pupils. “Manipulation of the legal system would violate the Templar’s ethic codes.” He threw up his hands. “Atticus was to find the Beast. He failed. Now we will send in the Aconites to end the Beast. All of this will finally be behind us.”

“All of it is before us. It has yet to begin.”

Prefect Cauldrick scowled. “You speak nonsense and I lack the patience. Your pupil, your precious Twin warrior has obviously gone rogue.”

Cai laughed, deep and long. “My Twin warrior? I have not always been alone in my confidence in him as one of the prophesized warriors.”

“Your faith in Atticus is misplaced and unwarranted. You stand alone where he is concerned. I have to think about the people.”

“From the pulpit? I thought we were Paladins, not Politicians.”

“This is the 21st century. Crude swords are no match to the almighty pen.”

“Tell me, Prefect.” He sipped from his flask. “How does it feel, leading the flock to the wolf’s den?”

Cauldrick lifted his chin and turned on his heel, his long robe swaying about his nimble legs. As he neared the stone stairs, a gust of wind spiraled from the sky. The air wrapped around Cauldrick’s frail body, constricting him much like the coil of an Amazonian snake.

As he struggled to get free, Elder Cai forced himself to call back the gust he’d summoned. He had let his emotions escape him. Frustrated with his impetuous behavior, Elder Cai sighed. With the speed of its assault, the wind retreated.

“Atticus must be freed from incarceration!”

Cauldrick turned toward Elder Cai. With long, confident strides, he approached, a scowl on his aged face. “Atticus is a mockery. To the outsiders, he has foretold of the Beast and the Paladins and of the Order.”

“And who gives a blistered dillo’s tail? It is without reason that we hide in the sands of New Mexico and the jungles of New Guinea and the mountains around the world. The world deserves to know of the evil that is defeated with every rise and set of the sun.” Elder Cai gave a flick of his hand, a gesture of dismissal. “You arrogant, naive fool!”

Prefect Cauldrick shook his head. The rigidity of his posture relaxed. A look of empathy reached his eyes. “The decision of the Order is final.”

“What will happen to Atticus? Will the Court allow the outside to pass judgment on him?”

“The Court will deny the validity of Atticus’ claims as a Paladin knight. We fear his sanity is not his own.”

Elder Cai scoffed and pointed a narrow finger. “Then let the fate of all worlds be on your hands. May the angels of Heaven and Hell have mercy on your pompous souls.”

“Cease,” Prefect shouted and held up a staff with a ruby jeweled head. “Your grip on your sanity is as threadbare as your pupil’s.” Prefect Cauldrick exhaled. “Effective immediately, Elder Rayden Cai, you are dismissed from your post as active Elder of the Order of Abel.”

Elder Cai drew solemn eyes towards the reaching desert. “All is progressing as it should.”

Excerpt – Reckoning of the Beast



CARMEN QUICKENED HER pace. Her thick heels tapped a loud staccato along the marble floor and she realized then that she might've overdone the outfit.

She pushed through the heavy door and entered a rank room with a row of cells. Only a half dozen people were being held, and most were dozing. Atticus was in the last occupied cell.

"Atticus," she hissed in a strangled whisper.

He was pacing and his lips were moving but no sounds came out. At the sound of her voice he flinched. He stormed toward the steel pipes. "The Beasts are alive!"

"Quiet down." Carmen placed a finger over her lips. "I think Amy might be in trouble and you're going to help her."

He looked at her, a deep sorrow in his green eyes. His gaze was so intense, it actually made her uncomfortable. No man could do that...not with a simple look. Who the hell was this guy?

Atticus stuck his face between two steel pipes. He glared at her, deadpan. "I fear the Beast intends to take her soul."

"Something to do with the stone in her chest?"

Atticus nodded.

She might think him loco had she not seen what she'd seen this night. "Then you know how to help her?"

"I most certainly do."

"We gotta get you out of here."

"Find my prayer satchel." Atticus pointed to his neck. "They removed it from my person before placing me into this dungeon."

"I don't know how things work where you come from but here, in this place, one does not simply search a police station without raising suspicion. Jeff may even arrest me just for being back here." She glanced over her shoulder at the big steel door leading into the main station then back at him.

Atticus shrugged. "You will simply have to incapacitate him."

"Right."

He arched a brow.

"So...how exactly do I do that?"

"Oh." A look of understanding softened his expression. "Through pressure points. Even the lightest of touches in the most vulnerable nerve can render a

grown man disabled.”

“Alrighty, so where’s the on-off switch to render a guy disabled?”

“Step closer and turn around.”

She did as he asked.

His arm reached through the bars. He slid the neckline of her low-cut dress to the side. With a firm but tender touch, Atticus gripped her right shoulder. His calloused fingers traced along her shoulder blade, up the side of her neck. With the coarse pad of his fingertip, he gently tapped a spot on her nape.

“Apply a gentle, but firm pressure here and the person will be dazed for several moments, allowing you ample time to overpower him.”

A warm tingle crawled down Carmen’s shoulders and between her breasts.

He pulled his arm back through the bars. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Crystal.” Carmen palmed her flushed cheeks. She turned to face him.

“What crystal?”

“Crystal clear.”

“Are you intoxicated, Miss Carmen?”

“No. And good grief, don’t call me ‘miss’.”

“But you are a lady?”

Carmen softly laughed.

He waved her along. “You must hurry and find my prayer satchel. It possesses an item I took from the time reaver. It may help us.”

“Carmen?” Jeff’s voice called from behind.

She paused. How much had Officer Jeff heard?

Shit.

Carmen slapped both open palms against the pipes. “Bastard! What did you do to Amy?”

Atticus stepped back from the bars. His eyes narrowed. “I will confess to nothing.” He turned his back toward her and gave a dismissive wave. “Be gone, wench.”

Carmen hid a smile.

Slowly, she turned. She met Jeff’s scrutinizing gaze with her own. “Just had to confront the prick for myself.”

Jeff put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed her against his hard body. “I hear you, but you’re not allowed back here.” He walked her toward the big steel door leading into the station.

She stopped walking and glanced back at Atticus. “He being charged with assaulting Amy?”

“No evidence or clear motive,” Jeff said.

"So you're going to let him go?" Carmen tried not to sound too eager. She forced a frown up at the big man.

"Heard about the family of four killed the other day?"

Carmen nodded. Small town. Shit like that didn't happen often, not in their town. So yeah, she knew and so did everybody else in a fifty mile radius.

"He was at the scene of the crime," Jeff said.

So just how many run-ins with the law had Atticus had?

"He was impersonating an officer," Jeff gave Atticus a hard look. "If convicted, it's good for up to five years in prison."

Atticus said nothing, just returned the hard look.

"You ain't goin' nowhere," Jeff said. "You just go on and make yourself comfortable."

Carmen leaned her head on Jeff's chest. Her arms came around him. She glanced up. "Is there some where we can talk," she tossed an annoyed look at Atticus, "more private?"

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