



EMANUEL SILVA

DEMON'S
BLOOD

Book I - Spiral of Deception

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~BOOK I: Spiral of Deception~

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An AMPL E-BOOK

Published by AMPL Publishing

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ISBN: 978-0-9879914-2-3

Cover Art by:

Veludo & Mentol - Publicidade, Design e Eventos

www.veludoementol.pt

Available for purchase at

www.amplbooks.com

Acknowledgements

To everyone who is a part of my life, and have, in one way or another, gained a place in my dreams.

To my family, as well as my close friends, who are, in the most genuine sense of the expression, the extension of my family.

To each and every person who has helped shape me into who I am today, be it through love and heartache, friendship and hardship, support or being supported, or simply by existing, and being there with whatever I may have needed, whenever I may have needed it, even if I had no idea I had that need.

To those of you who forever have a place in my heart and soul (and you know there are very special places in which only each of you could be welcome).

Thank you.

It is thanks to you that I have made it this far in life, and it is for you that I exist, and by association, anything that is a product of my mind.

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***With a quick, bright flash came darkness,
and with it, peace.***

Prologue:
«Prison? Or salvation...? »

“This cannot go on! They have proven to be worthy of their own freedom! The circle binding their world is an abomination, a contradiction to their very existence!”

A tall, winged being stood before a hall, filled with its own brethren. A white vest, intricately adorned with golden patterns, covered its skin and long, straight, dark brown hair hung down its shoulders. Anger was written over the creature’s snow-white eyes, its face showing enormous resolve as the ancient language spoken dispersed loudly through the air, for everyone present to bear witness.

“They are our brothers, made in the same way as we were! I cannot continue to see countless lives trapped. Is there no one among you who feels the same way? Am I the only sane being in this hall?!”

From behind this creature, amidst a sea of echoing voices with all sorts of doubtful comments, an approaching voice thundered “Cease your rebellious actions this instant!”

As a stern and powerful presence entered the great hall, silence suddenly filled its walls. Another creature, with opaque blue skin and four wings covered in golden feathers, rapidly stepped through the huge double door. The brown-haired being turned to face the newly arrived imposing entity, a tired look taking over his eyes, and asked “So... are you here to take my life? Has it come to this?” The angel spoke in a saddened tone, his words composing as much a rhetorical remark, as a sincere question.

“You leave me no choice, brother. Your soul has been tainted; no longer are you in control of your emotions. Chaos envelops you.” The four-winged being replied, with no sign of emotion permeating the cold veil of its guise.

Faint laughter echoed throughout the room, before the other creature's response was heard.

"How ironic! Emotions, Humanity's supposed greatest gift, are also their prison. The reason they are *blessed*, and also why they cannot be allowed contact with the life stream. Tell me *Archangel*," The name, representative of a heightened status, was spoken with spite "if emotions are so wrong, why were they hidden within us?"

The angel directed his voice and gaze more at the remaining crowd in the hall, than actually at the golden-winged being standing two feet away "If our father wanted us to use reason alone, and be completely void of emotions, why were we gifted with them to begin with?! And why is it that the human kind, completely connected with its emotions, has to be bound by such shackles?!"

A slight tinge of sorrow crept into the archangel's expression "I'm sorry, Kohryu... I'm sorry you fail to understand the meaning of our existence. You should not question our Father's will. You do not bite the hand that feeds you, my brother. I, for one, am completely aware of my purpose." Any hint of emotion disappeared once again; the being seemed to regain its resolve as each word left its dark-blue lips "And, now that I've finally caught up with you, I'm here to make sure you do not spread your corruption any further."

"I pity you, Uriel, together with the rest of you, mindless puppets! It pains me to see you all so blind..." Sadness crept around every inch of the angel's facial expression "even if I am imprisoned for all of eternity, not ever will I be like that again." But then a sense of undoubted purpose reappeared "And believe me, brother, I have never been more in control of myself. In fact, I feel like I've awakened from a terrible, unspoken and senseless dream."

Both creatures stood silent for a moment as the archangel Uriel looked his brother in the eyes with a forbidding scowl, before uttering his reply

“You could’ve been so much more...” The words weighed heavily in the air “But I suppose you may not be the one to blame. Maybe your faith was always too weak. Well, now it is too late. Your judgment has already been passed.”

“Weakness... I wonder; do you believe you can defeat me? Are you really willing to fight me after all the centuries we’ve shared?”

There was silence for a few moments. Every presence remained completely focused on the events unfolding, until the blue skinned being projected his voice loudly across the hall “Everyone is to leave this room. Our brother will face his sentence right here and now, as our Father’s will is exacted.”

As the others began to leave the room in an orderly fashion, Kohryu urged them to listen, one last time: “Anyone who feels I’m right, don’t shut that feeling out! Listen to your inner voice-”

“**Leave.** Immediately.” Uriel interrupted Kohryu in a harsh, loud tone.

All the creatures in the crowd abandoned the hall. The great doors closed behind the last one, leaving both angel and archangel alone. A few, seemingly unending, moments dragged by, until the silence was broken by Kohryu’s faintly faltering voice “So... is it time?”

“It is.”

“Tell me, how do you feel? Is your mind even more clouded since you were transcended?”

“Brother, despite what you may think now, what you are... feeling... it is wrong. It is not in our essence to be what you have become. And I see it even more clearly since my transcension. Our Holy Father’s will is absolute, everything has a purpose and a reason, nothing is random or without meaning.”

The angel remained quiet, allowing his brother to utter words that sounded like nothing more than a very long goodbye “Humanity shares His

love with our own kind; the choices He made, were made for a very precise reason, and our sole purpose in existence is to follow His will, without question. You once saw this as well...”

The brown-haired being’s pure white eyes focused on its sibling’s own empty glare for a moment before its next words were heard “Yes... and then I woke up.”

“Maybe you did... and, unfortunately, now you can never return to that dream.”

Kohryu looked at his brother, doubt and sadness emanating from his stare “Are you really willing to kill me? Does the bond of our family mean nothing to you?”

“You’re not who you once were. My brother is, sadly, long gone. But no, your sentence is not death.” An apprehensive look transpired from Kohryu’s gaze, but no words left his mouth as he stood, psychologically retracted, on his guard, listening “You will be expelled from our realm. You will never again be able to harness the life stream, and you will be marked with a curse, so that any creature that sets its eyes upon you knows what you are.”

Uriel paused momentarily to allow Kohryu to absorb what he was saying, before he continued “Your punishment for defying our Father is merciful. You will spend the rest of your existence among the Human kind, and we will see if they accept you, seeing you for what you are.”

Grit and resolve filled Kohryu’s face, showing that nothing but death would stop him from following his purpose “And does your Father really believe this will stop me from pursuing my destiny?”

“If **our** Father wanted you stopped, you would already be dead. You will learn by your own means how wrong you are.”

Kohryu let out an ironic laugh “I suppose having me killed would not make Him look like a very loving father... even in this He plays the cheap card. Still, I am glad I do not have to fight you.”

“Goodbye, Kohryu.”

“So long, my brother.”

The two creatures faced each other as the hall slowly filled with an intensely bright light. Wisps of archaic energy swirled and strayed vigorously from the increasing and expanding white blaze, before it focused around Kohryu, enveloping him and raising him near the ceiling. The light turned into darkness. Its intensity grew, creating a dark void that released a mute, lifeless aura. Moments later a pure black beam shot downwards, and with a sudden flash the Archangel’s powerful figure was left standing alone in the hall...

Chapter 1:

«Strange Thoughts»

Blood... blood dripping... Eyes black as an abyss, glowing dark-red... A bright gleam... something reflecting the faint light... Blood... dripping...

“AH!!”

He woke up, alarmed by the sound of his own voice. Sweat covered his skin. His mind felt anxious, his heart pounded fast and strong, pumping blood with increased intensity “*What the hell was that about?!*” It was a question he would not be able to answer for a long time to come.

Should he go back to sleep? The morning was still far away. A new school year was about to start the next day, he was probably just nervous.

Ryo Lowry Anderson had been living with his adoptive parents since he was five years old. He had no recollection of his birth parents, both brutally slain in a murder investigation that had since then remained unsolved.

In fact he had no memory of his childhood before moving into the town of Lemuris. “Probably due to the shock of losing both his parents like that”, the doctors would say. He didn’t remember how though. Nothing at all. For him it was like his life had started at that small house on the corner of J. Northman Street, almost thirteen years into the past.

He’d never really given any of it much thought, until recently. Not even when his parents had made that family meeting – the one where they explained to him that they were his mom and dad, but that it had not always been so – did it ever seem to matter. For some reason though, lately Ryo’s mind had been wandering a lot into thoughts he didn’t usually have. Thoughts about his life, about what he was supposed to do, about why he existed. Thoughts about his birth parents, who they might’ve been, how and why they had died.

His psychologist would say these were normal thoughts “You’re seventeen years old, Ryo. It’s a normal age to start having more profound and mature thoughts. You’ll eventually grow used to the changes you’re going through.” *“But what does he know?”* Ryo thought *“Hell, he probably knows a lot about people’s dreams, and their thoughts, but he doesn’t know anything about the people themselves. He doesn’t know anything about me. I should know what’s normal for me...”*

Ryo’s facial features showed him just for what he was: a simple young man. Short, straight, dark brown hair, usually unkempt, revealed a certain lack of care for his looks, as soft, also dark brown eyes transpired captivating discretion and unpretentiousness. Calm and gentle lines marked his facial expressions even if most of the time – and for anyone that didn’t know him well – his cold, emotionless look might pass him off as absent or impolite. Ryo’s stature was decidedly average, with about the right weight for his six-foot frame. Usually dressed in large, baggy jeans, simple T-shirts and sport sneakers, Ryo customarily kept to himself and his thoughts.

Lemuris, a relatively small rustic town located in North America, had been Ryo’s home ever since he could remember. Linda Lowry Anderson and Hank Woodrow Anderson had moved from Manhattan just a few days after adopting Ryo and had settled in town, hoping to provide their child with a safe and carefree life. The town was, to the present day, Ryo’s whole world, and Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were, for all intents and purposes, his mom and dad. Not only had they raised him into the life which he presently knew, but he didn’t even remember or know anything else.

The common misconceptions that people usually made “Oh, poor little thing, lost his parents.”, or “It must’ve been so hard...” had always meant close to nothing for Ryo. And they still did. There was no reason to feel sorry for himself, not in his mind. What had, on the other hand, always been hard for him, was to create connections with others, to relate, to even feel the need or longing to empathize.

The previous school year had been difficult; Ryo felt his class was filled with dumb kids and empty-headed girls, no one he cared for at all. Michael, his best and only true friend, had moved to the neighboring town of Amberlin. They'd been in the same class ever since Ryo had come to Lemuris. It had been fun, then. Now, two years had gone by, and school somehow kept feeling more boring and senseless with each passing season. A new school year was coming and Ryo wasn't looking forward to it at all. *"Another year putting up with annoying uninteresting kids... great..."*

"Oh come on man, it can't be all that bad!" Michael's lively light-blue eyes stared incredulously from across the coffee table at Ryo's relaxed figure. School break had just started, so they could meet more often at one of their regular coffee shops.

"I'm telling you Mike, those guys are all morons! Shit, this year was even worse than the last one!" Ryo replied, with a half-desperate look on his face.

"Well, think about it this way: one more year and we'll be going to college. It should get much better from there on, right? And besides, next year there should be some new people joinin' your class as well, so maybe they won't *all* be dicks." There was a slight look of sarcasm in Michael's eyes, before he split his lips in a wide grin at his childhood friend.

Two teenage girls passed by the coffee table, talking and giggling while looking at Michael's muscular figure. His head steered away from Ryo, pursuing the lean and short-skirted silhouettes heading for the exit. A bell rang faintly as the door opened, and both girls looked back towards the table, just in time to blush at Michael's provocative wink. Ryo remained indifferent, waiting for his best friend's mind to come back, before restarting the conversation.

"Yeah whatever... I don't know, I just don't feel like going to school."

“Yeah, but like, no one feels like goin’ to school, dude!” Michael replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, that’s not what I mean, dumbass.” Ryo’s tone was as much annoyed as it was playful “I don’t feel like going to school or doing anything else really... I’ve just been feeling off.” He sank back into his chair as he said this.

“What’s up with you anyway? You’ve been strange the past few times I’ve seen you.” Michael inquired with a curious look on his face.

“I don’t know... my mother’s been bugging the hell outta me. Saying I’m *all quiet* and insisting that I talk to her. Thing is, I don’t really know what to tell her.”

“Yeah, well she’s your mother, you know? Mothers do that.”

After a short pause, Ryo replied with an expression of profound annoyance “She’s also making me see a shrink.”

“Really? *Ouch...* that should be fun.” Michael’s awkward look as he answered showed just how much he’d hate to be in his best friend’s shoes.

“Yeah, really fun. *Bah!*”

Michael took a sip from his glass of coke; the ice cubes rattled amongst themselves as he swirled the glass in his hand.

Ryo kept looking down at the cup of coffee in his hand, until he raised his head to speak “Dude, do you ever think about... you know... what we’re supposed to be doing here? About life and all that.” At his friend’s blank and silent stare, Ryo felt the need to elaborate on his question “I dunno, lately I’ve been thinking a lot about this kinda stuff. Don’t really know why though.”

Michael waved the question away with his hand “Oh, come on, lighten up, man! Don’t you have anythin’ better to do than waste your time thinkin’ about useless stuff?” Seeing Ryo’s lack of response, he insisted

“Enjoy your life, have fun! Aren’t there any chicks in your class? Oh wait, they’re all idiots, right?”

Ryo cracked a faint smile at Michael’s thoughtless, wide-mouthed grin. His mind seemed to evade its worries, and for a moment he took the relaxed path; the one he always saw his best friend use as a main route “Yeah, whatever. Well, all I know is in a few days I’ll have to spend I don’t know how long staring at that shrink’s face. I so know it’s gonna be like one of those really awkward moments, just stretched out through the whole appointment.”

“You should tell him about those depressing thoughts of yours, man, maybe he can make some sense of them.”

Morning was up. With each new school year returned the same hated routine. Wake up, take a shower, have breakfast – or not have breakfast –, go to school. Same old streets, same old houses on the way. Same old people walking out of their houses, getting in their same old cars.

Upon arriving at school, Ryo entered his first class “*Aaaand everything looks the same... who’d have guessed it.*” Same teacher, same classmates, a few new faces. Nothing interesting. Students were still entering the room: one or two idiots from the football team, two or three brainless girls with them – who belonged to the cheerleading team – and one surprisingly interesting figure behind them. A new girl caught Ryo’s attention.

Ryo watched as she entered the classroom and walked to an empty desk, where she sat alone. Despite whatever it was about that girl that called out to him, Ryo tried, out of habit, to shut her out “*Meh... probably, another waste-of-space-chick with nothing better to fill her mind than shoes, her hair and nails, and how she’s going to throw the most awesome party and be the most popular girl at school... she’ll fit right in with the rest of the class, if that’s the case.*”

The rest of the day went by. Same old stuff, just like last year. Seemed like it’d be another boring season.

Chapter 2:

«Nightmares»

A closed door... A shadow under the door... Sudden movement... A woman's voice... A thump... Strange sounds... strange scary sounds... Silence... The shadow is back... Slowly moving... so quiet... A sudden impact breaks open the door!

“SHIT!” Ryo woke up, startled by the loud sound in his dream. He looked around. He was in his own room. The room he'd been living in for the past twelve years; the white, empty walls, the furniture he'd always known, the books stacked in the corner next to his desk; it was all there. “*What the hell...*” A week had gone by since that strange nightmare. This one seemed eerily similar. What could be going on in his subconscious?

The past week had come and gone, with Ryo having trouble occupying his free time. He played video games, mainly Role Playing Games and Beat-em-ups, read fantasy, sci-fi and horror novels and watched TV shows and movies in extensive sessions, but lately these activities felt strangely unappealing, and not at all as satisfying or fulfilling as they used to be.

Fortunately, his Karate practice had restarted a few weeks before, and he'd been attending all weekly training sessions, without fail. Inside the *Dojo* – just like he'd always felt since he'd started taking his lessons more seriously, at around the age of fourteen – he was able to focus his mind and shelter himself from the outside world, or any worries he might have. It was refreshing and invigorating. In there, he always felt like himself.

At school, classes had been feeling tedious. The subjects were only starting to pick up where they'd left off. The new girl still seemed unusually interesting, but somehow she'd remained mainly on her own since the first day of school. Didn't seem to have made many friends

besides the occasional talk, and usually just wandered around from class to class. Maybe she didn't fit in after all?

Ryo's mother had, on one other occasion, insisted on asking what was up with him. His father still hadn't gotten around to talking to him about it – probably didn't really have the time. The man spent most of his life at work, only got home late into the evening, and even on weekends he had extra work he'd bring from the office. Not like that talk would be something Ryo would look forward to, so he didn't really mind. Next week he would have another appointment with his therapist. It was not as bad as he'd thought it would be. He'd gotten used to talking to old Dr. Anders.

The night had run away, not much sleep for Ryo in its bag, and after it had come early morning. The whole daily ritual had been, to Ryo's semi-sleep-deprived mind, an arduous trial to endure. Mid-afternoon, one last class remaining, Ryo was walking through a school corridor, his mind completely absent *"What the hell can those nightmares mean? Why'd I dream that shit up again? It just seems so real..."*

A young female voice sounded, standing out among the usual hallway background noise, and several books fell to the ground. The blaring and unexpected interruption brought Ryo's daydreaming to a sudden end. As he looked towards the person he'd bumped into, he was caught by surprise. Two beautiful, deeply captivating, light-blue eyes attracted his gaze for a moment, his mind eventually calling him back to reality "Oh! Err... Sorry!"

"Oh, no, *I'm* sorry." The girl answered with an embarrassed smile on her face, before crouching to pick up her books "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"My bad. Here, I'll help you." Ryo joined the girl on the floor.

"Thanks. You're Ryo right? We're in the same class."

“Yes we are.” Ryo looked at the girl as they both got up, surprised that she knew his name, and embarrassed to admit he also knew hers “And you’re... Karin?” He said, trying to look uncertain.

“Yes, I am. Nice to meet you.” A joyful and pleasant smile accompanied the girl’s carefree voice.

“Nice to meet you too.” Ryo’s smile opened up without him even being aware of it. A few seconds passed and he realized he was still holding the girl’s books. “Oh, here are your books. Sorry I bumped into you.”

“No prob. See you next class?”

“Right. See you in a while.”

As the girl passed by him, Ryo couldn’t help but turn to admire her alluring looks. Her light facial features, with no heavy makeup or artificiality, unveiled a natural sweetness and gentleness that brought out her deep and vivid eyes, while the soft, red tone of her tender lips revealed a delicate and cute smile. Long and straight, light brown hair streamed graciously down her slender shoulders, over a simple grey top, both concealing and enticing. Ryo stood mesmerized in place; he watched the girl walking farther away into the hallway, as if his mind had stopped working. The bell rang, signaling the end of recess.

Finally, the school day came to an end. As he walked outside, Ryo’s mind wandered into thoughts he couldn’t seem to keep away, about the nightmares and what their meaning could be, when he heard Karin’s voice calling him from behind.

“Ryo! Mind if I walk with you? I think we go the same way.”

“Err, sure!” Surprised, and slightly embarrassed at the sudden emptiness of his mind, Ryo began walking at a slow pace, joined by Karin, amidst a few other students who had ended their daily classes at the same time.

Silence stood between them for a few seconds, until Karin broke it up “So, how long have you been in town? Were you born here?”

“Well, not really, but I’ve been living here since I was five.” Unwilling to allow silence to settle again, Ryo returned the question “What about you? Did you just move?”

“Yeah. We moved two weeks ago. Kinda sucks that I don’t really know anyone here yet...” She let it hang in the air for a moment “But oh well, what must be must be, right?”

Ryo shrugged “True. Why’d your parents decide to move here?”

“My mom transferred here at work. My dad’s been dead for two years so... it’s just me and her now.”

Hearing that, Ryo felt strangely nervous as he tried to think of the right way to reply. Not wanting to hurt the girl’s feelings, or perhaps worried of being misunderstood, he felt he had to apologize for bringing up the subject “Oh... sorry...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Doesn’t bother me anymore. Life goes on.”

“Yeah, I guess it does.” Ryo was looking at the ground, as he so often did when confronted with an uncomfortable situation. However, realizing how unconcerned Karin looked, and how lightly she had dispelled the subject, his mind was quickly put at ease “So, what does your mother do? What made her transfer here?”

“Well, she’s a detective. Homicide department actually.”

“Oh? And she came to a small town like Lemuris? She won’t have much of a job here!” They both shared a laugh at the idea, further lightening the mood.

“Yeah, I think that was her intention. She hasn’t been having time for anything except work. Maybe here it’ll be easier.” Karin sounded wistful “What about you? You live with both your parents?”

Slowly, with each step he took in the girl’s company, Ryo started appreciating her soft and soothing presence, and before he even realized it, all the nervousness he’d initially felt had dissipated “Adoptive parents.

They adopted me and moved here right afterwards. Can't really remember anything before that."

"You can't remember?" She looked both surprised and curious "You don't know what happened to your biological parents?"

"As far as I know they died in a freak accident." Ryo stated plainly "Nobody really knew what had happened, but my parents tell me it was horrible. Supposedly that's why I don't remember anything, blocked my memories or something."

"Yeah, I've heard that can happen in very traumatic experiences." Karin was pensively silent for a few seconds "Damn... Sorry."

The look of concern on Karin's face as she realized she'd addressed a sensitive subject touched Ryo's mind. Her gentle eyes buried deep into his own, uncovering an urge to break down any kind of mental obstacle that might occur between them "No, don't worry about it! That's way behind me."

"I see. Still, have you never wanted to know more?" Karin spoke with genuine curiosity "I mean, don't you ever think about what may have happened?"

"Well, I've lived here all my life basically, and my *real* parents are the people who've been taking care of me for as long as I can remember." Ryo thought it should be self-explanatory "So, yeah, I guess I haven't worried about it too much."

Karin felt self-conscious, unsure if she was prying "Sorry, you probably don't even wanna talk about this with someone you've just met."

"No problem. Really, I'm fine talking about this." Ryo dismissed the girl's worries "You said you still didn't know anyone here, by the way... so, now you do."

Karin looked back at him, with a truly beautiful smile written over her lips "I guess I do."

“I don’t really get along with most of the guys at school either, so... maybe we can hang out one of these days?”

“I’d like that very much.”

As they approached a crosswalk, Ryo realized Karin was turning away, and pointed out that his house was just a few blocks ahead.

“Well, guess I’ll see you tomorrow at school then?” Karin suggested with a smile “Thanks for the company, Ryo!”

“My pleasure. See you tomorrow then.” That day Ryo went home with a strange feeling. Something he hadn’t felt in quite some time. He was intrigued by the girl, attracted to her simplicity and sincerity, and astounded by how at ease and relaxed her company had left him. She was definitely different from all the other people he knew at school.

The next day, Karin had gone up to him first thing in the morning, before classes had even started. With a simple wink she had transformed what might have been just another tedious day into the beginning of something special. Classes were suddenly more engaging than reading a Stephen King novel, even if ninety percent of the spoken subjects had not made it past the barrier that ensnared Ryo’s brain – Karin was sitting right next to him. The day’s recesses became the highlight of his month, and the walk home equaled, or even surpassed, in anticipation, a season finale for HBO’s Game of Thrones. They’d swapped phone numbers, and Ryo had gone home already thinking of what and when he should text her.

As the weeks went on, Ryo and Karin grew closer with each passing day; they’d talk, between and during classes and on their way home. They’d text each other, daily, for hours on end, almost the whole time they weren’t together. It was such an alien experience for Ryo to feel so connected with someone, that he had, more than once, felt like he might be overdoing it. But yet, no longer than five minutes would her presence be absent from his mind.

The more Ryo got to know Karin, the more he felt she was special. Even though she seemed to have been through a lot, she seemed unshakable in her dedication to being happy and moving forward, to just enjoying life for what it was and what it might give her. Both her joyfulness and strong-mindedness were dazzling to the point where Ryo's admiration and respect for her grew to match the intensity with which he felt drawn to her company.

Screams and a very loud noise outside... A woman calling out something... Silence... A shadow under the closed door... The door bursts open suddenly infusing the once darkened room with light... The shadow starts moving into the room... Blood dripping...

“...four, three, two, one, **wake up.**”

Ryo opened his eyes, as much from the urge to escape the dreaded feeling that accompanied the view of that shadowy room in his dream, as from the fact that his mind seemed to expel him into reality at the command of the old man's voice.

“Welcome back Ryo. How do you feel?”

“I don't know... strangely rested?” Ryo sat up, noticed the classic furniture, warm, dark carpet and brown walls dotted with small abstract paintings, and felt himself relax. It was as if Dr. Anders' small office had somehow become a shelter from anything the outside world – and even his own subconscious – could throw at him

“How'd it go?” Ryo asked.

The old man looked at him reassuringly “It went well. Do you remember your dream?”

“Yes, it was part of the same nightmare I've been having. I have no idea where that place is, but somehow the room feels familiar to me.” Ryo was

contemplative, his mind recreating those images in his head “All that blood... and the shadow... what could it all mean?”

“We can’t know that for now. But it’s something your subconscious is trying to tell you. We’ll have to make some progress to know what it is for sure, but my best guess would be that it has something to do with the memories your mind blocked out, from your parents’ death.” At a slow and quiet pace, the therapist got up from his large, extremely comfortable-looking armchair, and moved to sit behind his desk “But this should be enough for today. When can you come in again? Let’s say a week from today, next Sunday?”

Ryo got up, and followed to stand in front of the old man “That would be the... 13th of October?” He sounded insecure until Dr. Anders nodded in confirmation “Well, that’s my birthday. Maybe the weekend after that?” He suggested “Or do you have any openings during the week? Mondays I have the afternoon free.”

Opening his large schedule pad, Dr. Anders followed the lead of his pen along the weekly calendared page to the 14th of October “Monday is fine. Would three o’ clock be okay for you?”

Ryo thought the date was as good as any other “Sure.”

With a strong and marked handwriting, the old man wrote an entry on his pad “3 o’clock: *Ryo. Birthday souvenir!*” and then looked up with a pleasant, fatherly smile on his face.

“Well, see you next week then. Good afternoon Dr. Anders.”

“Have a good afternoon yourself, Ryo.”

Chapter 3:

«A Strange Feeling»

It had been days since his last appointment with Dr. Anders, and Ryo hadn't experienced any nightmares since then. He had, on the other hand, spent the entire day of classes with a funny feeling. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He was in biology class, fortunately ten more minutes and he could get out. The teacher, Mrs. Smith – a thin, old-looking lady, formally dressed all in black and brown – carried on with a strict, monotone voice. All but one or two students seemed to be looking into nothingness, their minds completely absent as their heads rested on an open hand, on an outstretched arm along the table or lazily against the wall.

“So according to Darwin's Theory of Evolution, the evolutionary process occurs very slowly through changes in each generation. Individuals are *selected* through a process entitled Natural Selection; the ones that have the most resourceful attributes will fare better at surviving, and therefore reproduce more, leaving a bigger number of descendants to carry on their legacy of attributes. Pay attention that at this time there were no genetic studies, so you should never mention genes, or mutations when referring to Darwin's theory. Moving on...”

Ten minutes – that had felt like two hours – later, Ryo and Karin were finally on their way home.

“That took sooooo much longer than it was supposed to!” Karin exclaimed tiredly “Or at least it reeeeeeally felt longer!”

“It sure did. Glad it's over with!” Ryo agreed, taking a deep breath of relief “So, Karin, I've been thinking-”

“Yeah? You do that?” Karin interrupted him, with a sly smile on her face, followed by a provoking laugh.

“Funny girl, you are!”

Karin’s laughter drew a grin into Ryo’s face even before she continued speaking “Just kiddin’, just kiddin’. What were you about to say?”

“Well, I was gonna suggest that we’d go and grab a cup of coffee later tonight. How ‘bout it?”

“I’d love to! Where do you wanna go? I don’t really know any bars here yet...”

“I know this place, it’s not far from where you live, and-”

As Ryo kept walking and began crossing the street, Karin fell behind after dropping her cell phone “Oops! Ouch... my cell.....”

“-and it’s pretty cool! It’s got nice music, and-”

“**Ryo!**” Ryo turned back hurriedly as he heard Karin crying out his name from the sidewalk. She was on one knee, staring at him in surprise, waving her hands “*What the hell are you doing back there?*” Were the words going through his head as Karin suddenly shouted out loud “**WATCH OUT!!**” She looked terrified in that instant, as she regarded him.

Ryo heard a very loud honk coming from his side as he was facing back towards Karin. He looked to his left just in time to catch sight of a bus. As its tires screeched loudly, he saw the look of horror written over the driver’s face, the bus getting closer by the millisecond. Ryo’s brain tried to react; he felt his heart rate shoot up. He could see the bus approaching at a really slow pace, like if it was in slow motion. But his body would not respond. He noticed two or three insects hopelessly splattered on the windshield, their green blood almost invisible to the naked eye. He could see – and even smell – the rusty iron at the front of the bus. He almost felt as if for a moment he could feel the driver’s fear and panic as if they were

his own. But he couldn't move, not in time. He was going to get hit. If he could only-

Darkness all around... A light coming from under a door... A shadow moving... With a loud sound the door breaks open, letting a strong light into the room... The shadow reveals a figure... it slowly starts getting closer... A bright gleam... light reflecting from the sharp long edge of a blade... Blood dripping... The figure is close now, showing its demonic features... Its eyes... pure darkness at the center, a blood-red shine around them... The fangs protruding from its mouth, covered in blood...

“...selected through a process entitled Natural Selection; the ones that have the best attributes will fare better at survival, and therefore reproduce more, leaving a bigger number of descendants to carry on their legacy of attributes. Pay attention that-”

“FUCK!”

The teacher stared, flabbergasted, before her face turned deep red “Mr. Anderson! What’s the meaning of this??!”

“What?! Err....” Ryo looked around himself with complete and utter confusion filling his every thought. The entire classroom was focused on him, dead silence hanging in the air as over twenty presences leered at him in anticipation and amazement. Mrs. Smith, her eyes wide open in a purely outraged look, stood frozen in place, furiously awaiting some kind of response. Karin, seating right beside Ryo, had a look of astonishment on her face. Nervously, she alternated her gaze between him and the teacher, clearly expecting a fearsome reaction.

“Have you gone mad?! I won’t have that kind of foul language in my classroom, do you understand me??” The teacher clarified sharply.

“*What the fuck?!*” “Ach! Sorry Mrs. err... Mrs. Smith. I’m... really sorry!” Ryo tried his best to gather his thoughts.

“Were you asleep, Mr. Anderson?!” Mrs. Smith asked, incredulously.

Ryo was at a loss. He spurted the first excuse that came to mind “I haven’t been sleeping well!”

It took a few seconds for the teacher to contain her gaping surprise and speak again “Well, see that it never happens again, young man.” She scolded him nervously “Next time you’ll be visiting the principal’s office.”

“Yes, Mrs. Smith.” Ryo lowered his head “I’m really sorry for disturbing your class.”

“Go and wash your face, Mr. Anderson, you’re not looking too good. Return to class when you’re sure you’ll stay awake.”

“Yes, Mrs. Smith.”

Mrs. Smith turned around and walked towards the blackboard, mumbling what were probably words of disbelief “Okay then, moving on. As I was saying... where was I?” She approached her desk to look at her old and tattered notebook, sitting next to the teacher’s manual “Right. Pay attention that, at that time, genetic studies were not in any way developed, so words like “gene” and “mutation” should never be...”

As Ryo got up from his chair, he could still feel the collective stare of the whole classroom tailgating his every movement, accompanying him out the door. He walked to the bathroom, just a few steps down the hallway, and, once inside, he immediately opened the tap to splash water on his face.

“What the fuck just happened?! Am I going crazy?? Was I sleeping this whole time? I mean come on... what the hell...”

He stood there for two or three minutes washing his face, trying to make some sense of what was going on, but soon felt he should return, fearing he could provoke the teacher’s anger if he took too long. On his way back, he felt Karin’s anxious gaze following him all the way to their desk. He didn’t say another word for the remainder of Mrs. Smith’s class.

After the bell rang, just outside the classroom, Karin cut Ryo off as he was starting to head down the hallway with an absent look on his face.

“Ryo! What got into you??” She asked, bewildered “Did you fall asleep during class? I mean, I know it was really boring, but you could’ve gotten in trouble with Mrs. Smith. I’ve heard she’s really strict with this kinda stuff!”

“I know, I know...”

“You know, I didn’t even realize you’d fallen asleep...” Karin had a cryptic look on her face.

“Look, Karin, tell me something.” Ryo reached for Karin’s arm “Aren’t you getting a strange feeling? Like a *Déjà vu*?”

She looked deeply confused “A *Déjà vu*!?”

“Yeah, as if this has already happened before!”

“What the hell are you talking about? You just screamed *fuck* in the middle of class, when you woke up!” She honestly looked as if she had no idea what Ryo was talking about “I think I’d remember if you’d already done something like this once!”

Ryo looked away “I...” Distress and uneasiness filled his mind “I guess you’re right.”

“Hey, hey, you look pale,” Karin moved closer and took hold of his hand “are you okay?”

Ryo’s head felt like it would burst at any minute. He couldn’t stop thinking about the bus that was just about to crush him. His eyes came back into focus at the sound of Karin’s voice, and he felt like he needed to escape, to go somewhere, anywhere he could think things through “I’m fine.” He said, with a forced smile “I have to go, see you later Karin.”

“What? Where’re you going?”

“I... got something I have to deliver.” He was moving away at a hurried pace already, when he answered “Sorry, see you soon.”

Karin stood planted, watching him leave “See you...”

On his way through the streets, roaming aimlessly, Ryo was completely stunned with his inability to make sense of what was going on. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure he was just about to get hit by that bus, barely half an hour before. How could it have been a dream? And how the hell would he have gone from dreaming about getting out of classes and getting run over by a bus, to having that same nightmare again? He needed someone to talk to, someone who could hear what he had to say, and who wouldn't just assume he was losing his mind. He called Mike and asked him to meet.

“Dude really... you *really* think you were run over by a bus?” Michael had an honestly puzzled look on his face, as he stared at his best friend “You know I *am* talkin’ to you right now, right? And ya know, you’re not in pieces or anything.” He was about to smirk, but Ryo’s dead serious look stopped him “You do look strange though. Have you been eating? You look as pale as a ghost!”

“Come on Mike! I’m not screwing around here! I think I’m going crazy!” Ryo was almost screaming “How could I have been dreaming the whole time?! It was so real I could *smell* the damned bus!!”

Michael looked uncomfortably around their coffee table. The few people sitting at the surrounding tables stole glimpses at him and Ryo, or just plainly stared at them, their attention caught by Ryo’s loud and hastened speech.

“Look at what you’re saying Ryo.” He lowered his voice and reached closer, over the table “You could *smell* the bus?? What the hell man? Are you high?!”

“Hey really, I don’t know what’s going on!” Ryo waved his hands – something he so rarely ever did – utterly confounded “I’ve been having these strange nightmares about this demon with... I think it’s a sword!” Michael listened, bug-eyed “Dr. Anders told me it probably has something

to do with the repressed memories of my birth parents' death. I can't stop dreaming about it! It's driving me nuts! And now this..." Ryo brought both his hands over his head "I'm going crazy." He said, in a lower tone of voice "You know, I had that same nightmare just before I woke up in class. How could I just go from dreaming about being hit by a bus to having that same nightmare again, and then wake up, all in what? A couple minutes?"

Michael regarded his best friend's desperate and nervous look in astonishment; he'd never seen him in such a state. Unsure of what he should say, the first instinct he had was to try and calm, and somehow reassure Ryo "Look, dude, It's happened to me before. I mean, not the demon and being run over part, but... well everyone's had strange dreams that feel really vivid! And sometimes they don't make sense! And they don't have to mean anything, either! Maybe they're just plain stupid dreams!" He tried to relax back into his chair, realizing how he would probably not be doing that good a job of calming anyone down "Your perception of time is completely off when you're sleeping, you know? And... oh what the hell, come on man! You know it's impossible right? What're you thinking? That *God* came down to save you!?" Michael faintly laughed as he said this, openly trying to lighten Ryo's mood, with no success.

"I don't know what I think! I just... it was so damn real..."

"Dude, just let it go." Michael almost felt like begging his friend to pull it together "And please man, look at yourself in the mirror. You're really pale! It's like even your hair is... washed out or something. What've you been doing?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Listen, I gotta go, it's really getting late and I didn't warn my mother I'd skip dinner." Ryo was already getting up as he spoke, but then stopped momentarily, having realized he was forgetting something "Look... thanks for coming, man. I really appreciate it."

“*Ach*, wait-” Michael got up in a hurry, but Ryo was already halfway to the door “Hey, take care of yourself!” He almost screamed after him “And don’t be a stranger, say something once in a while!” And then he looked around awkwardly, threw everyone a “*Watcha lookin’ at?!*” look, and sat right back down to finish his cup of coffee.

Chapter 4:

«Love? »

Dear diary,

It's only been a few weeks since I really got to know Ryo, but it's been great. He's really sweet and different from all the other guys our age. I guess meeting him was the first truly good thing that's happened to me since we moved to Lemuris. The time I've spent with him has been fantastic ... am I falling for him? Hummm... who knows? Do you? Well, I guess you wouldn't.

Sorry for the long absence by the way. I couldn't get any time to look for you, but now we've finally finished moving all the stuff around the house, and I managed to find the box I'd put you in.

My room's starting to look like itself again. Hopefully it'll help me feel more at home here. Mom's been in a great mood, I'm pretty sure she's enjoying herself much more here than at our old place. I guess a fresh start is something she'd look forward to, after what happened... and from what she tells me, her work here is going really well =) a small town like this one, it can use an awesome detective like my mom to look after it.

I should go to sleep now... gotta get up early for classes.

Write in you again, soon (promise it won't be as long as last time) ☺

It had been close to three months since Karin Sutherland and her mom had moved to Lemuris. After her father succumbed to the claws of lung cancer, life had become increasingly difficult in a big city like Los Angeles.

Karin's mother came to the conclusion that it was best for them to move to a smaller town, to try and begin anew in a less hostile environment. As soon as the opportunity came up in her career, and this was only about two years later, they moved to this quiet town, hoping for a fresh start. A lower cost of living and less work strain would definitely help brighten their life, but it also meant changing schools, readapting to a completely new lifestyle, and making new acquaintances. It would not be easy, especially for Karin.

As soon as they arrived at Lemuris, Karin knew it would be completely different from living in L.A. The town was very calm, small houses and buildings lining also small streets, none of the continuous commotion and agitation that is present in everyday life in a big city. On the one side, it was a good change of pace; great to get some rest and peace of mind. The town was also really beautiful, lots of green spaces, trees all over the neighborhoods, small parks here and there, and even an old abandoned castle that gave it all a really ancient and mystical feel. But on the other side, there were very few bars, shopping centers and arcades, almost no places to hang out and have some fun. And what about the people? Would they be too different from what Karin was used to?

On the first day of school Karin had found out the answer to that: fortunately it wasn't half as bad as she'd expected *"Well, at least they're not a bunch of rednecks and hicks... but I still don't know anyone... this is going to be reeeeaally boring for a while."*

A few days of wandering from class to class had gone by when, by fate's hand, Karin had bumped into Ryo when coming out of the bathroom, distracted. She had already noticed the boy, he seemed different from the rest of her classmates. Although he usually kept to himself during and in

between classes, Karin had the feeling he'd noticed her as well, but she hadn't yet built the confidence nor had the opportunity to approach him. When she had least expected it, the opportunity had produced itself, and she'd embraced it with open arms. He became her first friend in town, and it did not take long for other kinds of feelings to surface.

Karin and Ryo had gradually grown more and more attached to each other. The time they spent just talking made her feel as if everything was perfect right the way it was, and that nothing could go wrong. He made her feel special, like she really – actually – mattered to him, and he made it easy for her to be happy. He also made her feel vulnerable, and that was what had tipped her off at how much he'd grown on her, how much she had already started to care for him. She'd made her first entry in ages in her good old companion, her trusted diary – something that'd been passed on to her by her mother, who had never grown out of the habit of keeping a journal – about her feelings towards the new boy in her life.

The next time Karin had been with Ryo, though, something really strange had happened. He'd fallen asleep during Biology class, and had woken up completely freaked out with something. After that, Karin had spent the rest of her day alone, unable to stop her mind from wondering about what might've happened *“What the hell got into him? He evaded all my questions and just left... and what was he talking about? ... a déjà vu?”* She had eventually accepted that plaguing her own mind with unanswerable questions would take her nowhere. She would just have to wait it out.

But, the next day, Ryo hadn't shown up in classes... could something have happened to him? To Karin this school day had felt like the hardest one to go through since she could remember – even worse than when she didn't know anyone, and spent her days wandering from classroom to classroom getting bored to death. This was different; she couldn't keep it out of her head, and the fact that she couldn't speak with Ryo about it was

really bothering her *“How did I get so attached to him already? I can’t stop thinking about this... damn, I have to talk to him... it’s driving me nuts... but... he hasn’t said anything... what if he just doesn’t want to talk to me? I don’t want to disturb him or make him feel like I’m... prying or something...”*

Even though it was really hard, Karin had decided to wait and see if he would say something. She’d spent the day trying not to think about the subject, but everything at school had kept reminding her of him *“Damn... I think I’m really falling for him... well, I suppose it’s normal that I miss him so much... he’s the only person I hang out with, here at school... here in town actually.”*

She’d walked aimlessly around school between classes, and eventually stopped by the school bulletin board out of sheer boredom. The birth dates of every student in school were posted there in a list, divided by classes; an idea developed by the student association. Ryo’s birthday was right around the corner, two days from then *“Oh! He’s going to be eighteen this Sunday huh? And he didn’t mention it at all... I guess it’s really like him, to not talk about anything related to himself... guess I’m getting to know him better, bit by bit.”*

At night, when she had gone to bed, Karin hadn’t been able to get Ryo out of her mind. She’d just lain there, awake, thinking about him, picturing how his face seemed to light up whenever he smiled, remembering how his eyes could so easily change from a shy and gentle look to a gaze that would dig to the very core of her person and bring about incessant clamoring from her heart.

She had realized how much she really wanted to get closer to him, to be with him. Not just as a friend, but in a different way. She’d wondered how his touch might feel, how it would be like to kiss him, to have his lips around her own, to be in his embrace. It had become a fact that his presence

made her feel complete. Hopefully the next day he would say something, otherwise she would... she couldn't take it any longer.

Darkness... As far as Karin can see, there is only darkness... but then, a strange light at the end of the long, dark tunnel comes up. A shadow? Is someone coming? As she starts walking towards the light, and the shadow gets closer, a familiar silhouette becomes more visible with each passing moment, step by step...

"Ryo? Is that you?" Karin asks out loud. There is no answer... but it is definitely Ryo who is before her. As she gets closer, she keeps calling out to him "Ryo! What's wrong? Why won't you answer me?"

She gets to but a few steps from him, but then he starts getting farther away, as if he is slipping away from her, being sucked by the light, leaving her all alone in the darkness "Ryo! Wait!! Talk to me! What's wrong?!"

Then Karin starts running. She has to, otherwise he would just slide away and disappear. She keeps running after him... she wouldn't lose him like that, not if she could help it. She goes on running, and running, her breath failing her as her heartbeat gets faster and faster by the moment. But she is almost catching up to Ryo... a few more steps and she will be able to embrace him, find out what is wrong with him, and comfort him.

When she finally manages to reach Ryo, Karin jumps forward and hugs him as strong as she can... he wasn't going to get away from her again... as she looks up to his face, the light behind him slightly obscuring his facial features, she asks him once more what's wrong, and why he won't answer her. But there is still no response. He's just looking down at her with that calm and serene look he always has in his face, faintly smiling "Why doesn't he answer me? What's wrong?" She wonders.

"Ryo... What's going on? What's-" But then Karin notices a change in his expression, and she stops talking. A reaction, breaking the unwavering look he had before. As Karin is about to end her sentence, Ryo reaches

down and kisses her. Suddenly the light at the end of the tunnel gets closer and closer, and in the blink of an eye it is enveloping both of them, forcing Karin to close her eyes. She feels Ryo's lips caressing hers. Their soft touch almost magically makes every care she had on her mind, everything she was worried about, just disappear. She wraps her arms tighter around him as they kiss... she would remain there forever if she could...

As the light around them starts to dim, getting less and less dazzling, Karin knows it is time to stop kissing Ryo, to try and find out what is wrong with him. She doesn't want to let go of that moment, but she has to... there is definitely something strange, he isn't acting like himself. As she breaks the bond between their lips and slowly steps back, she begins to feel strangely sad and melancholic... as if she was saying goodbye to a very dear person... as if something was getting lost forever...

When she opens her eyes, a shiver goes down Karin's spine, making the skin all over her body creep. As her eyes adjust to the light and she is able to focus on Ryo's face, all she can see are two menacing and ominous pitch-black eyes, surrounded by an eerie dark-red glow. Frightened, she steps backwards. And suddenly, the darkness comes rushing back. It washes over and encircles her and everything around her... it all goes black... the only thing visible, anywhere, is the view of those two sinister, ghostly dark-red light sources in front of her... Karin is terrified... she forces herself not to freak out, not to yell for help... her heart is battling furiously for a way out of her chest... she shuts her eyes as tight as she can, and hopes for a way out... she hopes for the light to come back, for the true Ryo to bring it back...

And she woke up, startled, sweating, panting, almost gasping for air. She was safely in her bedroom... it was still the middle of the night "What the hell! Oh, my god, that was SO creepy..."

Even though she had been sleeping for the past couple of hours, Karin felt exhausted. That nightmare had somehow been more mentally draining

than the entire previous day. She desperately needed to ease her mind, and get some rest. Slow ambient music eventually helped her return to sleep. The rest of the night, and morning, went by without her even noticing it.

The next day, by the time Karin woke up, her mother was calling her for lunch, with the table already set. During week days, the times when Karin and her mom were able to share a meal were scarce, so on weekends they always made the best of their time together.

“Good morning, sleepy head!” Nina Sutherland said in a joyful voice, when she spotted her daughter passing by the kitchen door. She was still moving some stuff around in the kitchen cabinets, and didn’t stop.

“Oh, sorry mom, I overslept.” Karin replied, yawning “Didn’t realize it was this late already.”

“Never mind that, Kare! I’m sure you’ve been tired.” Mrs. Sutherland let out a deep sigh “I know I’ve been pretty much exhausted these past weeks!”

“Well, actually yeah, it’s been tiresome. But I guess this could be much worse, right?” Karin had a smile on her face as she said this.

Mrs. Sutherland’s smile broadened as she noticed Karin’s joyful expression. She laughed with an inquisitive tone as she spoke “I thought I’d been noticing you more lively these days!” She approached Karin and spoke in a lower voice “Have you met a boy?” But before Karin had the chance to reply, her mom had stepped back with a pensive look that made her keep listening “You know, I realize I haven’t had the chance to ask you how everything’s been going at school for some time now... sorry...”

“Oh, don’t be silly!” Karin dismissed her mother’s worried look with a light smile “I know you’ve been really busy, mom. But yeah, things have gotten much better lately. I made a friend at school, and we’ve been getting along really well.”

“That’s great! And does this friend have a name?”

“Ryo.” Karin couldn’t help a smile from hatching on her lips, making her mom curious.

“Oh, so I *was* right...” Nina stared at her daughter with a sly look, before returning her attention to the remaining dishes that were still out of place “That’s an unusual name... isn’t he from around here?”

Karin frowned “Now that you mention it, I haven’t really thought of asking him about it...” She looked thoughtful for a moment, having found it strange that she’d never actually asked Ryo where his name came from “He’s been living in Lemuris since he was five. His parents moved here right after adopting him.”

“Oh... Poor boy...” Nina said instinctively, with a caring look on her face.

“Oh come on, don’t say that. He’s not a homeless orphan, mom, he sees his adoptive parents as his real ones!” Karin moved past her mother, to the fridge, and opened the door to sneak a look at the yoghurts on the shelf. She always had the habit of drinking one after waking up “He doesn’t even remember anything before moving here, so he can’t really miss his biological parents either.”

“He has no childhood memories?” Nina really felt like pursuing the subject, but she caught on to her daughter’s rising annoyance and decided to drop it “Well, that’s not important right now anyway.” She dismissed the subject, getting back to more pressing issues “When you say you’ve been getting along well, what do you mean, exactly?” She took a step closer and slowly crept on Karin’s back with a questioning look on her eyes “Are you dating, Kare?”

“Huh?!” Karin half chocked on her yoghurt before turning around to see her mom staring at her up close with a funny smile of her face “No! It’s not like that... well... not yet, at least-”

“What’s that?” Nina interrupted Karin’s almost inaudible voice “I couldn’t quite hear you... *Not yet?*” She made a teasing laugh “So, you mean you like him, don’t you?”

Karin blushed “Well... maybe I do...”

Nina’s provoking tone was replaced by a caring, silent look on her face. For a moment she stood, facing her daughter with loving eyes “That’s really great.” Noticing she might be creating an awkward situation, she stepped back and asked lightly “When do I get to meet him?”

“Oh, come on! It’s not like he’s already my boyfriend or something!” Karin answered, slightly annoyed “Don’t start rushing things, mom!”

“Okay, okay... sorry.” Nina waved her hand, withdrawing the question as she fetched the napkins.

“Well...” Karin joined her mom near the table “I guess you’ll meet him eventually.” She said, while sitting down to eat.

“That’s more like it!” Nina had a broad and happy smile on her face as she settled on a chair opposite to Karin.

After lunch, Karin decided that she should talk to Ryo. It couldn’t hurt to ask how he’s been, and honestly she couldn’t wait any longer. She went to her laptop and tried talking to him, even though he was offline. He answered back and the talk couldn’t have gone better. Karin was beside herself with joy when Ryo asked her out on what could be an actual date.

As soon as she logged off, Karin hurried to go get ready. She wanted to look her best, and even if she usually wore little to no makeup, it would still take some time. It was a special event, after all. She needed to look her best. On her way out, Karin knocked on the door to her mom’s bedroom before stepping in “I’m going out, mom, and I won’t be home for dinner. It’s Ryo’s birthday. He... asked me on a date...”

“Well! Guess that was faster than you expected, huh?” Nina replied, looking excited to hear the news “I see you really want to impress that

boy!” She regarded her daughter adjusting the elegant skirt around her waist “Well, this date also comes in handy for me, because I have to get to the department. Something’s come up, I probably won’t be home either.”

“Did something happen?” Karin asked, with a worried look on her face.

“Nothing for you to worry about honey, just a new lead that came up in a case I’ve been working on.” The last thing Nina wanted was for her daughter to be worrying about her work, while on her date “You go and have fun!” She immediately insisted “And good luck by the way!”

“I will.” Karin smiled in silence for an instant before continuing “And thanks, mom...”

“Oh? What’re you thanking *me* for?” Nina was surprised at the strangely serious and loving look that had suddenly overcome Karin’s eyes.

Karin chuckled at her mother’s carefree reply “Just for being yourself, I guess. I couldn’t think up a better mother than you, even if I tried to.”

Nina seemed touched by her daughter’s words “That’s really sweet, Kare...” She replied in a low voice, as if avoiding the urge to shed a tear.

“Don’t get too used to it though!” Karin raised a pointing finger as she spoke, in a joking tone.

They both laughed at the situation “Come on now; never be late for a first date!”

Karin nodded. It seemed like a wise-enough piece of advice “Right. Well... see you later.”

Karin’s cell rang with a message alert tone letting her know Ryo was arriving. She couldn’t wait to be with him again. She kissed her mother goodbye and dashed through the hallway to the front door. She stopped halfway out the front door and looked back... a strange uneasiness haunted her for a moment. Why did it feel as if she was saying “goodbye” to her mother, instead of “see you later”? Well, whatever it was, she forgot about it as soon as she looked out and saw Ryo’s smile directed at her.

“Hey!”

“Hi, Ryo!”

Chapter 5:

«Afflicted by Love»

“This is what we’ve been waiting for, this whole time. We must see to it that nothing goes wrong. The time should be about right for the boy to awaken.”

*“Do you think **they**’ll try to interfere? Do **they** know about him already?”*

*“We’ve all done our best to keep him from being found. But as you know, John, it’s been getting harder. We can’t say for sure **they** don’t know. Be as careful as ever.”*

Ryo had skipped Friday’s classes. He had stayed home, in bed most of the day, with the pretense that he wasn’t feeling well. His parents had not doubted him for a second, since he’d never once missed school with no real reason to do so. He hadn’t experienced any other nightmares or strange dreams, while on the other hand he knew, somehow, that something was wrong. He couldn’t really describe this sensation, or even understand it, but it was there. Constantly there, throughout the whole day and night, like a song stuck in his head. He couldn’t really hear it, but he knew it was there; an unknown presence.

There was also the fact that, since that bizarre afternoon in Biology class, he’d noticed that he looked almost ghostly. Karin and Mike weren’t kidding when they’d pointed it out; he was extremely pale and even his hair had this strange grayed-out look about it.

His parents had noticed something wrong too, and they’d asked him what it was, concerned for his health. Ryo had waved their worries aside. It was nothing, just a cold. And they had taken his word for it. He couldn’t help but worry himself though, about what was happening to him, to his mind and somehow even to his body.

Ryo was lost in thought, lying on his bed, staring into nothingness. The night had passed with barely a couple hours of sleep, and so had Saturday morning. Weekend meant lunch with his parents, at the table, and there had

been no way out of it. He had managed to excuse himself early, and returned to his bed, to contemplate the whiteness of his ceiling *"Tomorrow's my birthday... maybe I can take it easy and have a good time... put my mind off of everything that's been going on or something..."* His cell rang with a message tone *"...Karin?"* He was hopeful.

Hey bro, how r u? wanna go grab sumthing 2 eat tomorrow? Gotta celebrate ya know? It's not every day that u turn 18! Don't leave me hangin! ;)

"Mike... I should message him back. And Karin, maybe she wants to go out today? But I haven't spoken to her since... what should I tell her?" It had been hard to go an entire day without speaking to Karin, especially as his mind was engrossed in thought and fraught with worry about drifting off and losing his grip on reality. Still, it almost hurt him physically to not be able to pick up the phone and know there would be a message from her waiting for him. An alert sound played in Ryo's laptop.

KarIn says: Hi!

Ryo stared at the screen. His heart pounded hard. He felt the urge to answer immediately, but then stopped short before his hands touched the keys. He sat at his desk and took a deep breath. He thought about what he should say, but nothing came to mind.

KarIn says: U there Ryo?

The urge came back. He stopped again. Now he just felt ridiculous. He rubbed his face with both hands, and decided he wouldn't think about it anymore *"Just talk to her, dammit!"*

Skryba says: Hey. How's it goin'?

KarIn says: ok. how are u? feelin better? u skipped classes yesterday...

Skryba says: yeah, I haven't been feelin very well. Think I caught a cold.

Skryba says: but don't worry, nothing much

Skryba says: btw I was just about to call u

Skryba says: wanna go grab a cup of coffee or sumthin?

KarIn says: sure, I'd like that

KarIn says: where should we go, though? I don't really know any bars in town... u haven't taken me to any yet ;P lol

Skryba says: I know a cool place. not far from your home either:)

Skryba says: maybe we can have dinner as well...?

KarIn says: hum... don't know if I should... you were kinda mean the other day

Skryba says: I'll make it up to you. dinner's on me

Skryba says: meet you outside your house in 20 mins?

KarIn says: well...

KarIn says: I'd need a little more time than that to get ready

KarIn says: I AM a girl, you know? ;P

Skryba says: I can wait as long as you want

KarIn says: ok, how about 45 mins from now?

Skryba says: Sure. cya in a while then :)

KarIn says: ;)

Ryo told his mother he was going out for dinner, and that he wasn't sure how late he would be. The whole way walking to Karin's, he had that strange feeling, like he was being watched, as if he could sense a presence following him, tailing his every step, even though there was no one in sight. It bothered him. Deeply. He'd never been one to put his instincts out of his mind, but he was tired, sick of not understanding. His mind wasn't making sense anyway, so he just did his best to ignore it. He'd promised himself that, on that day, he would not pay attention to any weird stuff. He would take the day to try and free himself of his mind, to see if it was all really in his head, and nothing in the real world. Maybe it would all just go away...

And he had to make it up to Karin. She was so special, already so dear to him. He believed she truly deserved to be treated as best as he possibly could. Deeply strong yet partially hidden feelings for her had steadily grown in Ryo's heart. Even if he was not yet completely aware of it, her person had taken root in his heart, and in his soul, in a spot which would never again be vacant.

When Ryo reached Karin's home, she was just coming out the door. He was surprised at how he felt by simply seeing her again. Karin was dressed in a cute check skirt and simple grey top as she made her way toward Ryo, hypnotizing him with her light and graceful carriage, and the delicate curve of her shoulders and bosom. He felt grateful just for having the chance to be with her again. To hear her voice and regard her smile, to be the object of whatever – even if small – amount of affection she felt for him. He could stare at her beautiful figure forever, and be happy. Already, any other kind of thoughts or worries had been erased from his mind.

“Hey,” Ryo said, as Karin approached him.

“Hi, Ryo!” Her reply came in the form of an angel's voice “So... you here to take me on a date?”

“If you want to call it that...” He answered, looking directly at Karin’s bright eyes with a smile on his lips. He made his best effort to hush the fluttering in his chest, to give the impression of nonchalance.

She smiled back at him “So, how’ve you been? You looked really spooked the other day.” She seemed reluctant to bring up the subject, but Ryo knew there was no point in trying to stop her “You still look a bit pale...” Karin was clearly worried as she regarded Ryo’s face.

Ryo would not have her worry over any of that, not anymore. He wanted her to have nothing to do with that side of him, of his life “I’m fine, really. It was just this really strange nightmare I had,” In fact, he himself wanted nothing to do with whatever that unknown side of him was. He wanted it gone, as soon as possible, before it could somehow become something real “and then the whole waking up during class thing... it just freaked me out.” He shrugged, casually trying to pass it off as embarrassment “I’m sorry I just left like that, Karin. You deserved an explanation.” He was relieved to speak those heartfelt words.

Karin nodded and simply smiled “It’s okay, don’t worry about it.” She raised her eyebrows then, as if she had thought of something “Weird nightmares seem to be common these days, huh? Just this night I had a really creepy one too!”

“Really? What about?” Ryo asked, with a curious look.

“Oh...” Karin blushed, apparently embarrassed by the question “Nothing important, never mind.” She waved it aside “What I meant to say was dreams are just dreams, and everyone has them. They simply reflect whatever goes on in our minds. Don’t worry about it too much, kay?”

It made perfect sense in Ryo’s head. And he wanted it to make as much sense as it could “Yeah, you’re right, of course.”

“I know I am!” Karin winked playfully as she said this. Ryo laughed, and so did she “Well, let’s go then!” She said, joyfully, as she grabbed hold of his arm and kissed him on the cheek

Karin's cheerfulness completely washed away Ryo's worries. Her deep blue eyes had a spell-binding effect on Ryo; it was as if he couldn't look away, even if he wanted to "Let's." He said, after a few moments.

Karin squinted at Ryo with an inquiring look on her face "What?"

"Huh?" Ryo looked at her, surprised.

"Just now, you just had this... look on your face." She frowned and tilted her head with a probing look "Ryo Anderson, are you coming on to me?"

"Huh? Wha... err... wh..." Ryo felt his face heat up, his heart rising rapidly to his throat.

Karin burst out laughing "Just kidding, silly!" She pulled at his hand with both of hers as she started walking backwards "Come on, let's go."

Ryo chuckled "I'm going, I'm going." He let himself be drawn away; he would have let her take him anywhere.

A mild breeze enveloped Ryo and Karin, accompanying them as they walked. They went to Ryo's favorite restaurant in town, a quiet Italian place, and then to a small pub nearby – a tranquil spot where Ryo knew they could get in – where they spent the rest of the evening, just chatting. Ryo felt overjoyed around Karin, and somehow he could tell that she felt the same way. Just a couple of minutes remaining to midnight, and he was so distracted with Karin's company that his birthday had completely vanished from his mind.

Karin was looking directly into Ryo's eyes now, with an affectionate, more serious than usual, expression. His mind went blank almost immediately "So... I'm really enjoying this evening. I definitely made the right call in accepting your invitation." She reached for Ryo's hand. Her eyes traveled away from his, lingering for just a moment longer, and landed on his hand "Dinner was great, and this place is really nice too..." Very gently, smoothly, shyly even, she began, with her fingertips, tracing the

length of his fingers “You really know your way with a girl, Ryo...” She looked him in the eyes again, letting her words linger in the air.

Ryo was nervous. His heart was racing, his pulse throbbing. He had never been in a situation even remotely similar, or felt anything of what he was feeling now. Yet, his hand seemed to have a will of its own as it gently turned to touch Karin’s palm with his. With the tips of his fingers he caressed the underside of her wrist. The softness of her skin was tranquilizing all by itself. He could feel, ever so faintly, the beat of her own pulse, and it was not much quieter than his. He kept his eyes on hers “I really just wanted to make it up to you. For dropping out on you like that...” Ryo answered, with a slightly flustered look on his face “But I’m really glad you’re enjoying yourself as well, because I know I am.”

Karin only smiled at him. Her hand was touching the beginning of his forearm now, more boldly, more confident.

Ryo smiled an honest and charming smile back at her “And actually, I guess I really needed some time to relax and have fun myself.” He admitted “I’ve been really stressed out. It’s like I haven’t felt like myself these past few months.”

“Oh?” Karin looked curious “Are you telling me I don’t know the real you? I *have* just met you a couple of months ago...” Karin’s playful look as she said this evoked a chuckle from Ryo, one he couldn’t have kept away even if he’d tried to.

“That’s not what I meant.” He said, smiling, as he tenderly wrapped his fingers around her wrist “I’ve just been feeling oddly on edge.” He averted his eyes momentarily “*Also, nothing in this world seems to be even remotely interesting... except for you, that is. You’re simply special.*” Those were the words he thought of “But I promised myself I wouldn’t think about any of that today. That I’d just enjoy the evening with you, and try to have you enjoy it as well.” These were the ones he spoke.

“Well, I am enjoying it very much, so I’d say you’re keeping your promise.” Karin’s hand slowly slipped away from Ryo’s; his fingers almost instantly started to beg for her touch back as they slithered in between her thumb and forefinger. She leaned back to take a sip of her drink and then appeared to remember something “Oh, by the way, I’ve wanted to ask you for some time. Ryo, that’s a really unusual name. Where’d you get it?”

“Hummm... well, it’s something I can’t quite answer for sure.” Ryo answered, pensively “My parents always told me it was engraved on a bracelet I had when social services found me.” He thought back to the few times he had discussed the matter with his mom “So I suppose my birth parents gave it to me... but since I have no idea who they were, or where they came from, it doesn’t really help much.”

Karin was absently biting her lower lip “And the social workers had no information on your biological family? How could they not have any records of you?”

Ryo took a sip of his own drink, before patiently beginning to explain “Well, the whole thing was really weird.” It had also always been unsettling for him to think about. But he felt none of that now, he actually seemed to want to talk to her on the subject “From what I know, I was found at a house that’d been recently rented, still basically empty of any personal belongings. Both my birth parents were dead... murdered, and their bodies maimed beyond recognition, it would seem.”

Karin raised a curled hand to her mouth, her eyes betraying her attempt to hide shock. She remained silent.

“There was nothing that could identify them, or me.” Ryo added, pursuing the subject even though he had noticed the girl’s uneasiness. He felt she deserved to know what little he could tell her of his past, just as he believed from the bottom of his heart that it would not push her away “No ID’s in the house, no legal documents of any sort, no neighbors that knew them or me, no acquaintances, no one that came forward as next of kin.”

For the past minute, the smile that'd been constant on Ryo's lips throughout the entire night had faded. He became entangled in his thoughts lowering his eyes to the table "But my parents didn't really care that much about it I guess... I'm *their* son, and I always will be so... so, I guess it really doesn't matter, right?" He looked back up towards Karin, trying hard to redraw a smile for her.

Karin appeared to be lost in Ryo's words. He stopped talking, looked at her, and the blood rushed to her cheeks. Her eyes were sparkling "I'm... so sorry for bringing it up." She lowered her hand as she said this "I should've known it wouldn't be a pleasant subject for you." Her saddened look revealed just how upset she felt about having brushed the subject, especially on that occasion.

"Aw, come on, don't worry about it." Ryo answered with a light-hearted expression "It actually felt good, somehow, to talk about this with you." He reached for Karin's hand in an effort to put her at ease. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel bad. She welcomed his touch.

"I guess I got this excessive curiosity from my mom... I can't seem to avoid it sometimes." She said, looking annoyed at herself. Ryo softly laughed at this, and relief immediately showed on Karin's face. She lowered her eyes to her mobile phone, and pressed a random key, to light up the screen. A large digital clock marked ten past midnight "I have something for you." She remarked, with a thought-provoking tone to her voice.

Ryo looked surprised. His eyes had not left Karin's face as she'd looked away, and for a brief moment, he worried she might have noticed it, and might feel he was staring. She gave no hint of anything like that, though. Then his mind was brought back to the moment at hand, to what Karin had just said. His most immediate thought tumbled out of his mouth, almost immediately sounding like a dumb reply "Huh? You do?"

Karin smiled, noticing and appreciating his bona fide awkwardness “Yes, I do.” She bit at her lower lip once more, this time with a very different look in her eyes.

Ryo’s heart skipped a beat. She was so beautiful. He did his best to gather his thoughts “Well, I can tell you I’ll love it, whatever it is.” He was proud of the words he’d managed to spill out.

Karin allowed a moment to go by as she looked at Ryo with an alluring gaze, before she said “I’d say a congratulations kiss is in order. It IS your eighteenth birthday, right?”

Ryo’s expression betrayed his efforts to hide feelings of nervousness and surprise mixed together as one “Oh... damn, I’d forgotten all about that.” He admitted, bringing his free hand to scratch his tilted head “But... how did you know?”

“School bulletin has all the birthdays up for whoever wants to know, silly.” Karin replied in a low voice tone, as she slowly leaned closer to Ryo “You actually did forget your own birthday, didn’t you?” She asked, playfully, her tone of voice decreasing with each passing instant. Her face was only a few inches away from his, now.

Ryo lowered his voice as he nervously alternated between looking at Karin’s mesmerizing blue eyes and her enchanting and delicate lips, so close to his own. Slowly, and without thinking of whatever words were leaving his mouth, Ryo replied with an empty mind “Right... I’ve never... really looked at-”

And then Ryo stopped talking. He stopped thinking at all. The soft touch of Karin’s lips on his own. For a moment he was afraid he’d wake up and it had all been just a dream. Not a nightmare this time though; probably the most enjoyable dream he could ever wish for. He felt infinitely calm, her kiss was soothing his very soul. It was as if the whole world had stopped, and everything else had ceased to exist... everything except for the two of them... the only two living creatures in the universe, alone, together. Even

that strange presence he'd felt was now completely gone. All that was left was silence, serenity and tranquility. Ryo was happy. For him, that moment could go on forever.

They remained there in that little bar for some time, just enjoying each other's presence. But eventually it was time to leave. Slowly they walked together through the empty, silent streets, under the full moon's ghostly gaze. Their bodies interlocked as one, they took small steps forward while enjoying the magical ambience all around them.

Karin nestled under Ryo's embrace, her arm wrapped around his back and waist. "You really didn't have to come with me. Now you'll have to go all the way back to get home..." She said, as they took the last few steps needed to arrive at her place.

"It's okay, I don't really mind walking." He was looking up at the moon, looking more resplendent than ever he could remember, as he spoke "I actually enjoy it even." The sky would've been pitch black, with no clouds to be seen, had there not been countless stars lighting it to a very dark blue tint "Besides, I couldn't just let you come home alone, these streets are really dark. I wouldn't feel comfortable." They let go of each other's embrace and stood, face to face, their hands gently clasped together.

"I'm not that helpless, Ryo!" She held his hands tighter "I'm not a little girl; I can take care of myself." She tried to feign being upset, but couldn't manage "Is what I would say, if I hadn't loved to have you with me." The smile that formed on her lips was the brightest, most heart-warming smile Ryo had ever seen "It was sweet of you." Karin's hands constantly caressed Ryo's as she spoke "This whole night has been really great... you've made me feel like I haven't felt in a long time. Thank you..." She stepped forward and embraced Ryo once again, placing her head on his chest, as if to hear his heartbeat.

Ryo answered in a low voice as he settled his arms around Karin's shoulders. He kissed her on the top of her head, slowly "The time I've

spent with you over the past weeks has been the best time I've had in years." Gently fondling Karin's soft hair, Ryo motioned her head back, to look into her sky-blue eyes "I don't think I've ever met someone as special as you..."

"... I..." Karin started to speak, but her words were lost between the touch of their lips. It was a gentle and entangling kiss, which consumed all of their senses and emotions. Exactly how long the moment lasted, neither Karin nor Ryo could tell, as everything around them was muted, the world paused. Any little sound or noise that echoed through the empty streets could not reach their minds. During that moment, Ryo and Karin were on a space of their own, their minds bound together and completely sheltered, separated from anything except one another.

"PUT YER 'ANDS UP!! Gimme your money and everythin' you have on ya!"

The shrill, alien noise resembling an offensive voice came suddenly from behind Karin, shattering the barrier of silence that had separated Ryo's mind from the outside world. Startled to numbness, he looked forward, half-stunned by the abrupt alarming sensation he felt throughout his whole body "What the-?!" Ryo exclaimed in a confused voice, as he felt Karin's body tense up, her hands gripping his shirt with intense force while she looked up to him with shocked and scared eyes.

"I said PUT YER HANDS UP!! Try somethin' and I'll put a bullet through this'ere girlie's pretty little skull!"

A very slim and tall, ugly-looking character approached from behind Karin, with a revolver aimed directly at the back of her head. The man had a nervous and aggressive stare beneath his bedraggled hair, his crazed eyes appearing to float around Ryo, unable to focus. He suddenly reached out and pulled Karin away from Ryo, by her hair. Karin screamed out in pain, and Ryo lashed out after her, grabbing hold of her hand. They both

immediately stopped struggling when Karin felt the gun's barrel on her back and they heard the click of the gun's hammer cocking.

Ryo begrudgingly allowed Karin's hand to slip free of his, and raised both his arms beside his shoulders. He felt his heartbeat accelerate with each passing instant "Okay, okay!" He felt like he could choke on his own heart as it relentlessly tried to jump out his throat. The ugly man's eyes seemed to be getting more and more rattled, as if he was seconds away from losing it "Calm down, please." Ryo took a step back "I'll do whatever you want, just... just let go of her... please..." He pleaded.

A different, hoarse voice answered his plea "Then give me everything you have on you! Money, jewelry, watches, everything!" A second man stepped forward from the shadows to stand in view. He was a fat, round man, stocky and relatively short. Curled body hair covered his sweaty arms and chest, visible around and almost through the dirty wife-beater he wore. Shabby curly hair crowned his head, from underneath a raggedy beret "Jimmy, search'im." The man waved at the thin robber, indicating Ryo, with a large pistol in his hand "I'll search the girl..." An indecent snicker left his mouth as he spoke those words in a croaky voice.

The crooked-looking man stepped forward in silence with a dumbstruck look on his face, and Ryo emptied his pockets with no second thoughts "Here, this is my wallet," He handed it over "I don't wear a watch, but you can have my cellphone as well!" He pulled out the fabric of the side pockets of his pants, and patted at his legs, making it clear he had nothing else on him "Please, just let her go!"

As the slimmer assailant took Ryo's possessions from him, the other one was searching Karin, who was helplessly trying to keep the man's hands off of her "Well, well, this one has some pretty things'ere!" The fat guy exclaimed excitedly "Nice rack, bitch! Maybe I'll have some of that tasty pussy of yours!"

Ryo jumped forward and pushed the guy in front of him aside, as he heard the robber's insinuation "**HEY! LET HER GO!!!**" He screamed, anger and despair transpiring through his words.

"Hey, HEY!" Ryo stopped short at the man's loud voice. The gun was pressed violently against Karin's cheek now "Just stay right there! Jimmy, hold'im dammit!"

The thinner looking man stepped forward, and grabbed Ryo from behind. With his strange high pitched voice he said, slowly, speaking next to Ryo's ear "Just be quiet kid! It be over before yous knows it. Then yous can go on with your liveses and no one get hurt. Okay?" A putrid smell emanated from his breath, right next to Ryo's face.

"Ah!! Ryo, help me!" Karin cried out in panic as she felt the fat man's hands groping all over her body.

"What the fuck!! Get off her you fat pig!!" Ryo hollered at the man with an enraged voice now "I swear to god! If you don't take your hands off of her I'll kill you!!" Ryo's mind was completely empty. He screamed from the top of his lungs, desperately trying to say anything that might make the robber center his attention on him, and leave Karin alone.

"Hahahahahah!!" The burglar's gravelly laughter resonated in Ryo's mind. His perplexed eyes twitched as he heard that disgusting voice "The little rat thinks he can raise'is voice. Jimmy, if he moves put a bullet in the back of his'ead!" Karin then became the sole target of the thickset man's attention "Now... lemme just get those panties down... heheheheheh" The thug laughed sheepishly as he pulled violently on Karin's top, ripping it off completely, and then grabbed at her skirt. Instinctively Ryo reacted at Karin's desperate shrieks, trying to free himself.

"Hey comon! Just stay put kid!" Said Ryo's captor, in his strange treble voice "Pleese, I don wanto hurt yous.." His words came out amidst grunts and huffs as the goon struggled to keep his hold on Ryo, who was by now frantically trying to get loose.

A window could be heard opening in a nearby building and lights were turned on in a few rooms along the street. Karin's screams came out louder than she could've ever imagined herself screaming "**RYO! HELP ME!!**"

And then it happened. As that plump, grotesque excuse for a man was about to try and force himself on Karin, Ryo, in an outburst of anger, got free and shoved the dumb one aside, and tried to go for her. As he was leaping forward he felt a hand grab his arm firmly, stopping him from advancing, and in his attempt to get loose he heard a piercingly loud gunshot somewhere behind him.

He knew the bullet would hit its target, but he didn't care. All he could think about was saving Karin. He could hear her crying out in panic; he could see the rapist's fat face of amusement as he pushed Karin to the ground and went on top of her, starting to unzip his trousers. The look of despair in Karin's face, the tears running from her eyes, overflowing with fear and pain. Ryo could no longer see the happiness that had always transpired from her eyes; they looked hollow and empty now, in shock. They somehow resembled a foggy mirror... a mirror that would soon break.

The presence Ryo had felt before was now much stronger. There was definitely a fourth entity near him, and it was getting closer and closer at an impressive speed. No one could move that fast... somehow, he was certain it wasn't a human being. But, whatever it was, it wasn't getting there in time. It was too late. The amount of anguish, despair, and rage building up inside Ryo's soul had already driven him to a point of no return. He had almost lost consciousness. The bullet still had not hit him, and in fact, it never would. Both the bullet and the unknown guest would reach Ryo just at the wrong moment. Just in time to cease to exist, along with everything else around him.

Chapter 6:

«Hollow Anger»

“Amano... I have bad news.”

“What happened?”

“The boy, and the girl that was with him... they were attacked.”

*“So, **they** knew after all...”*

“They were attacked by humans.”

“Humans?! Fate certainly has a sick sense of irony... is Ryo alright?”

“He’s alive. But John... he tried to interfere and help...”

“And...?”

*“He’s gone. And if there was any chance that **they** didn’t know about the boy, it’s gone as well. The outburst of power we’d felt... it was Ryo.”*

Darkness... Darkness all around... Suddenly the door breaks open, and light engulfs the room... A shadowy figure enters... It slowly walks closer... light reflects off the edge of a long sword, slowly balancing in the creature’s hand... As it comes near, its glowing eyes become visible... Blood is dripping down the fangs that jut from its mouth... A mirror on the wall seems to attract its attention... Silence... The dark-red glow around its black eyes grows stronger... Tears? Dark tears seem to be escaping the abyss of the demon’s eyes in the instant before everything goes black...

Ryo was in a dark place now. Nothing to be seen, anywhere, but a strange faint glow directly ahead, in the distance. In his mind, that shimmering light was trying really hard to break through the veil of darkness all around him. He could hear voices, echoing somewhere, really far away.

“... condition is stable... seems to have recovered... didn’t suffer any physical injuries...” An unknown voice. It was hard for Ryo to make out all the words “... he could wake up anytime...”

“... okay doctor. Thank you for your concern...” That voice Ryo could identify. It was undoubtedly his mother’s. Wherever he was, he could hear his mom talking to someone. And it was getting clearer “... Michael... thanks again, for being here...” Michael was there as well? “Ryo will like that, when he wakes up. Let’s just hope that won’t be too long.”

“Don’t mention it Mrs. Anderson. I was getting really worried.” Was that Michael? He sounded... different, somehow “It’s been two days since the incident... does the police have any answers on what happened?” Incident? What were they talking about?

“No... they seem to have no idea...” His mom sounded really worried “The inspector was supposed to drop by today again, to see if Ryo was awake.” An inspector? What could have happened? His head hurt... he was sure he was forgetting something. Something very important. It was as if that something was on the tip of his memory’s tongue. And it tasted sour. It tasted rotten “I think they have to question him... I hope they don’t expect too much... I don’t know... when he finds out what happened to **Karin**...” All of a sudden, it came flooding over him, that something he couldn’t quite remember “*No!*” It streamed uncontrollably from his own subconscious, and overtook everything around him. The ominous bitterness encased him, it threatened to consume him, to drive him to the ground under such weight that his very core would burst into nothingness.

“**KARIN!!**” Ryo screamed out loud asudden, as he sat straight up. His eyes were bulging, his voice had sounded alien to himself. Caustic tears immediately formed over his lashes. He blinked instinctively, and the tears washed down his cheeks. An intense rush of images and feelings filled his head as he looked around himself, dizzily. He was in an austere-looking room, with white walls and furniture, lying on a bed covered in white bed

sheets. His mind was blurry, he was unsure if he'd been awake all along, or rather dreaming. His confused memories... were they real?

"Ryo! Son, you're awake!" Mrs. Anderson quickly came near Ryo with a look of immense surprise and happiness at seeing her son awake and conscious.

Ryo stared at her face, so close to his own. Her hands, tenderly wrapped around his face, felt as if they could squash his throbbing head. With each heartbeat, a pulse of pain seared through his brain. He forced his eyes shut and winced away from his mother's reach. The pain subsided, but his heart rate only seemed to increase "Mom... what... happened? Where am I-where's... Karin?" Confusion and urgency filled both Ryo's voice and his facial expression, as he spoke in rushed, unfinished sentences.

"You're in the hospital, Ryo..." Mrs. Anderson's happiness was gone from her eyes almost instantly. It was replaced with sadness, fear even "... I'm... sorry..." Her reticence was palpable "Karin..."

Ryo, having gained full sense of his surroundings, and of what he remembered last happening, looked into his mother's fearful eyes and demanded a full answer "What?! What about Karin??" His voice was angrier, more fervorous than he wanted it to.

"She..." The words clung to the lump on the back of her throat "Sweetie... she... didn't make it..."

Ryo's breath stopped short. For a few moments he stood perfectly still with his eyes wide open. His mother had looked away, unable to face him, or the reaction he might have "What? ... How?" He said slowly, with a blank expression "What... happened? No..."

"I'm... so sorry, honey..." Tears filled Mrs. Anderson's eyes, as she regarded her son's pain stricken face.

Ryo looked down at his hands, weightlessly abandoned on his lap, as he spoke in a low voice, as much speaking to himself as so his mother might

hear him “But... how can it be?” He could not believe what was happening. It made no sense “We were... being robbed... and then... he... he was trying to... I-” That gunshot reverberated in his mind, in his ears even, and he flinched back violently. The skin all over his body trickled. In a sudden movement Ryo raised his head and looked at his mother with angry eyes “NO!” He shouted, harshly “You’re lying! It can’t be!”

Michael came into view. Ryo had forgotten he was there. He rushed near Ryo and placed a firm hand on his back, trying to reassure and control his friend “Hey, calm down man! We’re only trying to-”

“Get the FUCK OFF ME!” Ryo yelled, and pushed Michael away. A sharp pain ran through his right arm. Mindlessly, he ripped the catheter needle from his vein and jumped off the hospital bed, leaving a trail of blood behind. His legs failed him momentarily and he stumbled forward. Both his mother and his best friend reached for him, but he quickly recovered and shoved everyone aside “Let go of me!!”

Ryo stormed out of the room. The door banged loudly against the wall beside it. The staff outside came to a halt. Nurses and doctors stared at him, in surprise; a patient raised himself on his elbows to peer from his stretcher. Ryo was motionless for but a second, before he spotted the exit sign and rushed in its direction. He broke into a jog, and then he started running. The hospital gown billowed and whirled on his tracks as he ran through hallways, down stairs and past doorways. His mind was burning. He needed to see Karin, to make sure that she was not dead. That she was, indeed, okay.

He ran, and ran, and ran, until he was out of the hospital. Until he was out on the streets of Lemuris, and the warmth of the sun washed over him. His skin welcomed the sensation at once, after cooling in the hospital’s conditioned air, but his mind paid it not a single moment’s attention. He would not stop until he’d reached the place where he last remembered being with Karin, outside her house, kissing her. He couldn’t think of

anything else. The only image in his mind was that of Karin's beautiful face. She couldn't be gone... no. They were lying.

When Ryo rounded the corner into Creekside St he fell to his knees, stunned by the image he was seeing. The whole street was blocked off with police "Do not cross" tape. There was an explosion crater in front of Karin's house, part of the front steps gone, and everything around it was destroyed. The small trees were reduced to carbonized sticks, the bigger ones broken in half or completely rendered asunder, burned to a cinder. There were cars turned upside down or on their sides, shunt against the walls, and there was another vehicle that was smashed straight into the side of a building, half of it stuck inside someone's room on the third floor. The electrical posts were completely twisted and deformed, charred, and there were countless deep crevices around the crater, spanning all the way across the street. The nearby buildings looked as if they were ready to crumble into heaps of dust and rubble. The whole picture seemed to depict the remains of some kind of immense unnatural disaster.

Ryo was still kneeling, staring dead ahead, dumbfounded, when he heard Michael's voice "Ryo, man... wait up!" Michael was shouting, still a few steps out of view from where Ryo stood. When he finally caught sight of Ryo, on his knees, he slowed down his pace and approached his best friend, placing a hand on his shoulder. Ryo didn't look up at him.

"What... What is this? What in god's name happened here?!" Disbelief and confusion deeply marked Ryo's voice.

"God... I'd say that would indeed be the right choice of words." A strange, unfamiliar tone in Michael's speech caught Ryo's attention, making him look away from the unbelievable sight in front of him, to eye his friend, who went on speaking with an impassive look on his face "God saved you, my friend."

Ryo looked completely stunned upon hearing this. The bewilderment filling his mind was quickly swallowed by the rush of hot blood that came hand in hand with swelling, unbounded anger “What?!”

“Don’t you see? Look at what’s in front of you! You survived an impossible situation... it’s a miracle!” Despite how senseless it was for Ryo to hear those words coming out of Michael’s mouth, his best friend’s eyes displayed no hint of farce, but true belief instead.

“What the hell?!” Ryo snapped “A miracle?? Mike,” He got up and tensely seized the front of Michael’s T-shirt “Karin was being **raped!**” His voice came out almost as a desperate howl. He stepped back and raised both hands to his head “I tried to help her and...” He was quiet for an instant, nodding in disbelief, before the anger came rushing back “and what happens?!” He questioned rhetorically, facing his friend “I have no idea! Because when I wake up everyone tells me she’s **dead!**” Ryo was again shouting, fiercely “**Dead!!**” His voice echoed over the forlorn street “And now there’s a fucking crater in the middle of the street!” Exasperation raced through the bulging veins in his neck and drenched each word spewed out of his mouth “God?! You say *this* is god’s work??”

“Yes!” Michael simply insisted “You weren’t meant to die, Ryo! How else do you explain this?” He pursued his point “God protected you!”

“Fuck god!” Ryo shoved Michael away with both his hands “When the hell did **you** become such a damned believer?? How can you just-”

“Mr. Anderson!” Inspector Smith, from the Lemuris Police Department, had just arrived at the site, Ryo’s mom right behind him “Finally caught up...” The thickset man was huffing “Could you please accompany me? We need your statement.” Taking notice of the teenager’s enraged look, he began anew “I’m sorry. I’m inspector Smith.” He nodded, politely “I’ve been trying to make sense of what happened here.” He explained, and spoke somberly “You were the only survivor, so I’m hoping you can help me shed some light on this tragedy.”

“Karin... where is she? I need to see her!” Ryo said quickly, as if realizing the inspector might be able to help him. He disregarded the man’s request as if he hadn’t listened to a word he’d said.

Mrs. Anderson stepped between the inspector and her son. She tried her best to stay calm, and reassure Ryo “Honey, please go with inspector Smith.” She was on the verge of tears all over again, sounding as if she was ready to plead for her son to listen to her “Please, they need your help to try and find out what happened...”

“I need to see her!” Ryo insisted, looking over his mom, directly into the inspector’s eyes.

The balding inspector met Ryo’s gaze and replied matter-of-factly “Mr. Anderson, I don’t think that’s wise right now.”

“Take me to her... please...” Sadness crept into Ryo’s face as he begged to be heard.

“Sir, really I-”

The inspector was about to try and talk Ryo out of his idea, but Ryo snapped again. Unable to control his anger, he stepped past his mother and grabbed at the man’s shirt with both hands “I need to see her, dammit!”

“Fine! You can see her at the morgue!” Without removing Ryo’s hold on him, inspector Smith raised his voice to a stern, loud tone “*After* you give us your statement.” He extended a hand behind him “Now, *please!*”

For a few moments, Ryo stayed frozen in place. Mrs. Anderson approached and held her son, gently pulling him free of his clutch on inspector Smith. She slowly stroked Ryo’s hair and nestled his face into her neck, hugging him closely. In a few seconds she was feeling the cold touch of tears streaming onto her neck. They were silent tears, filled with pain, anguish and despair.

“So, Mr. Anderson, what do you remember from the night of the incident?” Inspector Smith was addressing Ryo from across a table, in an interrogation room, at the Lemuris Police Department. Another inspector, with deep-set, unfriendly eyes behind reading glasses, sat next to him. This one had pen and paper at hand, ready to write down any relevant information.

Ryo was sitting still on his chair, staring down at the table in front of him. Without looking up, he started recounting the events of that fateful night, trying hard to recall every painful detail “I was walking Karin home when two guys jumped us. They held us at gunpoint and asked us for all of our possessions...”

“Okay. Then what?” The unnamed inspector pressed on.

Ryo looked at the questioning man “I said I’d give them my wallet and my phone... it was all I had on me. But then one of them started searching Karin... saying he was going to...” A long pause interrupted Ryo’s already faltering narration. He had his eyes set downwards and for a long moment he seemed to not even blink “... abuse her.”

Inspector Smith let out a heartfelt sigh “I see.” He gave Ryo a moment to gather his thoughts. There was a grave look in his eyes when he took the leap needed to get the teenager going again, despite how bad it felt “What happened next?” His partner was scribbling on his notepad, while listening intently to each word Ryo said.

“She was screaming for help. She was desperate.” Ryo spoke slowly, emotionlessly. The inspector wondered if he might be in shock “The slim guy was grabbing me from behind.” Both men sat quietly, regarding the detached look on Ryo’s face as he spoke “I tried to get free. I was reaching for her when I heard a gunshot.” Ryo lowered his head.

“A gunshot.” Inspector Smith’s partner repeated, as he took note “So, he missed?” He questioned with a suspicious look, then clarified “You weren’t shot. He missed at point-blank?”

Ryo didn't appear to notice the leeriness in the question "Next I remember, I woke up in the hospital."

Inspector Smith slumped back in his chair "You don't remember anything else?" He looked disappointed "At all?"

"Nothing."

The other inspector leaned forward, apparently taking the lead "Mr. Anderson, you only mention three people besides you at the location. Is that correct?"

Ryo only nodded.

"Well, when we got there, we found you lying at the center of that crater. There was a body right behind you, another one behind that, and two more in front of you. That adds up to four..." The inspector held his speech, looking intently at Ryo's reaction.

"Bodies..." Ryo repeated "Are... are you sure one of them is Karin?" Disbelief, mixed with a mild hint of hope crept back into Ryo's face.

"DNA tests confirmed Miss Sutherland's identity." Ryo looked away "I'm sorry Mr. Anderson, but I really don't think you'll want to see her. The four bodies we found were completely burned to a crisp. All of them... completely carbonized."

Ryo opened his mouth to speak, but then thought better of it. What good could come of him mentioning that alien presence he'd felt on those last moments? It wouldn't help them figure anything out, and it would only lead to more questions he had no answers for. After a moment, he asked plainly "How can that be?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. You saw the scenery out there, it looks like some kind of unnatural disaster struck that street alone! We have no idea *what* may have happened!" The inspector raised his hands in frustration "We actually checked the weather services to see what they had recorded, and no one can make sense of it. There's a huge spike in

temperature at that particular area, and the wind speed went up to ridiculous levels... even static electricity readings were off the scale! Seismic reports read as if there was some sort of micro-earthquake, contained only in that exact area!” Indignation fought off the sense of impending defeat in the man’s speech “It all happened in a matter of seconds, and then what was left is what you’ve seen!” He’d perked up on his chair while speaking these last words, clearly aggravated at the lack of answers “Now, tell me, Mr. Anderson, how can you have been at the center of *that*, and remember nothing at all?!” He was demanding those answers, at whatever cost “What are you keeping from us?!”

“What do you want from me?!” Ryo snapped back at the unnamed inspector, pushing himself and his chair away from the table “I told you! I don’t remember anything else!”

At this, inspector Smith pulled his colleague back to a sitting position, and motioned him and Ryo to remain calm “Ryo,” He moved to first name basis, in an attempt to create empathy “I’m terribly sorry for your friend.” His words were of crystal clear honesty “I really am. But that is exactly why we must understand what happened. If anyone, somehow, is to blame for what happened, we can’t give up until that person is brought to justice.” Ryo’s face showed a hint of determination when presented with that idea. It was clear he agreed whole-heartedly “And we’re talking about over twenty innocent people. Older people, children, fathers and mothers, whole families. Anyone in a five hundred feet radius of the crater you saw is dead. It looked as if they had all been electrocuted right where they stood... inside their own homes.”

Ryo wished he could help. He wanted so much to remember, to know something about what had happened. Anything. But there was, instead, nothing “... What about... Karin’s mother...?” He said, in a low voice, after a few moments measuring the inspector’s onerous words.

Detective Smith leaned back on his chair again, and took another deep breath, this one of relief “Fortunately, she wasn’t home at the time. Detective Sutherland is not allowed to work on the case though. Personal involvements automatically exclude an agent from an ongoing investigation...” The detective looked as if he was wavering between speaking his next words or not, but then opted to voice his personal thoughts “and honestly, I really don’t think she’s emotionally stable to work right now.”

Ryo had remained standing, and had kept his head lowered, his eyes locked in a blank stare at the ground “I’d like to go now... I’ve told you all I can... please just... just let me leave...” He spoke slowly, with a tired voice. The last few hours were violently weighing on his mind. He felt disheartened, hopeless.

“Very well.” Inspector Smith got up and accompanied Ryo to the door “But please, keep your phone on, and don’t leave town. We’ll contact you if we have any new information.” Ryo stepped out the door in silence, but looked over his shoulder once again, at the sound of the inspector’s voice “And again... my condolences...”

Outside, Michael waited, propped against a wall. When he spotted Ryo, he hurried to him “Ryo! How’d it go? Your parents should be arriving soon, they had to handle all the paperwork at the hospital.”

Ryo looked at his best friend with empty eyes. Without speaking a word he walked to the nearest wall, leaned on it, and let his body drop to a seated position, where he stayed, looking at the floor quietly.

“I’m so sorry about Karin, man...” Michael said, looking down. He sat on the floor, beside his silent friend “I can’t imagine how you must feel...” He admitted “But you mustn’t focus on the bad, despite how hard it may seem for you to notice the good.” He said with his eyes set on Ryo’s face “*You* survived... surely that means somethin’, right?”

“... I wish I hadn’t...” Ryo answered, still looking at the floor with nothing but sadness in his stare.

“But you did! God must have something in store for you. Maybe if you just accept Him into your heart... maybe it’ll all become clear?”

Michael’s statement triggered a switch in Ryo’s mind. Suddenly, he directed an enraged, nearly mad-looking glare at his friend “What the fuck are you talking about!? Have you completely lost it?!” He was beyond aggravated “Karin just *died*, along with many others, and you’re talking about god’s great plan to keep *me* alive?! **What the hell’s wrong with you?**”

“God is at the center of everything, Ryo!” Michael raised himself to his knees and approached his friend “Whatever happens, it’s because He wishes it to happen! If you were saved, you are undoubtedly part of his plans! I just want you to seriously consider this!” Michael insisted, almost pleading for Ryo to hear him.

“If there is any thought in my mind about *any* god, it’s that I wish I could kill him for taking Karin away from me!!” Ryo screamed at his friend.

Michael’s eyes showed an extreme amount of desperation at witnessing Ryo’s relentless refusal to accept his advice “God didn’t do anything to Karin! Evil killed her, not God!” He continued, trying to redirect his friend’s anger.

Ryo looked deeply into Michael’s eyes for a moment before continuing, in a less unbalanced tone of voice “*Evil* was robbing us, and as I was trying to stop it, something intervened. *That’s* what killed Karin.” A look of intense determination crept into Ryo’s eyes as he glared at his friend “I *will* find out what happened. And if you’re right somehow, and this really *was* god’s will, then I swear to you, Mike, I will not stop until I’ve killed god himself, for what he did.”

Michael stared at Ryo with saddened eyes. In that moment, hope seemed to have completely abandoned him for some reason, and he just stood there, looking as if some horrible truth had been revealed to him. Ryo noticed the strange look haunting his friend's face, but before he had time to consider what to say, a car came to a stop near the sidewalk. Mrs. Anderson waved at Ryo from the passenger's seat. He got up.

"Bye, Mike." Ryo said, looking down at Michael.

"So long, my friend." Michael remained in place, watching with a gloomy stare, as his friend approached and entered his parents' car.

Through the entire ride home, Ryo was perplexed. His mind was still numb with everything that had happened, and Michael's incomprehensible behavior had only served to make everything seem even more unreal "*The whole world's gone mad... Karin...*"

Chapter 7:

«Confusion... Loneliness... Despair»

"My lord... I've failed."

"You know what has to be done then."

"But... if you give me more time... maybe I can-"

"Enough. There is nothing else to consider. Proceed with your mission."

"... Yes, my lord."

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson stood just outside Ryo's room "Ryo, please... you can't stay holed up in your room forever." Ryo's mother spoke softly, preoccupation and exhaustion clearly weighing on her voice "Come on out and talk to us. We'll walk through this together... your father wants to speak with you... we both do."

"Come on, open the door, son. Your mother's right..." Mr. Anderson's voice was calm and patient. He tried to reassure Ryo, before knocking on the door once again "I can't imagine how hard it must be, but this is not the way to face this situation..."

"Dear, please! You haven't had your dinner... you just got out of the hospital, you won't get your strength back like this! You have to eat something." Mrs. Anderson insisted through the door.

Ryo finally answered, his voice far away into the room "I don't want any dinner... please, just leave me alone..." For a few moments there was silence. Ryo remained lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He had no idea what he should do now. He needed to know what had happened, but if the police couldn't find anything out, how would he? There were too many unanswerable questions.

Who was the fourth person whose body was found? Ryo did remember sensing that other presence... it had felt as if his brain was picking up on some sort of signal headed – at an alarming pace – his way. It'd been an

alien sensation, something Ryo would have already dismissed as his mind playing tricks on him amidst all the chaos, had it not been for the existence of that unknown fourth body.

Why didn't Ryo remember anything after hearing that gunshot? He certainly wasn't hit by it, otherwise he'd be hurt. So what had made him lose consciousness in that particular moment?

And on top of it all, what the hell could have happened on that street? What kind of accident might bring about such damage, and, more importantly, who or what would be at its origin?

And Mike... what had gotten into him? Just like that, out of nowhere, everything he sees is God, and God is the source of all that happens. Since when was he even a religious guy?

There was too much of the unexplainable running through Ryo's mind, flooding his thoughts, dragging his cognition away like a tsunami, continuously threatening to tear asunder the very foundations of each of its most basic elements. But that was not what was bothering him the most. Karin... she was gone. Much faster than he'd grown attached to her, she had been mercilessly taken away from him. He would really never see her again... that idea brought about more fear and despair creeping into his mind, than he could've ever imagined feeling. It was as if his soul had been gutted, and splayed out to dry like a fish under the scorching sun.

His head spinning from all this, it wasn't long before Ryo fell asleep. He hadn't realized how tired he was. His parents had given up on getting him to open the door and had decided it was best to just let him sleep it out. Tomorrow would be a new day. With no interruptions, Ryo slept for hours on end.

The following day, it was already late into the afternoon by the time he woke up *"How strange... mom hasn't said anything since she got home..."*

As Ryo got up and unlocked the door to his room, he noticed there was complete silence in the house. It was empty. Both his parents were still

out... *"I must've really worried them... now that I think about it, with all that's happened I haven't even given a minute's thought to how hard this must be for them as well... sorry..."*

Ryo dragged himself to the bathroom. His head was still woozy, and his eyes felt swollen from so many straight hours of sleep. The running water felt refreshingly cool over his skin. As he was washing his face, he looked up at the mirror. Even with all the weirdness going on, he still couldn't help being surprised yet again. He had been looking off for some time, but this was something else.

His hair and eyebrows were almost all white now, for some reason. His skin tone was even paler than before, almost frighteningly so. The skin under his eyes was dark, as if he hadn't slept in days, and even his eyes seemed to have changed. They looked all black at the center, as if the pupil had outgrown and absorbed the iris and its once brown color. He raised a hand to his face, almost unable to recognize himself, questioning what the hell might be happening to him. He noticed his fingernails had gained a strange yellowish tint. When he touched them, they felt abnormally hard on his own fingers.

Yet another mystery floating around his head. Was this some kind of disease? Was it because of whatever had happened on Creekside Street? Maybe some sort of radiation poisoning?

As he stared at the water flowing around in the sink, at the hypnotizing swirls and waves it formed while running down the drain, Ryo's confused mind became paradoxically aware of how plain and natural, of how soothing, it was. How, despite all the splattering that occurred as the water gushing from the faucet hit the pool's surface in the sink, ultimately all of it would take its course and slowly drain away. Was this the nature of the world? Was everything just flowing through its path like a river into the ocean? Was Karin always supposed to have died like that, or could he have saved her, somehow? Did Ryo have any control whatsoever over anything

that was happening in his life or was it all predestined? Too many questions...

When Ryo came to his senses he realized his cell phone was ringing, back in his nightstand. His feet trailed along the ground as he strenuously willed them forward.

"Mr. Anderson?" The strangely familiar voice on the other end asked for his name.

His mind was muddy. Whose voice was calling for him? "Yes?" He answered, reticently.

"This is inspector Smith." Right. How *wouldn't* he recognize the man's voice? "I'm really sorry to have to be the bearer of such news, but..." The long pause immediately led to a skipped heartbeat in Ryo's chest "there's been an accident... two... actually..."

"What... do you mean?" He was unsure if he actually wanted to hear the answer to that question.

"It's your parents, Ryo..."

The inspector's hesitation was palpable, even if over the phone, and not only in Ryo's imagination. It was clear the man was fighting a hard battle to find the right words. Ryo's heart was beating loudly in his ears "What *about* my parents? Are they okay?!"

"I'm sorry... there was nothing we could do... When the ambulances got to them, they had already passed..."

It was like the weight of the world had suddenly been dropped on his head. His vision seemed to tunnel, his heart sunk to his stomach. He was going to be sick "What?! But... but how? Wha...happened?" He was staring forward, without blinking, at nothing.

"You better come to the station, son..." Inspector Smith's tone was compassionate, caring even "I'll explain all I can once you get here. An officer should be arriving in a few minutes to pick you up."

Ryo disconnected the call and rushed down the stairs. He ran to the front door with a single thought in mind: *"This can't be happening!!"*. Only when he stepped onto the street did he notice the warm roughness of the sidewalk under the naked soles of his feet. He was still in his pajamas, sliding on a random pair of sneakers, when he heard the car arrive. He stumbled out the front door, tripping on the undone shoelaces, opened the black and white car's door without waiting for permission and threw himself on the backseat. The officer in the driver's seat looked at him in surprise, but did not speak a word. Instead, he revved the engine.

That same strange sensation hindered Ryo's mind all along the way: was someone following him? He wouldn't think about that now, he couldn't. He needed to get to the station, it had to be a mistake. Upon arriving, the officer took him directly to the coroner's room. Inspector Smith was waiting by the door. Despite the helpless desperation Ryo felt at the whole situation, he remained hopeful it was all just some sickly misunderstanding.

Inspector Smith stopped Ryo from entering. He placed a hand on his shoulder and spoke sympathetically "Ryo... you need to be ready for what's inside this door. I wouldn't ask this of you if it weren't absolutely necessary that you identify the bodies..."

No reply came to Ryo's mind. He was sure it had to be a mistake, he just needed to confirm it to the police. The inspector stepped aside looking grim. Ryo turned the doorknob. He hesitated for a brief moment before pushing the door open, feeling a dreadful weight on his mind. He put it aside, half-unconsciously giving in to the idea that if he faltered in his resolve it might all turn out to be true. As he entered, he was shocked to his very core. Both his parents' lifeless bodies were laid down on separate metal tables, covered to their necks under white sheets. Their faces looked pale, their lips a darkening purple in color. This was happening, there was no way around it.

“Son... I am so, *so* sorry...” Ryo heard inspector Smith’s voice as if the man was miles apart from him. He was locked away in the deepest recesses of his mind, gazing at his parents’ bodies as if from a separate reality “I need you to sign this to-”

The inspector’s voice kept humming, until Ryo snapped back into reality and suddenly interrupted him “How did this happen!?”

“Mrs. Anderson was found at the steps to St. Peter’s Chapel, in Central Square.” The bluntness of hearing about his mother’s deathbed hit Ryo’s mind like a truck “Mr. Anderson, on the other hand, was at the entrance to St. Anthony’s Church, at the far east edge of town.” He almost flinched away from each word, as if the sounds were taking stabs at him “Two completely distinct locations, yet both public, and religiously associated... we have no clue as to how they got there.”

Ryo looked as if his mind was unable to process what he was hearing. He gave no response. Seeing this, inspector Smith continued detailing the few pieces of logical information they had managed to gather “Dr. Hans estimated the time of death at around four hours ago. No one witnessed any kind of accident or attack. They were both found laid down on the floor carefully, with their arms crossed over their chests. There are...” The man’s voice faltered. He hesitated, aware that he might possibly be going too deep into specifics. Ryo had not looked away, and this seemed a sign that he wanted to know, in spite of how hard it might be “There are no signs of struggle, and judging from the physical symptoms they both died of heart failure.” Smith concluded his reasoning.

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” Ryo suddenly retorted “They couldn’t both have had heart attacks at the same time!” He refused to accept the facts he was hearing “Someone must’ve done this, how can no one have seen anything?!”

“We can’t be sure it happened at the exact same time, but it was definitely within the same small time window.” The inspector added “It is

almost certain that this wasn't due to natural causes. But there are no witnesses whatsoever." He sounded troubled "We've spoken to the people who reported both incidents, but beneath the natural shock and nervousness from being involved in a possible murder investigation, they had nothing relevant to tell us." Inspector Smith carried on as Ryo remained silently looking at him with a look of utter rejection splashed over his face. "I can imagine how hard this must be, but at least you can take comfort in the fact that they didn't suffer for more than a few instants... their deaths must have been quick and mostly painless..."

"... I..." Ryo started to speak, but seemed to be at a loss for words.

"I'm very sorry to have to ask you this, but do you know of anyone that might have wanted to hurt your parents?" Inspector Smith was clearly hoping for some sort of lead "It's virtually impossible that this would happen to both of them by coincidence..." He wanted something, anything to go on "But whoever might've done this, left no trace of evidence behind."

Ryo just stared at the inspector with empty eyes, as his mind fought to accept the reality being presented to him "*Who could've... What... did they do to deserve this!?*"

"Ryo... I'm really sorry, but... is there anything at all that you can tell us?" The inspector insisted, bringing Ryo's eyes back into focus.

"I have no idea who would do this..." He answered, slowly directing his stare down at the ground "My parents... had no enemies."

"Are you sure? No one they ever pissed off? Maybe a neighbor or work colleague they didn't get along with? It doesn't necessarily take an enemy to do this. The sad truth is some people are sick enough to kill over little disputes, over something that might seem pointless to us."

"No one... they always get along wi-" Ryo almost bit his tongue before correcting himself "Got... along with everyone they knew..."

The inspector let out a deep sigh “Alright. I won’t tire you anymore. You should get some rest. Go home. I...” He looked like he was at a loss for words “I realize this must be an impossibly difficult situation. If there is anything we can do to help... do you have any close family you can stay with?”

“Thank you, inspector.” Ryo answered with a cold, detached voice “I’ll be fine.” He looked at the man’s worried eyes and felt nothing. He slowly blinked before looking away and making for the door.

Smith walked after Ryo “Here.” He handed out a card with his phone number “Anything at all, just call me. I’ll be there in an instant.”

When Ryo left the police station he was walking slowly, his head low, his arms limp at each side of his apathetic figure. He wandered aimlessly. He had nowhere to go, no one waiting for him, anywhere. Not anymore. Everyone was gone. Except for Mike. Ryo tried dialing his number, somehow already expecting it not to work. The call did not go through *“We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel-”* He hung up. He was alone. At the rate things were going, Mike was gone too... there was nothing left for him.

He was tired, too tired to go on. He had kept walking with no destiny in mind, and before he’d noticed, night time had fallen and obscured the skies. The old castle lay before him, as if he had unconsciously been driven to seek a place where he could be isolated from the world. He welcomed the idea of being engulfed by solitude, of disappearing. Of leaving the whole of the world behind, and never having to again regard the meaninglessness of it all.

Ryo stepped through gates that looked as abandoned and forgotten as he felt. He slowly went up the stairs and along the ramparts, to the higher parts of the castle walls. The whole way up Ryo had no thoughts going through his head. His mind was the likes of a watch that had stopped ticking, cogs

frozen in time, unable to turn, hands pointing to numbers long deprived of meaning. All that was left was silence.

As he reached the highest point of the castle and stepped out into the night, Ryo once again felt an unknown presence somewhere in the vicinity. He looked around sluggishly. All he could see was the night sky above and beyond the tower, its dark emptiness feeding his own. But there was no one in sight. And did it even matter, anyway? Why would he care about any of that? It had come to the point where he could think of no reason to worry about anything at all. He walked to the tower's edge, and stopped, staring ahead. The town looked peaceful as well as vibrant, quietly lighting the darkness all around it. He could be at peace too... all it would take was one more step. He could finally rest and forget about everything...

"Thank you Ryo. You save me the pain of having to erase you myself. I'm sorry it had to go this way... See you around my friend. I promise I won't be far behind you."

Ryo felt an intense urge he could not place. Something beckoning him, reaching out to his mind. He turned back towards the other side of the tower, perhaps expecting to find something that would give him a reason to go on. But there was nothing there. All it was, were the last clinging bits of wistful hope left inside him. One small leap backwards was all it took for his body to start falling. He could feel the wind rushing around him, his hair flowing rapidly, obscuring his view of anything but the dark-blue sky. It felt good, peaceful. He would be with Karin again, and his parents. He would be with them forever. Happy.

As his vision was starting to fade, his consciousness numbing, everything becoming a blue shade of nothingness, an unexpected shape entered his field of vision. This sparked attention in his brain, giving him a brief moment of lucidity. He was looking at a winged creature, rapidly dashing down towards him *"Is that... can it be... an angel?"*

Chapter 8:

«Friendship»

Michael James Turner was soon to enter his eighteenth year of age. Ryo had been his best friend since they had started attending the same class, at the beginning of their first year of primary school. Back then, Ryo had just moved into town and was yet to make any friends. He was a strange kid, always very quiet, never wanting to play with any of the other children. As usual, as soon as he'd noticed a new kid in class, Michael had gone up to Ryo and started asking him a million and one questions. With time, they had started getting closer and within a few months they'd become best friends. Growing up, they'd hang out every day at each other's house after school. At the age of ten, their parents would joke about how they were inseparable.

Their close friendship only deepened with the years, but eventually the time came when separation became inevitable. Michael was fifteen when his parents decided they should move to Amberlin, the neighboring town where they had bought the house that would become his home for the next two short years.

Michael had always been a really forward person. As a child he was one of those kids that would mess around with everyone; he would ask question after question about everything and he'd play with any other child around him. It was like his batteries would never run out. As he got older, he developed a very outgoing personality, never being one to think much about anything other than having fun and enjoying life every day as if it was his last one.

At the age of seventeen, Michael had grown into a handsome young man. His short blond hair and light-blue eyes usually netted him a wink from any girl who looked at him. A very well built physique showed that

he worked out on a daily basis; a detail he made sure the girls were aware of, with the tight T-shirts and jeans he usually wore.

Probably one of the reasons Michael and Ryo got along so well, was that in terms of personality they were, in a wide range of aspects, the complete opposite of each other. Ryo was always quiet and thoughtful about everything and everyone around him. He wouldn't create new friendships or make any effort to engage in new relationships, but Michael would meet whoever he felt like, and introduce Ryo. Michael would go and push him against a girl, and then introduce him as if by accident, when Ryo would not have even considered trying to create conversation.

On the other hand, Michael wouldn't think twice about skipping classes, or putting his work aside and just going out to have fun. Ryo would press him to study, and would make sure he attended classes... at least most of them. Whenever Michael got into trouble for provoking other guys, Ryo would come to his aid to try and calm things down, even if it meant getting beaten up in the process. He would play the part of Michael's conscience when there was something that had to be done. But he would, in the end, always go along with whatever Michael asked of him.

When they got separated, Michael adapted effortlessly to his new school. He quickly became one of the most popular guys in his class. Ryo on the other hand, even though he remained in the same school and most of his other classmates were there except for Michael, was almost always alone. He became even quieter than before, always recessed into the depths of his own mind.

Even though they were miles apart, both friends made sure to keep in touch. While at first they'd meet more than once a week, unavoidably, as time went by, they grew apart. After a year they'd only meet when they had the chance to, and wanted to catch up, but that didn't seem to change in any way the deep-seated roots of their friendship.

It was Saturday. Ryo's birthday was just around the corner, but unlike past years, this time they had made no plans to get together. Last time they'd met, Ryo had been acting very strange, with all that talk about nightmares and demons. And there was the idea that he'd been hit by a bus. What could be going on inside his head? *"You started actin' like this around the time the new school year started, and you met that girl, Karin... is she messin' with your head? Tomorrow's your birthday and you won't even answer my message... dammit, what's up with you anyway?!"*

It wasn't too long before Mike's cellular rang to bring him good news:

Yo d00d! Sorry I didnt answer ur msg earlier. I'm goin out 4 dinner with Karin tonight, goin 2 meet her right now. Tomorrow I'll call u and we'll get together to catch up. Grab a couple of beers...give some use to that fake ID of yours xD

Michael drew a large smile as he read the message on his phone. He answered Ryo with anticipation building in his mind over the fact that his best friend might've finally found a girl he really liked.

Ok, cya tomorrow buddy. And enjoy the evening... IF you know what I mean xD

But the next day Michael didn't get the phone call he was expecting. It was still early in the morning when he woke up to the ringtone of his cell. Still half-asleep, he answered the phone call without even noticing the caller ID "Yo! Dude, how was it last night?" He chuckled "Had fun?"

"Hello? Michael?" A familiar female voice spoke on the other end.

"*Ah, shit!*" Michael almost blurted those words out "Oh... errr-hi Mrs. Anderson! Is everything okay?"

“Well... not really...” Ryo’s mother spoke with a sad and worried tone of voice that quickly made Michael sit straight up in his bed “Ryo was in an accident last night. He’s in the hospital.”

“What?!” Michael pushed the bed sheet aside and stepped out of bed “An accident? What happened??”

“We don’t know... *No one* knows exactly what happened...” Mrs. Anderson sounded deeply troubled “I... I’m sorry, I just came home to grab something to eat, and I’m going back to the hospital. I just wanted to let you know.”

“But is he alright?!” Michael spoke in a rush, trying to prevent Mrs. Anderson from ending the call.

“Well, he’s still asleep, but the doctors say he doesn’t appear to be harmed in any way...”

Michael’s whole body seemed to relax at that remark “Oh okay, thank god. Well, I’ll see you in the hospital, Mrs. Anderson. I’ll go straight there to see Ryo, if you won’t mind”

“Okay, see you there.”

On his way to Lemuris, Michael wasn’t sure what to think. The train trip, though short of an hour, lasted a life time in his anxious mind. Ryo was sure to be okay, otherwise his mother would have been much more alarmed. On the other hand, it sounded as if something had been seriously troubling her, when she should’ve been relieved her son wasn’t hurt... what could be causing this? When he arrived at the hospital room where Ryo was, Michael relaxed at seeing his friend lying comfortably in bed, nothing but an IV line attached to his arm. But what had happened to him? Why was his hair white?!

“Mrs. Anderson! How is he?” He asked, after slowly knocking on the door and pushing it open.

“Oh, hi Michael.” Ryo’s mother looked up, surprised. She appeared to have been lost in her thoughts, sitting by her son’s bed “Well, the doctors say he should be just fine. There’s nothing wrong with him. It’s like he’s only sleeping.”

“But what happened anyway? What kind of accident was it? And did anyone get hurt? He was with Karin last night, right?” Michael was speaking in a hurry, asking one question after another, without giving time for an answer.

Mrs. Anderson spoke when Michael finally gave her a chance to. By the look on her eyes, Michael could tell she was distraught “That’s exactly what’s wrong... it doesn’t make any sense... no one knows what happened, not even the police have any clue to-”

“The police?” Michael interrupted her speech, with a look of deep surprise on his face “Why is there police involved? Was it something serious?!”

“Well... there was some kind of freak accident at the place right where they found Ryo... there were deaths... I’m not sure how many...”

Michael’s eyes widened “Deaths?! What the fuck?!” For a moment he’d forgotten who he was speaking to. Nervousness and embarrassment filled his facial expression when he resumed his speech “Err... sorry, but, what do you mean by a freak accident, Mrs. Anderson?”

Ryo’s mom continued as if Michael hadn’t said anything wrong, ignoring his slip up “I got a phone call at about three AM. It was the police. They said they’d been called, along with the fire department, to Creekside Street, and that Ryo was the only survivor among the wreckage. I went to meet them, and when I arrived I had no idea what to think... I still don’t. It’s just something you have to see with your own eyes... but the fact is that Karin...” She paused for a moment, straining to utter her next words “She’s... dead... she’s been confirmed to be one of the bodies found

there... Thank God Ryo is alright, but I have no idea how he'll react when he finds out what happened..."

"Wow..." Michael had stepped back to sit in a nearby chair, clearly shocked with what he'd been hearing. He had no idea what to make of it "Damn... I mean, the most important thing really is that Ryo's alright... but Karin... he's going to be devastated..." As he spoke, Mrs. Anderson was looking at Ryo's sleeping figure with deep sadness settled into her eyes. Despite his doubts if he should press the subject, Michael's curious mind urged him to know more "But how can no one know what happened? I'm sure the police have seen countless accidents... and the fire department? Was it some sort of fire?"

"I don't know how to explain it, Michael... you should just go see it for yourself."

"Okay... I'll do just that. If Ryo wakes up, would you please call me on my cell? I'd really like to talk to him."

"Of course."

Michael left the hospital both puzzled and dazed. He wondered what could have happened, and thought about how he'd never gotten to meet Karin. The first girl he ever knew to steal Ryo's heart. And now she was dead. As soon as he arrived at Creekside St he was overwhelmed by the visage before his eyes. "*What... the...*" "Hell... is this?" He couldn't stop the words pouring out of his mouth, with no intended listener.

"Hell... child, you know not how right you are." A deep voice sounded in Michael's ears, as if it had been carried by the wind.

"Huh?!" Michael looked all around himself, startled "Wh... who's there?"

"What you see is the work of a demon." The voice spoke again, sounding closer this time.

“Who’s talkin’?!” Michael yelled out. He nervously spun around in place, trying to determine where the voice was coming from. But there was no one to be seen. The street was completely empty.

“I am right here, child.”

Michael quickly looked around, alarmed by how near the voice was to his ears. An old woman stood right behind him, leaning deeply on a wooden cane with a pleasant smile on her withered and wrinkled face “Oh shit!” Michael jumped back, startled out of his mind “What the fu-... old lady... where’d you come from?” The elder person simply smiled back at him. Michael slowly recovered from his fright. Only then did he actually process what the stranger had said “What do you know about what happened here?” He asked, putting aside his eagerness to know who the woman might be, or how she’d shown up out of thin air.

The old woman looked into Michael’s eyes for a long moment before her rough voice was heard again “Let us just say I know enough. I am here to make a proposition.”

“A proposition?” Michael looked perplexed. He let out a faint, unsure laughter as he continued “What... do you mean?”

“Your friend, Ryo, do you want to save him, Michael?”

Michael’s face changed “Okay... H-... how the hell do you know my name?!” He was getting seriously freaked out.

“I know all there is to know about you, Michael. You love your friend as if he was your brother, am I right? You would do anything to save him, correct?”

“What do you mean, save him? Ryo is fine, I just saw him at the hospital.” Michael spoke with more certainty now. He wanted to discredit the old woman, prove himself right. He was instinctively trying to get some control over the situation.

The strange lady let on with her speech, hanging on to her ancient-looking cane for support of her own weight “What you see before you, here, is the work of a really powerful demon. Your friend is in great danger. You are the only one who can save his immortal soul. Are you willing to make the sacrifices that need be done?”

Michael laughed out loud now “Come on... what are you jabberin’ about?!” He waved his hand, dismissing the woman’s words, making a joke out them, even “Demons? Eternal soul? If you knew as much about me as you say, you’d know I don’t believe in any of that stuff at all!”

“It matters not if you believe it.” The old lady stated plainly “I am offering you the only chance you will ever have to save your friend. If you do not take it, he will be lost forever.”

“Seriously now, lady... whoever you are, this is getting really old, really fast.” Michael was trying hard to maintain a polite smile, but his lips quivered with the effort “Did someone put you up to this? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Enough!” The warm smile quickly vanished from the woman’s withered face. Her expression became dead serious in an instant as she spoke with a stone-cold voice “I do not have time for jokes, child! If you will not come willingly, I will be forced to bring you by other means.”

Michael stepped back in surprise. He raised his eyebrows and let out a mild chuckle as he spoke “You’re kiddin’ right? What exactly do you think you can do to me? You’re just an old bag!”

And then, right before Michael’s eyes, something that many people would consider a miracle happened. The tired-looking old woman, who appeared to be in her sixties, dressed in simple garbs and leaning over her cane, became something other than human, the sight of her an eerie glimpse of the supernatural. Suddenly, an impossible glow had surrounded the woman. Coming from every pore of her skin and every inch of her garments, the light was intensifying by the second. As it became brighter

and brighter, Michael was forced to partially cover his eyes behind his hand. He could, however, see just enough to witness something that would mark him forever.

Right in front of him, a huge pair of pure white wings unfolded from the midst of the fierce light. When the glow started to gradually disappear, a silhouette became visible. Michael was now looking at something that he, someone who didn't believe in any kind of religion, had no other way of describing other than an angel.

An impressive, deeply enchanting female figure stood before him. Intricately embroidered platinum and golden pieces of armor covered her shoulders, waist, arms and shins, weaved together by a few threads of the same thin snow-white, almost see-through, fabric that covered her bosom and partially concealed her otherwise naked body. Shining brightly below the sunlight was a small, round golden shield attached to the woman's left arm, and at her waist a golden short sword was sheathed unto her belt. Powerful and stern, yet feminine features marked her face, surrounded by the round metallic designs of a helmet apparently molded from pure silver and gold, imposing respect into anyone before her. From the back of the helmet emerged long locks of wavy crimson hair that streamed down her back all the way to her waist. But most strange and inhuman were the creature's eyes. They were completely white, with no iris or pupil whatsoever.

As the angel's wings folded onto her back, Michael, completely stunned, took a step backwards, tripped and fell on his back. He sat there, with his mouth wide open in disbelief as the creature's voice was heard, this time with a deeply echoing tone "You have no need to fear me, child. I am not here to harm you. Will you come with me, and serve your purpose as per our Almighty Father's will?"

Michael was speechless. Dumbfounded "Who... wha-... what... **are** you??"

“I am an angel of the lord. A warrior in Heaven’s army. A harbinger of justice. One of many of God’s celestial children. I am here to bring you before our lord, who will give you what you need to save your friend.” The creature spoke as if its words were not strange at all, obvious even “Will you come with me, now?”

“But... how... can this be?” Michael couldn’t believe his own eyes. His own ears. He wondered if he might have bumped his head into something and was now lying unconscious somewhere. Or if he had even been asleep the whole time, and this bizarre day was nothing but one of those dreams he’d once mentioned to Ryo. But that did him no good. He wasn’t waking up anyway, so he should take the practical approach and go with it, he thought “If a demon really *is* after Ryo, how am *I* supposed to help him?” He confronted the angel’s proposition “Why don’t *you* help him?!”

“That is not my duty, nor would I be able to do anything about this matter. You are Ryo’s best hope of being saved. Everything will become clear soon enough.” The angel outstretched her slender hand towards Michael, who still sat on the floor where he’d fallen.

Michael hesitantly took the winged woman’s hand. She pulled him up straight with ease and grabbed him around the chest in a tight embrace. Blood immediately rushed to his cheeks as he felt the softness of her plump breasts forced against him. Her great wings unfolded and with one strong flap his feet were lifted off the ground. As soon as he felt his weight leaving him, Michael immediately let go of the awkwardness of the situation and wrapped both his arms tight around the angel’s torso. With a sudden impulse, they started rising at an incredible speed. The wind rushed so fast through Michael’s face that it was overwhelmingly difficult for him to breathe. He buried his face in the nook of the angel’s neck, but to no avail. In only a matter of seconds he had lost consciousness. The last thoughts in his confused mind were almost imperceptible.

“Wake up, Michael. We have arrived.” The angel’s voice brought Michael back into awareness.

“... Uh... Huh?” He looked around, confused. He was lying on a soft floor. The majestic winged creature stood next to him.

“We are here. Follow me and you will be given the answers you seek.”

“... Here?” Michael slowly got up, stumbling around until he regained his balance “Here, where?”

“Look around.” The angel made a gracious movement with her arm, indicating the tall window to their side “Where do you think you are?”

“Oh my god!” Michael sounded like a man who had just seen the eighth wonder of the world. In truth, he had witnessed more than any living man could expect to “It can’t be... really... I’m dreamin’, right?”

“No, Michael, you are not.” The angel replied calmly “And we have no time to waste. Follow me.” She motioned for him to follow her, before turning around and starting down the hallway without a moment’s notice. Her long hair waved wildly between her wondrous wings with each swift step she took, occasionally finding its way between the shining platinum waist guard and the lean, naked curve that led to the small of her back. Michael stared in awe, before his legs actually dared to move after his host.

He followed the angel through a majestic hallway of what appeared to be a huge castle. The walls were all richly decorated with paintings of heavenly winged figures and epic landscapes, and the floor was coated with what appeared to be lustrous dark-red silk. The windows revealed an astounding view; it was what had made Michael aware of where he might be. Whenever he looked out, all he could see were white clouds and clear blue sky. Had the creature really brought him to Heaven? While he involuntarily mused over these thoughts, he was guided through a great double door, into a wide chamber “*I’m walking in a castle surrounded by clouds, following an angel to her superior, because God has a mission for me... what the fuck... is goin on here?!*”

As he stepped further into the massive room, a new figure presented itself before Michael. This one was different, it looked even less human. The skin all over its body was light-blue in color, and its wings, two huge ones, and a pair of smaller ones below these, were covered in bright golden feathers. The blue-skinned man's long hair, its gold-blond color almost matching the graciousness of his wings, flowed down over his shoulders in cascading loose swirls. This being sported no kind of armor, or battle garbs; instead it was dressed in long white robes, marked with golden chain-like designs that interlocked in labyrinthine patterns all along the sleeves and body. The four-winged creature emitted such a powerful aura that it was actually frightening for Michael to simply stand before it.

"Welcome, boy. I am Archangel Raphael. I will be responsible for your transcendence." The Archangel spoke with a clear, imposing voice.

"Erm... err..." Michael was baffled "my... what?"

"I'll take care of him from here soldier, you are dismissed." Raphael directed his speech at the other angel, who bowed in place and turned to leave without looking back. "You haven't need to worry, Michael. I understand this must all be very confusing. It will all become clear in a moment. Just come closer, child."

"Come closer?" Confusion bridled Michael's mind, rendering him unable to even know how to react "How is that going to help me understand any?"

Michael was overawed by a sense of displacement when the Archangel touched an open palm to his forehead. In that moment his line of thought was completely shattered, his mind stunned by the amount of information it was receiving. He was having visions, countless, boundless and all-encompassing visions of the history of all of mankind, and before that, of the Angels themselves. Then of the Demons, and of how they had come to be, born from God's kin itself, but forever banished from the Holy Realm.

No, not visions... they were memories. Somehow he was remembering century after century, millennia of history and events, as if he had lived it all himself. Even through the thick layer of information flowing into his consciousness, Michael could also feel his body changing, mutating, becoming something else other than human. All of his muscles seemed to be contracting, his whole physical structure altering itself, somehow becoming denser, stronger. And his back... he could feel his bones shattering and separating, and then reforming themselves, as two members sprouted from his back enveloped in light. Muscles, sinews, veins, layers of skin and finally feathers, sprouting from the skin, were formed, giving birth to a pair of pure white wings. When the strangely painless process was finished Michael was no longer himself.

The archangel withdrew his hand from Michael's forehead "How do you feel?" He spoke slowly, giving Michael's mind the time it needed to process everything "You should now understand everything as it is. Humans were made from our very own essence. The transcendence shall have made available all the memories previously locked away in your mind." Raphael's speech was lenient, but concise "You are no longer a part of humanity and you are to put aside anything and everything from your past life. This is the role you are meant to fulfill in our Father's will. I am sure it is all clear to you now, is it not so?"

Michael's fractured mind slowly but steadily adjusted. It was as if there were two separate consciences within his one mind. He still retained all of his human memories and feelings, but the overpowering angelic entity that he had become quickly repressed that part of him. An uncontrollable sense of loyalty towards his heavenly nature took dominion over all of his senses, numbing whatever else he might feel. The universe, and life itself, had, in a matter of seconds, taken on a whole new meaning. What had once seemed of the utmost importance, now came as an almost forgettable runner-up to

his inborn duties as a soldier in Heaven's army: to follow the archangel's commands, without question.

"I am overjoyed to be able to serve our Father's will." His voice at first had sounded alien even to himself. The words had no meaning and the shapes outlined by his lips as he spoke them were nonsensical. Only then did he realize that he was speaking in the ancient Holy Language, just as the archangel had in his last words "What exactly am I required to do, my lord? It seems the situation is not quite as clear as our sister had told me earlier..."

"You are to bring us Ryo. We are giving you a chance you most certainly can appreciate, to save your friend from eternal damnation." Raphael made a slight pause, waiting for any possible doubt to creep into Michael's face. Satisfied that his newly awakened soldier seemed intent on listening to the details of his mission, he retook his speech "As you witnessed firsthand from the soldier who sought you out, you can regain a human appearance easily by creating an optical illusion. You know Ryo better than anyone, if there is any chance that he can be approached and brought to our side, you are our best hope of achieving this."

"But... is this really possible? I mean... Ryo..."

"It is not your place to question the details of your mission. Our Father's will is absolute, and it will be carried out. This is all you have to know. It is Ryo's only chance of survival, so try your best. If you fail, you are to report back. In the event of that outcome, everything and everyone around this matter will be erased."

The archangel's words, though harsh and hurtful on Michael's human mind, were indeed unquestionable in his newly born angelic conscience. He would follow them through to the end, regardless of anything and everything else "... Very well, I understand, my lord."

Chapter 9:

«Heaven? »

Ryo woke up. As he opened his eyes, they slowly adjusted to the soothing light “*What is this place?*” Beautifully clear blue skies spread out before him, while below them a green grass field span as far as his eyes could see. The soft light of the sun bathed the landscape in a sensational dream-like glow. There were no living creatures in sight. It appeared as though nothing could disturb the fantastically peaceful and calm scenery Ryo’s eyes were witnessing “*Am I dead?*” Were these the meadows of Heaven? Could it be that he was really in Paradise? Was there really such a thing?

As he took a few steps forward, Ryo became aware of the small animals around him. Where there was initially nothing except for his own presence, now he could *feel* dozens of creatures, their feeble – almost unnoticeable – auras becoming gradually and increasingly more vivid. Small and slimy earthworms burrowed beneath the grass and frigid dark scarabs walked amidst it. Enchanting butterflies, dragonflies and other small insects hovered around and there were black and white, fluffy rabbits hopping here and there, peacefully feeding on that same grass... it summed up to the very definition of *natural*. And he could feel it all, as if he was at the center, one with everything.

Ryo was absently gazing at the ground, trying to give an image to the multiple presences he was somehow sensing, and his own feet suddenly stood out, clearly out of harmony with the rest of the picture. He seemed to be wearing some kind of strange black boots he had never before laid eyes on. Now that he noticed it, his whole attire had changed. He was wearing ragged dark clothes and he had a unique Japanese sword strapped at his waist. It looked like a very ancient and long samurai katana. An eerie light was emanating from the pommel and the complex metallic designs that

covered the scabbard shone golden under the sunlight. Somehow, and for a reason unknown to his conscious mind, he was sure a picture would materialize from those designs if he admired the weapon in its full glory for long enough.

His hands looked even stranger than he last remembered noticing. They seemed older, and had gained an inhuman color. His skin was now a marmoreal white, with a preternatural blue tint, and his fingernails had darkened, and become edged. They felt hard, almost resembling an animal's claws. He wondered how his face looked... but did it really matter? After all, he was dead... just a few moments ago he was falling down from the castle tower, and now he was in a peaceful and magical-looking place like this. There was no other conceivable answer to this conundrum...

But out of nowhere, Ryo's mind was assaulted by an alarming sensation of dread. He started feeling numerous other presences, strong and intense ones, all heading towards him at an impressively fast rate. He looked around himself, confused and startled. Shadows began engulfing the ground. There was something passing over him. He looked skyward, but could discern nothing but multiple umbral outlines rapidly moving through the sun's dazzling light. Whatever they were, all the creatures started their descent and landed about five hundred feet away from him. They all shone brightly under the sunlight. Winged creatures, all wearing golden metallic armor and snow-white clothes "*Angels!?*"

Once on the floor, forming perfectly ordered rows, they remained still for a long moment. Ryo wondered what might be happening. All at the same time, and without any sort of order or vocal command, the creatures readied their weapons, and again stopped, quietly facing Ryo's direction. If he was in Heaven why would there be any need for armor and weapons at all?

A few instants later the creatures all started walking towards him. And just like that, his feet were moving as well. Unable to explain it, he discovered he was no longer in control of his own body. His legs were being driven by something other than his will. He could control none of his actions; it was as if auto-pilot had kicked in, and he was nothing more than a passenger, sitting in the driver's seat.

As he slowly got closer to the army, the creatures' physical traits became clearer: he was, in actuality, facing what appeared to be Angelic warriors. They looked human, for the most part, but they all had majestic white wings on their backs, and they were all wearing beautiful golden and platinum armor over pure-white vests. Some of them held small and round golden shields, and on the opposite hand a medium length golden sword, while others had varied weapons, ranging from long swords to small daggers, as well as axes and pole arms. They were walking closer, by the step, towards him, at a faster pace as each moment went by.

With no control over his body, Ryo was now only watching the events unfold. As he got to about one hundred feet from the angels, slowly keeping his pace, he could see the army starting to run towards him. The frontline warriors opened their wings and suddenly rose off the ground. A brief moment was all that it took for them to be upon Ryo: one after the other, they flew past him, flashing their swords, drawing inhumanly fast slashes that would have cut his head off in a single swoop. But just as quickly and skillfully as it seemed they were slashing at him, so was he effortlessly evading their strikes. He got past all the warriors of the first line of attack, swiftly swaying left or right with supernatural speed, easily avoiding the assaults thrown at him, and neared the army's main force. His adversaries were ready and willing to attack him head on.

He had no idea what was going on. Why couldn't he control his own body? And why the hell would these angels be attacking him? Even though in the moments that he did manage to catch a glimpse of their blank-eyed

faces he witnessed the rage they felt towards him, he was somehow not afraid. The whole scene was utterly unexpected and incomprehensible, but for some reason it felt like it was where he should be. Where he needed to be, and even where he wanted – for a motive he was altogether unaware of – to be.

Ryo felt himself increase his speed and take on a lower stance, closer to the ground. His right hand reached for the hilt of his katana, strapped by the left side of his waist. He was going to engage an army, in battle, alone. Armed with a sword. Since when could he even handle a katana? Maneuvering a huge Japanese sword was a far cry from his years of karate training. He was going to die... again.

As soon as the first angel came upon him, swinging a great axe towards his head, Ryo felt his right arm move, together with a tension increase in his left hip, and a lightning fast flash followed. Time seemed to have stopped flowing then. The strong-willed look on the angel's fully white eyes remained locked on Ryo's own gaze. The warrior's shouting voice echoed loudly in Ryo's ears at the continuous sound of ruffling feathers. An instant later, everything was painted crimson, and there was no longer an angel right in his face, striking down upon him... instead, all he could see was the creature's body torn in two, momentarily suspended in the air. A clean diagonal cut had cleaved its torso in two pieces, sending the upper half flying, as the lower one fell to its knees, convulsing in slow motion.

He had killed the angel, mercilessly, and without a moment's hesitation. It had not been hard – physically, or mentally – either. In his mind, he now realized – even if had no idea why, or even how he knew this – these creatures were nothing more than his enemies. They deserved what they were getting. Two more angels dashed in from the sides, and Ryo felt himself bolt forward, between the two halves of the still falling corpse, evading both of the other creatures' attacks. There was no time for idle pondering. Suddenly turning back on his right side, he felt his whole body

tighten, and his feet forcing themselves on opposite directions on the ground. Taking full advantage of the momentum of his movement, he swung his sword. Feather, muscle, bone, and even metal... it all split apart, and, with one single slash, both angels' heads had jumped right off their shoulders. The lifeless bodies fell to the ground and with a sudden push he was rising rapidly into the sky, in a jump so high in altitude that it actually felt like flying.

Ryo could see all of the angels below him rushing towards where he had been just a moment before, a couple of them missing their attacks for but fractions of a second. The view was chaotic. Sunrays reflected countless shimmering lights back at his eyes, making it difficult for him to be aware of exactly how large a force he was facing, but he was sure to be outnumbered by at least twenty to one. And the bulk of the army would soon be upon him once again. High in the air, two presences closed in at vertiginous speed. He had forgotten the angels who'd gone airborne. But, fortunately for him, whoever or whatever was in command had not. His sword was raised defensively, and the angels' simultaneous strikes hit the blade with immense force, propelling him far away. He strained to regain control over his inertia, before he released an outburst of energy upwards, gaining the impulsion needed to start descending. Dazed by the sheer velocity at which the events were unfolding, Ryo could do nothing but try to take in everything that was happening all around him as he dropped, head-first, at an insane speed, towards the battlefield.

His sword was position alongside his body, held with both arms. As soon as he got close to ground level, right above an opponent's head, he delivered an extremely fast vertical slash, quickly twisted sideways and somehow landed safely on his hands and feet, sprawled right next to his opponent. Blood gushed everywhere. The angel's body had been split in two, from the middle of his forehead to his crotch. The dismantled armor

pieces fell off first, followed closely by both halves of the exanimate creature, which made a sickening thump when they hit the dirt.

Three other opponents turned back towards Ryo, surprised by his presence in their midst. They were too late to even raise their shields: three quick slashes – one for each – were all it took to render them lifeless. The tip of his katana's edge still rested on the ground, where the arc of his last strike had ended, when Ryo's mind sensed another creature, this one a female warrior, coming from behind him with both arms raised high, holding a thick broadsword. He quickly turned and delivered a two-handed upwards slash. Her own arms, separated from her body and still holding the golden sword, her blood pouring lavishly into the air and showering her world: this was the last image the angel would see, before she was sent into oblivion.

Severed body parts, blood-stained feathers, the screams of the dying, their faces and their hollow eyes. Ryo was dazed, transfixed by the sheer amount of bloodshed and raw gore. He was shocked by how easily he could take these creature's lives. They were like lambs to the slaughter, hunting after him, attacking him, blindly pursuing his death, unaware that they were actually – and somehow – nothing more than easy prey. But he was moving again, no more than a second lost before he'd sheathed his katana and taken a swift leap towards his enemies. The nearest creature reacted to his advance and raised its golden shield to protect itself. Ryo quickly advanced his right leg and, using the drive achieved by briskly unsheathing his weapon, he cut right through shield and breastplate, carving a long ragged crevice on the angel's torso.

As he recovered his stance from the attack, a second warrior appeared from behind the one Ryo had just slain. This angel's long spear was already thrusting towards Ryo's neck. With a quick movement he lowered his stance just enough to feel the air rushing over his head and the weapon's bladed head straying amidst his hair, then suddenly strained his body to

quickly raise himself back up, leaving him right in front of his opponent, who was completely open from his missed onset. Too close to use his sword, Ryo felt himself grab the angel's body in a deathly constricting grip. He was horrified when he felt his mouth open, and terrified by watching himself, in first-person view, ferociously bite down on the angel's neck. A stream of blood came gushing from the ripped veins and torn tissue. He could feel it flowing freely into his mouth and down his throat, its bitter taste overflowing his senses.

Completely stunned by what he was experiencing, Ryo felt the muscles in his jaw tighten even more and, with a sudden pull, half of his opponent's throat was completely ripped off. The angel stumbled back, screaming in pain, trying to hold his neck in place, blood spraying everywhere. Ryo spit out a mouthful of flesh as he watched the creature drop to its knees, life seeping from its body. He felt a kind of vertigo sensation as his muscles tightened, and he seemed to become steadier, more alert and focused, his wasted strength returned to him, as if he had replenished his energy resources. The dying creature's flesh was like butter beneath the swing of one final slash of his sword.

Behind the fallen creature's body, four other enemies approached, rapidly running at Ryo, behind them six or seven more. There seemed to be no end to them. For each one he put down, two more came into view. But would that really make a difference? The angelic warriors were clearly outmatched by whoever they were fighting – yes, because by then, Ryo was becoming convinced he was not really himself. He sheathed his sword once again, ready to engage, but was surprised by a flying attacker, who fell upon him, tackling him to the ground. It was the first time he had been one step behind in this battle, and already worry had crept back into his mind, erasing the relevance of questioning his identity.

Amidst broken leaves of grass and dead bodies – the smell of each and the smell of both creating a disturbing dichotomy of sensations – Ryo was

now looking up, his opponent on top of him, a savage and brutal look ravaging her seemingly delicate feminine facial features. She was ready to impale him with a small sword, held two-handedly. Her fingers were fully white with pressure around the weapon's hilt and her wings all tensed up above her. As the weapon was coming down upon his throat, Ryo was sure it would finally be his end. Instead, he felt his hands move, and with a sharp striking pain, he realized the sword had been stopped. He had grabbed the blade right as it was coming down. Blood sprayed into the air around his hands, spilling from deep cuts in his fingers and palms, and dripping onto his face. The warrior struggled to force the sword down, her teeth locked in an angry grimace. The blade's edge cut deeper into Ryo's flesh, scraping the bone of his right middle finger – a sensation which would leave a long-lasting scar in his mind – but it did not move an inch further. He felt his entire body's energy concentrating around his hands, and suddenly a burst of light engulfed them. Sparks rushed viciously along the blade to the winged woman's hands and she was stunned by an intense electrical shock. Her whole body tensed up, her wings completely extended in convulsive contractions. Ryo took the weapon from her quivering hands and threw it away quickly, before grabbing her neck with one hand and the side of her head with the other. With a strong brisk movement, her spine snapped like a twig under the pressure of his bloody grasp.

The awful bone-cracking sound reverberated deep into Ryo's ears. His mind was reeling from the intense pain in his hands, and that loud popping sound seemed to have rendered everything around him mute. The female angel lie inert on top of him, a dead weight. He could feel numerous presences rapidly closing in, and their collective mind screamed out loud, demanding his death. He would have gladly given it to them. He would have stayed there, waiting for them to come and bring him eternal sleep. Had he jumped off the highest tower of a castle in search of release, only to find himself a marionette in the midst of an atrocious battle, forced to

witness gruesome deaths, one after another, at his own hands? No, he would have no more of it.

But the unknown puppeteer was not yet through. Ryo's body pushed the angel aside with little effort, and swiftly arose. Anywhere he looked, there was the face of an enemy, determined to fell him. Over a dozen angelic warriors surrounded him, coming even from the sky, obscuring his view of anything, and everything else. He felt all the muscles in his body – some of these muscles he did not even know he had – contracting with extreme strain. He was recoiling on himself, wrapping his arms around his own body, tensing up, spreading and arching his legs. His hands went, with slow intensity, from being furiously clutched around his own twitching arms to clasp into blood-soaked fists. His clawed nails dug deep into his own flesh and he gradually felt the energy surge draining him as his body tightened, the temperature around him rapidly increasing. His jaw was clenched so hard he could hear his teeth grinding and his jaw bones creaking.

The enemy was nearly upon him when Ryo's body quickly stretched out and released the immense pressure of the energy gathered within him. His eyes had been shut tight. When they opened, wildfire consumed everything in sight. A massive outburst of scorching flames erupted all around Ryo, and in the blink of an eye spread all across the field with a ferocious inevitability and all-consuming destructiveness that overcome Mother Nature itself. He could smell the burning flesh as the creatures screamed in agony, their wings being reduced to searing bones, their feathers incinerated, their armors melting within the heat of the inferno enveloping them. The flames generated by Ryo's own energy had died out in a matter of seconds, but the devastation left behind would endure. Slowly, and painfully, the blazing warriors succumbed, and nothing was left of the former angelic army. Ryo was exhausted from the energy drain.

The view in front of his eyes was astoundingly disturbing... before him was no longer the green field of grass beneath peaceful blue skies that had enchanted him so. In its stead, a tide of dead bodies had washed up, bringing with it the stench of death. The grass and ground were charred as far as the eye could see, blood and body parts scattered everywhere, and at the center of a monstrous black crater stood Ryo, surrounded by a veil of burning carcasses. He had done all of this. He had forever scarred that patch of Heaven. But the angels had attacked him first. He had only been defending himself. In fact, he had done nothing else besides watching this whole crisis unfold before his eyes. Despite knowing he had not been in control, Ryo could feel the rage as if it was his own. The thirst for blood – for... revenge? – which had now been quenched. For whatever reason, he felt those creatures had brought that heinous end upon themselves.

But, how did he know this? Why would the angels deserve to die? And why would *he* have killed them? None of it made any sense... *“Who the hell am I right now, and what the fuck’s going on here?!”*

But all of a sudden Ryo wasn’t looking at that horrifying picture anymore... he wasn’t looking at anything at all. There was only darkness and silence. Not for long, though. The sounds of a fight slowly emerged, coming from far, far away... metallic weapons clashing together repeatedly and loud footsteps echoing through the silence, shattering it. Muffled grunts. Ryo started regaining his senses, slowly able to control his eyelids. The sounds grew louder. The blurry outlines of two shadows battling only a few feet ahead came into view.

Suddenly one of the warriors was toppled and fell towards where Ryo sat. The attacker came dashing after him without hesitation. Startled out of his mind, his previously invincible self long gone from his memory, Ryo stood and tried to get away. Turning around, he tripped over his own two feet and took a dive right back to the ground. He looked over his shoulder, completely ignoring the scrapes and bruises on his hands and knees, as he

crawled vigorously for his life. At what could arguably be considered safe distance, he allowed his morbid curiosity to be satisfied: one of the two warriors engaged in battle seemed to resemble in every aspect the angels he was fighting just moments ago, in what was probably the most life-like dream ever. The other creature though, was something else. It had black wings on its back, and a grimmer, darker appearance. Although it resembled a man, as well as the other one did, its skin had a hauntingly pale tone and the short hair that grew around the two twisted horns on its head was completely white.

But Ryo wasn't able to see much more before the battle came to an abrupt end. For no more than a full second, an extremely bright light flared from the angel's uplifted hands, and the world's forms and colors and motions were taken away, leaving Taste, Smell, Touch and Hearing short of one brother. Ryo fumbled farther away, nervously groping at the ground beneath his back with bare hands. The infinite span of over half a minute elapsed before Sight laboriously found its way back to its brothers in arms. By then, Hearing had already told Ryo the story of a sword that had been projected violently against the ground with a loud metallic scream, and of the aggressive sounds of active combat that had passed their message along to the sinister gurgling and flapping that could now be heard. Touch had made Ryo aware of the gusts of wind created by nervously flaying feathers, and both Smell and Taste had sung hymns of bloody metal in the air.

Once Sight had returned, already one warrior kneeled before the other. Seen from its back, the dark creature looked helpless. Its wings flapped wildly as the angel pushed his thin sword deeper into its chest and restrained it to the ground. Blood dripped from the tip of the sword to a pool accumulating on the concrete floor. Drop by drop, Ryo could sense the dying warrior's presence fading away, while the angel's remained steadfast. Moments later, it was gone.

Ryo was alone with the angelic creature. Was he being saved by an angel, or was he going to die at the hands of one? Would he suffer the same fate as that other creature did? Amidst all the anxiety swimming in his mind, these questions, along with the sense of utter helplessness and confusion, were drowning every last one of Ryo's thoughts, rendering him unable to even continue trying to escape, even though human nature would have him do just that in such a situation.

Chapter 10:

«Angels and Demons»

Standing tall and majestic over Ryo, was that imposing winged figure. For what seemed like eternity, the angel just stood there, looking straight down at him... what could be going through the creature's mind? Unable to get up and run, or even unknowing if he should, Ryo remained frozen in place. He stared at the winged warrior's face, too dazed to even remember fear. Somehow, there was a cryptic sense of familiarity. His blank eyes, although infused with very little expression of humanity, were not completely void of emotions. They gave off an aura of sadness and... doubt? *"What is this? What's it staring at me for?! Is it feeling... pity? Fuck..."*

"Hey!" Ryo snapped. The frustration filling his heart took over and words tumbled from his lips "Just get it over with! Whatever it is you're here to do... just **do it!** I don't need your pity!"

The angel slowly sheathed his sword in silence, looking at the floor. Ryo went on, speaking in a rushed tone "Did you just save me? Or are you here to kill me?!" His speech was hastened and riddled with confusion. He spoke out loud to himself, amidst his sentences towards the creature in front of him "Of course you are... why would God wanna save me?... Well... after all that's happened, **just kill me already!**" Ryo was screaming at the top of his lungs. Noticing that the warrior remained unmoved, he slowed down "I don't have anything left to live for anyway! I wish you'd just let me fall!"

On that instant, something changed in the angel's facial expression. With eyes open wider and eyebrows raised as if in surprise, the creature looked at Ryo, parting its lips. No words came out.

"Well?! What are you waiting for, damn you?!" Ryo insisted.

“What about... Karin?” The angel’s voice was finally heard, and it sounded inexplicably familiar to Ryo “And your... parents...”

“What *about* them?” Ryo let his eyes drop to the floor for an instant, but quickly raised his head again “They’re all *dead*! Just like *I* should be!”

“Don’t you want to avenge them?” The angel sounded somewhat unsure “Make the demons pay... for their deaths?”

Ryo was taken aback “Demons?!”

“Yes. *They* are the cause of all of this. If it wasn’t for *their* existence, everyone would still be living their regular lives...” The winged warrior spoke with certainty now. The apparent truth in his words fuelled his voice “None of this would ever have happened... *no one* would have died.” Ryo remained in silence “If you come with me, we can give you the chance to have your revenge. You can help us rid the world of their species. You can bring rest to your soul.”

Ryo had no idea what to think of what he was hearing “Why should I believe any of this?” He questioned, reluctantly “Why would... *demons* kill Karin... and my parents?” He did not know if he even wanted to speak his next words “And... Mike...?”

Briefly, a look of deep sadness surfaced on the angel’s face, only to vanish as quickly as it had been exposed “Well, do you have anything else to believe in? You didn’t think God existed, but here I am, before you, a warrior in His army.” Ryo said nothing. The angel’s words had their weight. But how could he be convinced of such an estranged idea, just like that? “Do you have any reason *not* to believe me?” The warrior aimed to make his point as clear as possible “Do you prefer to remain here, and die, oblivious to everything? Or will you take your chance... and fulfill your destiny?”

It had, when put in such terms, become a much more transparent decision. Ryo had given up on life. He had lost any and all reasons to go on. And here was the chance, no matter how remote, that he could avenge

his parents. That he could avenge Karin. Could he really give that up? Would he not want that, from the bottom of his heart, were it really offered to him? "... How... would *I* be able to fight... demons?" He came to the realization that he *wanted* to believe what he was being told.

"You don't have to worry about that, for now. All you need to consider is if you want to do it, or not." The angel spoke in a tempting tone, making an effort to give Ryo some much needed reassurance.

"Can you... tell me-" A faint glimmer of resolve seemed to sparkle in Ryo's tired eyes "Do you know which one did it?" He stared directly into the angel's gaze "Which demon killed them?"

"You will come to know that, eventually." The angel answered, after a short moment of silent reticence.

Ryo realized he needed to know, if he was to keep on going. If he was to somehow try and move on with some sort of life. No matter how scared he was of the answer he might get, he needed to ask the question "What about... Mike... was he killed as well?"

"Michael..." The winged creature seemed to let the name resonate for an instant "He... is no longer among the humans."

The detached look on Ryo's face showed that he had already expected that answer. The sheer absurdity that had taken control of his reality, completely twisting his life upside down in a matter of days, had propelled his conscience into a very dark corner of his mind. A place in which his worst fears, no matter how unlikely, could – and probably would – take form. A very real form "Very well." Ryo stood up, languidly, numbly. He could either give up once and for all, or decide to push forward, and fight the source of those fears "I'll go with you." Without even realizing he had weighed his options, he had decided which of the two routes to take.

The angelic warrior looked deeply relieved as he uttered his next words, very slowly "Thank you, Ryo." He was smiling placidly when he took an unannounced step forward. Ryo did not flinch.

His vision started blurring as soon as the angel's palm came into contact with his forehead, and in mere moments he had lost consciousness. It would seem he had found a reason to keep living, even if for just a while longer. The last thoughts on his mind were of his love for Karin, for his parents, and for Mike. If he really was being given this chance, he would not stop until they were avenged. He swore to himself, moments before allowing sleep to take over, that whoever was to blame for their deaths would pay with every last drop of blood in their system, and that he would not cease his search for revenge, for as long as he had breath. Even if that meant going through Heaven *and* Hell.

There were no dreams, no awareness of time or place, or of any sort of movement, whatsoever. There was nothing. Except for Karin's face, painfully fading away in the sight of his mind. When Ryo woke up, he found himself once more lying on soft grass, sunlight warming his skin. Metal clashing against metal was quickly identified by his drowsy mind as the sound he was hearing in the background. Alarmed, he quickly opened his eyes and sat up. He looked around aimlessly, nervously. He was in an unfamiliar place, but – thank god – it wasn't that doomed grass field, and his hands and clothes hadn't changed. Relief automatically swept over his mind, and only then did he raise his eyes for a second take on his surroundings. Finally, the outlandishness of what he was witnessing hit him.

Slowly, and dumbfounded, he got to his feet, and stared in awe as several winged creatures battled each other, one on one, in what looked more like training bouts than actual fights. As he looked around, he noticed the curtain wall to his left, standing over ten feet tall, delineating or maybe protecting the huge landscape in front of him. He took a step back, and hit solid stone. The wall stretched out to his right, and looking straight ahead he could not see the opposite ends. The bright green grass span as distantly as he could scope, in a flawlessly level field. No inkling of elevation or

depression could be seen in the terrain. It looked so perfectly even, that it seemed unnatural *“Where... in the world... am I?!”*

In any direction Ryo looked, a fierce battle between two winged warriors developed. He could feel hundreds of presences in that vast field, becoming stronger and progressively weakened as they exhausted their energy and exerted themselves battling each other. His mind had, somehow, already become used to the concept of sensing another creature’s presence. It seemed these beings had such powerful auras, that they stood out amidst everything else in his brain. Could this mean that they had been following him on those past instances when he remembered feeling this same sensation? He stood there for a few minutes looking around, witnessing one incredible and superhuman feat after another. Events that he would never think to even be remotely possible, had he not been witnessing them with his own set of eyes.

Besides the inhuman force and swiftness with which all the angels swung their weapons and moved their bodies, Ryo saw some particularly unbelievable maneuvers. One of the warriors jumped away from his opponent’s attack and, while in the air, shot electricity from his fingers. Another angel disappeared into thin air to evade an onset, and immediately reappeared behind her adversary. A third one created a bright outburst of energy all around his body, which knocked back the hulking warrior who had, until then, been holding him in a stranglehold.

Even if immersed in the sheer intensity of these sparring bouts, Ryo still could not keep his mind away from the mystifying premise that he would have dreamt up that gruesome battle, before he even imagined all of this could exist. Even more worrying and unfathomable would be the idea that it had not been a dream at all.

“Hello, my boy.” A deep, old-sounding voice startled Ryo out of his brainstorming. The figure of a brown-haired angel, dressed in fully white robes, and brandishing a long straight beard tied in a knot at the end, had

approached him, undetected by any of his senses. The winged man resembled a monk, or some sort of scribe. A man of studies, and not a warrior, like the others Ryo had seen “My apologies, it was not my intention to startle you.” The angel spoke softly, placing a hand on Ryo’s shoulder “I am here to answer any questions you may have. I take it you must be overwhelmed by all that you are witnessing.”

Ryo only nodded. His eyebrows went up as he took a deep breath “How is this possible?” He finally questioned “Are you all really... angels?”

“Yes. That would be correct. What you see before you is a part of Heaven’s holy army. Constantly training to maintain and improve their strength, these soldiers’ sole purpose in life is to carry out God’s will, as best they can.”

“But... God... angels... how can all of this be real?” The disbelief in Ryo’s voice was tangible.

“This is as real as anything will ever be, child. God is the beginning and the end of everything. Our Lord created all that exists; the universe and every single life form that populates it. We are the descendants of the first born sons of God.” The angel’s words were absolute truth. There was no hint of doubt. No sign of deception. No clue, at all, that it could be a farce.

Question after question swarmed Ryo’s mind. Presented with the chance to acquire answers countless men would kill for, to possibly discover the true meaning of life, to ascertain the actual origin of mankind, it surprised him that the need to know how to avenge his loved ones still came first “Demons... where do demons come from?”

“Demons were once angels.” The scribe seemed content with answering Ryo’s questions without hesitation “They challenged our Lord’s will and were banished from the Holy Realm and forever cast into darkness. Evil has no place here.”

“Holy Realm...” Ryo had a hard time taking that one in “So... we’re in Heaven?” The angel nodded, and Ryo, having no idea how he should feel

about that, did his best to set it aside in his mind “An angel that questions God’s will is turned into a demon...” He thought out loud, processing what he had heard.

“Doubt, indecision, questioning. All of these bring about confusion, opening our minds to unwelcome and tainted thoughts.” The brown-haired being explained “Evil must be kept at bay, and weakness before it cannot be tolerated. Any and every worthy angel of the Lord’s army has this in his mind above anything else.”

It sounded somehow like a dictatorship to Ryo. But was it even his place to consider questioning such a thing? Again, his ghosts crept back into his mind, pushing everything into second row. He looked deep into the angel’s white eyes “Why does God allow such bad things to happen to his own children?” His tone was filled with indignation, and he meant it to.

“Humanity was born millennia after we were brought into existence, just as the ecosystem that populates the earth, which has ever since kept evolving on its own. What you may consider to be bad things may not be so at the eyes of our Father. Every single being has its purpose in life. When it is fulfilled, then that particular life has no more meaning. It therefore ceases to exist, one way or another. Death should not be seen as evil. As the end of each entity’s role, it is not good or bad... it just is. And there is nothing that can change that fact.”

“So, this really means that there is no free will. Everything has its destiny, and it will come to be, one way or the other...” Ryo declared his trouble in accepting what he was hearing.

“That is how the cycle of life is meant to be. Humans cannot – and should not – think of changing it.” The angel left no room for doubt on the matter, speaking with unquestionable finality.

“Why... was I chosen for this? Why would God decide that I deserved to have my revenge?” Ryo needed something that would help him believe.

A reason. An explanation “People die all the time. Everywhere, murderers and criminals walk free. Why is *my* life any different?”

“Every one of us has a role to play.” The bearded angel’s statement was plain. There was no hidden meaning “Yours is an important one. You will come to understand that, in time.”

“So this was always my fate...” Ryo was looking at the ground “I was never supposed to live happily with my family. With Mike and Karin.” He looked just as he felt: like a person struck with a life-changing realization “They were already dead... I just didn’t know it.”

“There are certain circumstances that you cannot understand,” The angel interjected, but without dismissing Ryo’s conclusion “but yes, all of your loved ones fulfilled their parts. You need only consider that everything happened so that you can be here. To help stop the demons from corrupting any more helpless souls.”

“*So... they died because of me?*” Ryo’s eyes were locked on the ground. For a long time, he did not blink “None of this... really matters anymore.” He finally stated out loud “It won’t change what’s happened.” Rationalization. It was his only chance. And, even if unwittingly, his mind had taken it “I didn’t agree to come here to learn the meaning of life.” He was done with the angel’s answers. An icy cold look overtook his face “I came here because I was told that I would have revenge. How am I supposed to fight demons? I’ve seen what all of your soldiers can do, but *I* am obviously nothing like you...”

The angel smiled with satisfaction “You, my boy, will be trained in the art of battle. When we are finished with you, I guarantee that you will be able to kill all the demons you want to. Revenge *will* be yours...” The bearded creature let its words hang in the air, focusing its empty gaze on Ryo “but first, you will have to pledge yourself to God’s will.”

Ryo did not care. He nodded, absently “I understand.”

“Do you swear before our Almighty Father to follow the mission of exterminating all demons to the last extent of your capacities?” The angel’s manner was ceremonial, his words almost reverent.

“I do...” Ryo answered, with some reluctance.

“Very well.” The angel looked pleased “Only when you are ready, will you have what you seek. Tomorrow you will begin your training. Today, you should go rest up, ready yourself for what comes next.” He advised “I will accompany you to your sleeping quarters.”

A huge door – somewhere along the infinite-looking wall to Ryo’s right – led the way into a long hallway. The floor, walls and ceiling were all made of what appeared to be pure white marble. Lustrous red silk tapestry covered the floor while golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The walls were lined with paintings as tall as five feet, depicting several images of angelic warriors, and also what appeared to be demonic creatures falling from the heavens. Ryo followed the angel to a smaller door, located about halfway through the hallway that led into a long descending stairwell. At the bottom, a wooden door opened the way to a smaller underground corridor. Lit only by a few wall-mounted candlesticks, which painted the low stone ceiling and walls in ghostly flickering light, it looked like an impossibly long passageway into the catacombs of an ancient castle.

Doors lined the walls on both sides, each pair facing one another, perfectly alternated by the candelabra, giving Ryo the impression he was walking into a reflection, trapped inside a series of countless mirrors. After a couple thresholds, the angel stopped and opened a small door to his left. A faint white light came to life at a flicker of his hand, scaring away the thick darkness that engulfed the room. Upon entering, he called Ryo in “Here we are. These will be your sleeping quarters. You already have your training vests ready for you, on that stand.”

“Okay.” Ryo answered without much consideration, as he looked around, studying his surroundings. The room was small and low-ceilinged,

almost claustrophobic. There was a large square bed at the center, taking up most of the space available, and a wall mounted stand on the farther left corner. White vests hung from it. Besides the other door on that same wall, and the strange small round structure hanging from the ceiling – from whence shone the white light – the room was bare.

“There is a small room with a water surge through that door, so that you can cleanse your body from the dirt of everyday training.” The angel pointed to the door on the side wall of the room “Here, take this bracelet.”

Ryo stared blankly at the scribe’s hand “What for?”

“It is enchanted with an open link to the life stream. While you wear it, your body will be supplied with the energy resources it needs to sustain itself. You will have no need for any kind of physical nourishment.” The angel explained, as he handed it over. It was a thick metallic bangle, with what appeared to be shining gold wires imbued into its surface. After a strange initial tingling sensation, the object felt as if it was warming Ryo’s skin as he held it.

Ryo looked as if nothing could surprise him anymore “I see.” He placed the bracelet around his wrist and the golden designs seemed to traverse around the object, gleaming, until they locked in place and the bracelet somehow perfectly fit Ryo’s size.

“Well, I’ll leave you to rest. You will be called first thing in the morning, to begin your training.”

As soon as the door closed behind the winged creature, Ryo’s mind wandered back into thoughts of everyone he’d lost. It wasn’t long before the light source went out, and Ryo had no idea how to rekindle it. He did not pay it any attention either. All the information he’d been receiving, and the awe at everything he’d seen and heard had, at the time, managed to push the sadness and anger away. But now, alone once again with his thoughts, Ryo lay down on a bed in the middle of this small room, staring at an unseeable ceiling, but looking far beyond it. That day he swore to

himself that, before he died and left to be with Karin, his parents, and Mike again, he would first take it upon his hands to avenge their deaths. Whatever he had to do in order to get the strength he needed... He would do it.

Chapter 11:

«Vital Force»

Come next day, Ryo discovered he would be taken under the wing of Archangel Raphael. This being's powerful presence and imperial looks betrayed a fact that Ryo later came to acknowledge: he was the angels' ruler, their king maybe. Why their leader would be the one tutoring Ryo, he did not know. But it was of little importance, as long as he did the job.

Ryo was taught all about the basics behind using one's vital force to augment the body's physical conditions and the mind's spiritual awakening, in order to elevate oneself to a higher level of power. All those super-human feats he had seen the warriors perform had been done this way, it would seem.

An entity's vital force, according to the Archangel, is the Life God gave it. This essential energy, existing within and around everything in the universe, is also known as the life stream. By concentrating their energy into a certain part of their bodies, the Angels are capable of extraordinary feats, such as shooting lightning from their fingertips or creating fire from the palms of their hands, or even bending the space time continuum using their mental awareness, slowing down the flow of time.

Ryo was also told – as if he did not already know – that these warriors possessed an extremely high amount of energy within their bodies, hundreds of times that of a human's body. This was obviously the reason why humans could not do the things these creatures could. So this brought Ryo to the next thing he felt he needed to know: how or why *he* would be capable of harnessing greater amounts of energy, since he *was* only human.

It was then that he learned the reason behind the changes that his body had recently been going through. As stated by the Archangel, Ryo was able to use the life stream, to harness it, and perform the same type of exploits the angels could. But it came at a cost: every time he did so, his body

would degrade, undergo deep and irreversible changes, tightening the gap that separated him from physical death. Because he was consuming his own resources beyond their limit, in order to maintain itself, his soul would feed on his body, destroying it little by little. The Angels on the other hand, drained the energy they used from the abundant amounts of life stream on the Holy Realm, and from items such as the bracelet Ryo was now wearing, which were imbued with highly concentrated amounts of energy.

“So... how is it that you have any kind of problems fighting demons, when you have this clear advantage? Or do the demons have some kind of being providing them with infinite power as well?” Ryo asked, with a slightly ironical tense in his words “And why the hell am I able to use this energy like this? I’m only human...”

Raphael regarded Ryo with an annoyed expression “As I’ve taught you, the life stream is a part of our Almighty Father, so obviously it would be impossible for any other entity to provide it to anything or anyone. I would suggest you cut the sarcastic comments, and concentrate on learning your lessons properly, Ryo.”

“... You still haven’t answered my questions.” Ryo insisted, ignoring the archangel’s regard.

Raphael squinted ever so slightly, his white, empty eyes appearing to look at everything and at nothing at the same time “Do not presume that you will know more than that which you are supposed to. I personally welcomed you into our realm, and am going to great lengths to ensure your training, so you will know *what* I want you to know, *when* I want you to know it.” He paused in silence, sternly looking Ryo directly in the eyes, expecting him to remain silent. Satisfied that his student did not question further, the archangel gave an explanation to one of Ryo’s questions “A creature’s vital energy flows within their blood cells. By consuming our blood, the demons are able to recover their energy levels and augment them. The more blood a demon has consumed, the greater the extent to

which its demonic traits will be developed, as the curse spreads its corruption. You should know as of now, that if you encounter a demon who has a really monstrous appearance, then the creature has gorged on the blood of countless of our soldiers, and is undoubtedly a powerful enemy.”

“Oh...” Ryo was jolted by the realization that he had felt what the archangel was describing, in the dream he had experienced the day before. In it, at some part he had bitten and ripped open an angelic warrior’s neck, and as the creature’s blood flowed down his throat he could feel his body pulsing with increasing energy.

He remained in place, looking past Raphael into the void of nothingness, as his mind reeled with the inconceivable thought of how he could possibly had dreamt that up and of why he would have embodied a demon in his dreams, until the archangel interrupted his daydream “Well, this should be enough for today. Come tomorrow, you will begin your combat training.” Raphael declared before motioning a nearby soldier to accompany Ryo “You will be accompanied to the armory, so that the blacksmith can analyze you and choose the weapon better suited for you. After that go and rest up, the coming days will be quite exhausting, physically, as well as mentally.”

On the way to the blacksmith’s quarters, Ryo was fully immersed in his thoughts as he followed in the soldier’s footsteps *“So... can it be... did I really rewind time when I was about to be run over by that bus?! Did that really... happen? ... And so that would mean that the reason I survived that night, was because I somehow used my... vital force... to protect myself from whatever happened there... but how the hell can I do these things? What am I... supposed to be...?”*

Only when he bumped into the annoyed looking soldier, did Ryo realize they had arrived at their destination. The rhythmic sound of banging metal reverberated all along the walls around them, and Ryo was surprised for not having noticed it earlier. The winged soldier waved his hand, in indication

that Ryo should enter through the great wooden door, and turned to leave without uttering a word.

“Welcome, young one.” A strong, resonating voice spoke, as Ryo stepped over the threshold into the armory. The room’s stone walls were lined with every sort of weapon his imagination could ever make up, and many more. At the corner, near a grand, ancient-looking welding oven, stood a massive bearded being, dressed in what could be dirty old rags. The angel’s face and wings were fully covered in ash and coal residue, giving him a tired and worn out appearance.

“Archangel Raphael sent me...” Ryo stated, unsure of what he was supposed to do.

The blacksmith delivered another jaw-clenching blow, further intensifying the glow of incandescent metal on the blade of the long sword he held in place with a large welding clamp “Yes, I know exactly why you have come. Just lie down there, and relax.” He pointed to a diagonally inclined wooden table of sorts, before returning his attention to the sword. He turned the weapon over and inspected the metal closely as he spoke, absently “I’ll be analyzing your body structure and the way your mind reacts to different situations. This will allow me to ascertain what kind of weapon will fit you best.” Apparently satisfied with his work, the man slowly dipped the sword in a water filled tub. The water sizzled violently and steam quickly made its way up the walls to the strange round structure on the ceiling – which, besides appearing to have the same purpose as a chimney, in nothing resembled one, being totally enclosed instead of comprising an opening to the outside – as the weapon was slowly submerged “It will take a while. You should make yourself comfortable.”

Staring at the ceiling, while the blacksmith probed and scrutinized his mind, Ryo pondered on everything that he’d learned over this unending day. He also could not avoid recalling how everything around him had changed so drastically... how everyone was gone. He was completely

alone. The only thing left to live for was his thirst for revenge. The minutes dragged along as Ryo's view of the fiery-shadowed stone ceiling blurred out. He felt tired, drained. It had really been a very long day...

Before, this room had been enveloped in darkness, silence alone filling it walls. Now, light has forced it way in, by my hand. The door that previously blocked my path is broken asunder beside me. The freakishly tall shadow on the floor depicts a dark and distorted version of myself. The windows let in the moon's faint glow, and together with a strange and slow sobbing sound, they grant the room a foreboding and – for some reason – melancholic ambience “Do I know this place...?” A metallic, bitter sweet taste sips through and makes its way into my awareness. Some sort of warm fluid that's slowly dripping down my chin, already becoming dry and clotted on my lips... As I enter the room I notice a bright gleam coming from my right side... light is reflecting off the edge of a long sword I hold in my hand. It paints a ghostly slash in each of the room's walls. The reflection accompanies my movements, swaying, trembling, quivering with each step I take, as I walk further into the room. The feeble sobs continue, getting closer, growing into a soft crying echo. In the corner... there's a small shadow on the floor, shivering... “What is this? Where... am I?” As I take one step further I notice a mirror to my right... the horrible vision of two dark, empty eyes comes to life within the mirrored image. The crimson aura surrounding them shines fiercely with a deep-seated thirst for blood...

“Child... calm down... you're safe here... **HEY!** Get a grip, boy! Stand down, right now!”

Ryo opened his eyes at the sound of the blacksmith's shouting voice “Erg... huh? What the...?” He looked around himself, confused and perplexed. He realized he was still in the armory, no longer lying down, but instead standing right in the blacksmith's face, forcing him against a wall. Swords and shields were scattered around both their feet, and an upturned weapon rack was awkwardly reclined on its edge. The angel's eyes...

“Fear? Is he... afraid of me?” “What... happened? Was I... dreaming, just now?” Ryo stepped back, disconcerted.

The blacksmith made his way back behind his welding oven before replying. He was visibly nervous, trying hard to regain his calm “I suppose you were... I was reading you for some time, when you suddenly got on your feet, moved directly to that sword and proceeded to unsheathe it. It would appear you have chosen your own weapon...”

Only then did Ryo notice the extra weight on his right arm. He raised his hand and realized, in surprise, that he was holding a sword. Its long two handed grip and slightly curved edge perfectly resembled a Japanese katana’s. The weapon’s scabbard, lying on the floor next to him, was all white, with golden embroidery at the top and bottom tips. Ryo picked it up, and slowly sheathed the weapon, noticing the golden hilt, and the strong white fabric on the grip “So... I picked this weapon myself... while I was dreaming?” Ryo raised one eyebrows incredulously “Is that how this is supposed to go?”

“Well... normally I suggest the weapon and the soldier takes it. You would appear to be a special case...” The angel spoke with a mild hint of spite “Does it feel right?”

“Hum... its weight and size do feel comfortable...” Ryo answered, studying the weapon “but I have no idea how to use a sword properly, so how can I really tell?” He paused for a moment, and smirked “It’s very... bright... Do all of your vests and weapons really need to be white and gold?”

“That is not your place to question.” The blacksmith answered with a grunt. He pointed at the weapon as he continued “That sword is unique, it is the only one I made of its kind... you can have it, but you better take good care of it. Now begone, I have other matters to attend.”

“... Goodbye then.” Ryo replied as he left the room. *“More weird nightmares, huh? I guess I should’ve gotten used to them by now... a lot*

stranger things have been happening. Can't worry about dreams." Ryo went back to his sleeping quarters with his newly acquired weapon. The next day he would begin his real training; the one that would allow him to face the cause of all of his loved ones' suffering, and take it down.

Chapter 12:

«Stream of Tragedy»

[May 19th of 2013]

“Nina Stark Sutherland?! **The** Nina Stark? As in... The Shark?” Louis, an inspector from the Lemuris Police Department, sat at his desk in awe, speaking to his partner Tony.

“Yup. For some reason the L.A.P.D. Shark has apparently been asking for transfer to a small town. Peter’s been thinking of moving to L.A. and working in a bigger department. He says it will definitely be a big boost for his career.” Tony explained, also sounding stunned himself by what he was saying “I just received confirmation they both passed their preliminary and background evaluations and will be exchanging posts soon!”

Louis looked incredulous “But... what can possess such a successful detective to make her wanna come to a small town like ours?!”

“Well, I heard that since her husband passed away she hasn’t been the same...” Tony had taken a more serious tone of voice as he spoke “maybe she just wants some peace and quiet, away from all the gruesome murder investigations she’s been workin’ on?”

“Hummm... yeah I suppose that makes sense. I had no idea her husband had died... well, truth is that having such a big named agent here will surely bring respect to our department.” Louis remained silent for a moment, looking at his partner with thoughtful eyes, until he broadened a jesting grin and spoke lightly “And if she wants peace and quiet, she’ll sure have it! Nothin’ ever happens around here!”

Tony laughed slightly at the remark “She’ll have plenty of time to spend on paperwork though. Peter’s been slackin’ as hell! Have you seen the pile of case files on his desk?!”

Both partners broke into loud laughter as they joked about the situation, filling the otherwise silent and empty room.

“Yeah, I sure have! Poor thing, she’ll go from catching notorious serial killers left and right to running away from paper sheets!”

“Hahahah! Indeed, indeed... well, let’s at least give her a warm welcome when she gets here. The transfer’s due in little over a month.”

[June 2nd of 2013]

Good evening, dear friend.

It's been exactly 1 year and 11 months today that my love was taken from me. Keeping myself up through these past times has been, as you know, a nightmarish quest, and being able to keep my work unaffected... well, ultimately I suppose that having all these big cases show up, requiring all of my concentration, is probably what helped me keep my mind from constantly drowning in thoughts over Hugh's death... but I worry that Karin might feel I'm not there for her...

We hardly ever talk... a real talk I mean. I have no idea how she feels about her father's death... even after so much time, I still haven't been able to bring myself to discuss it with her... yes, I know I've been promising I would talk to her for some months now, but it will all soon change.

I finally got my transfer accepted. A small town called Lemuris... less work stress, more free time. I can't keep hiding from my own mind filling it with work, it's time I made peace with all that's happened and gave my daughter the support she deserves. In about a month I believe it'll all take a turn for the best!

Thank you for always being here... you're my only confidant... but this is also the last time I'm writing. I must leave all of this behind and start anew.

So long, dear diary.

[October 19th of 2013]

It's been a long time since I've written you anything. I know I said my goodbyes last time... but I'm all alone now. Right when everything seemed to be heading in a good direction, the remaining part of my heart was ripped away...

The very last talk I had with her... she was so vibrant... so joyful... she was going on a date with a boy she had met at school... Ryo... I never even got to meet him... I only saw him once, from the window, when they were leaving... but I'll never forget his face... it was the last time I saw my daughter alive.

Now I'm all alone... I had to find a new apartment, and move what little stuff I could salvage from the other one. They won't let me be a part of the investigation. The supposedly peaceful and quiet town I came to has turned into a hell hole. First the gruesome, unnatural incident that wrecked our entire block and led to... her death... and

then the kid, Ryo, who was the only survivor, lost both his parent under really strange circumstances... both found already dead in a burial-style position, on religious locations.

The night the boy found out about his parents' deaths was also the last time he was seen. It's been 3 days since he went missing...

I don't have anything else to live for, other than the truth... I have to find out what happened... I'm sure all of this is connected... but it's all so sketchy... I have to keep going. Right now Ryo is my only lead.

Goodbye for now, dear friend.

[October 21st of 2013]

I found Karin's diary today. Like mother like daughter... I know I shouldn't have read it. But I had to, not just to find out how she was feeling and what was going on in her life in these past months, but also to see if it could give me any kind of lead to what happened.

There was nothing there that could help my investigation. But it seems she was really falling for Ryo... she was in love... at least I know my daughter felt love once, before leaving this world... I felt relieved to know she didn't blame me for not giving her the support I should have, after Hugh's death. I miss her so much... both of them...

I'll find whoever did this to Karin, even if it takes me to the deepest recesses of Hell.

I gathered some info on Ryo. It seems he was a really quiet boy, always keeping to himself. The only person he really got along with was his best friend Michael Turner. The

next step is clear: it seems Michael and his family moved to Amberlin. Tomorrow I'm going to pay them a visit... see what Michael can tell me about Ryo and his possible whereabouts.

Write in you soon.

[October 22nd of 2013]

I feel like I'm descending deeper and deeper into a black hole... nothing leads anywhere. Only more questions arise, and never any answers.

Michael disappeared on the exact same day as Ryo. His parents have done all they can over the last week, with no results at all... not even one simple report of spotting someone with a description that matches one of the boys... Michael's parents seem to think the two boys ran away together... maybe they're right? But it doesn't feel right...

Ryo lost both his adoptive parents and the girl he was supposedly in love with, almost all at the same time... I wouldn't be surprised if he even tried to commit suicide... but Michael? Would he really run away from his home, and abandon his family to support his friend? And how would two teenagers be able to completely disappear without even being sighted by anyone at all?!

There's something else here... I'm sure all of these bizarre happenings are somehow linked to Karin's death. This can't all be just a series of random coincidences.

Or am I just seeing things where I want them to be? Can I really trust my own judgment right now?...

On a side note, Smith, from the department, found out I was following the case on my free time... he agreed not to let the captain know... maybe I've found a friend? I could really use one right now... any help would be welcome.

[October 24th of 2013]

It's been a week and still no news on the kids. I've searched all around for any kind of clues with no success... Creekside Street is beginning reconstruction. I managed to search the site thoroughly a few days ago, and just in time... the day after that they moved in there with the heavy machinery. Besides the bizarre circumstances I'd read about in the report, that indicated very strong seismic activity as well as some sort of electrical storm and temperature overload around the crater on the site, the only relevant thing I managed to find was physical proof of possible gunfire. My incompetent colleagues had not paid much attention to Ryo's report about being mugged because there was no actual proof. I found the overlooked charred remains of a handgun underneath some wreckage.

It seems the boy was really telling the truth about him and Karin being robbed... that would mean that out of the 4 bodies found at the center of the crater, 1 remains to be

identified, as the other 3 would be Karin and the 2 assailants. I've taken a look at the coroner's schedule... Smith said he knew someone who 'd lend him the key to the morgue... I'm going to sneak in today after the coroner gets off work, at midnight. I know enough about forensics to work my way around a few bodies in a night's work... there has to be something that can shed some light on all of this...

{October 25th of 2013}

I don't know what to make of it all... what can it mean? The 4th body... how did he miss this? Mediocrity is definitely the strongest feature in this department... upon a close and thorough analysis of the body I found... incredible facts... that I have no idea how to explain.

Most notably I found 2 strange protruding lumps on the back. Even though they are barely noticeable, due to the severe damage done by whatever happened that night, they are definitely there. I dug deeper and, underneath the flesh tissue I found small bone structures... there were extensions of the collarbones, which indicated the presence of 2 limbs attached to the back... if they were residual or really active members is impossible to determine, but their presence is beyond doubt!

On top of that, upon further examination to the dentition I found abnormally developed fangs where the canines

should be, as well as irregularities in teeth number, size and development.... Definitely not human dentition.

What sort of creature was this?! How my co-workers managed to overlook all of these facts is beyond my comprehension, but what they can mean is an even bigger mystery! Was this some kind of mutated aberration? Could it have been the cause of the incident? And if so, why is it dead? And how did Ryo manage to survive unscathed?

I collected some DNA and sent it to a friend from forensics in L.A. The results on the report identified Karin's body, and also the other two as known robbers with a record. The test was inconclusive on the 4th one... Later today I should have some accurate results...

I just got the call from Judy... definitely not human DNA. The string is unknown... it doesn't match any cataloged species...

[October 24 of 2013]

Days have gone by... haven't slept in over 72 hours... I can't stop my head from thinking... been over the details dozens of times and still I can't find a decent connection... something... anything at all that might help unravel some kind of answer... Smith has been a good friend over the past few days... I can tell he really wants to help me, and even though he's known me for so little time, he's gone to great lengths to take part in my fruitless quest...

[October 2012

How many days it been? I can feel my mind sleeping away... every time I close my eyes I'm haunted by my daughter's dead body... my head is exhausted... wasn't able to work properly today... I fired my gun on instinct during my patrol with Smith when a robber ran by us... hit on the leg... it seems it was just a kid... Smith tried covering for me, but couldn't let him take the blame. my badge and gun were taken from me. A leave of absence... and the chance of returning to the force was under condition that I attend a few appointments with the department shrink... I scheduled for tomorrow... I don't need a shrink I need answers!

I can feel the darkness calling me. sleep urging ~~my head is~~
~~going to explode~~ need to rest. ~~But~~ but my mind won't let
me the drugs they will help.

Karin. must find you.

there has t

Chapter 13:

«Harsh Months»

"You! What are you doing down here?! Do you have a death wish, traitor?"

"... I..."

"Hummm... Even after performing all of your horrible tasks like a faithful little dog, you were banished... He continues to use irony as his play tool, at every corner, does he not?"

"I just wanna die... please... please, free me from this curse..."

"Weakling! Thanks to you, humanity's greatest hope for freedom may be lost. I will not let you die until you have done your part in trying to set this right!"

"..."

"Besides, the fact that you retain your memories tells me you are worth more than I would give you credit for. Your force of will must be stronger than you even realize... Now, get on your feet. You are no longer his pet!"

Hours and days on end of exercises that served no other purpose than that of improving Ryo's speed, agility and flexibility, were what had awaited him in the coming weeks. This meant that, faced with multiple obstacles, he'd had to evade and get past all of them, while suffering the minimum injuries possible. It was a process of trial and error, and at first much more of error than of actual success. Bruises, cuts and gashes had soon become close friends with Ryo, close behind them frustration, in constant battle with his will to reach further. Each day he would expect to do better, and every day he would be wrong, because as his skills increased, so did the difficulty of his challenges. Eventually, to match Ryo's improving reflexes and physical performance, he had begun facing real opponents amidst his obstacle courses.

In certain situations, facing an opponent's direct attack, Ryo would have the reaction of unsheathing his weapon. Each and every time he would be punished with a series of physically draining exercises. The archangel was

extremely strict in his teachings, and, according to him, movement training did not in any way involve weapons defense or attack.

Ryo could not have imagined he would be pushed so far. Every day of each month he would feel as if he was completely exhausted, and in the evening he would find himself with the recurring thought that he wouldn't be able to withstand the coming morning's exercises. As he went to sleep and remembered everything that had happened he could not keep his tears from running down his face... he would remember Karin, and his parents, and Mike, and how they were all gone, and would never return... and as he did so, his will would always prove to have become stronger than the day before, and he would awaken ready for whatever lay ahead of him.

That he would reach so far, in so little time, would have seemed nothing more than a fantasy to Ryo's past self. In little over two months' time, he was going through all his exercises like a mathematician reviewing simple equations, overthrowing any randomized obstacle that got in his path, evading each attack that came at him, and whenever he felt like drawing his sword, he would ready it instead, but keep it sheathed, just as he had been instructed by the archangel. While at first Ryo could not see the use in this, he quickly grew aware of the effect this training was having on him: he had grown, so little time after he had begun, much more agile and significantly faster, with exceedingly sharper reflexes, and with a surprising knowledge of spacing and distance, which would allow him to easily predict where an enemy's attack would land and how he should evade it.

Even though Ryo would often feel the need to eat and drink, it was due only to sheer force of habit. No more than a week into his training, he had become used to not having to care about consuming food or any kind of beverage, and eventually his body had stopped asking for any of it. The bracelet Metatron – he had found out that the simple-looking angel that had received him on that first day, had been none other than the scribe of God –

had given him was certainly having its effect, however it was that it worked its magic.

Close quarters unarmed combat was also of high priority in Ryo's training. The daily basic martial arts and self-defense lessons felt like a breath of fresh air to him, after so long running obstacle courses. In this, he easily excelled at most of the initial and intermediate exercises, thanks to his years of karate practice, and quickly moved on to the more advanced parts of training.

A lesson Ryo learned by force was that of withstanding pain. While every cut and bruise he got would be healed so that it would not infect or cause any serious injury, the pain was not in the least softened. He was told it was important to feel pain, and to get used to it, so that he would embrace the need to avoid injury, but also be ready to withstand it, when it inevitably occurred on the battlefield.

A second couple of months elapsed as Ryo bettered his movement and unarmed combat skills, and as the training got harsher, so did his desire for revenge grow to further fuel his physical and mental capabilities. Every night he would lie down in his sleeping quarters, in dark silence. After a month of uninvited gloom, he had surrendered and asked Raphael how to turn on the light source in his room, to which he'd received the plain – but cryptic – answer that he needed only *will* it to light up. He had decided he would rather remain deprived of light, but keep his pride more or less intact, than insist on a proper, understandable, answer. And so he had, and the darkness had become as much a part of his nights, as sleep itself.

While he felt he was gradually becoming stronger and fiercer, the idea of facing real enemies in battle sounding less and less ridiculous to him, so did he become aware that he was slowly, but steadily, losing his humanity. Ryo could no longer cry for his lost life, all of his tears having eventually dried up. Physical pain came to mean nothing to him and he could no longer really see spiritual pain as a bad or harmful feeling, as it was simply

with him, at all times. But most disturbing of all, Ryo could no longer remember how it felt to interact with another person. He was starting to forget whatever it was that had once made him into a human being. Love, compassion, sympathy... happiness, laughter, sadness... it was all getting farther – and further – away from his heart, and he knew that just as surely as time flowed, so would he eventually come to not care anymore.

Even the feeling of looking into another person's eyes was getting forgotten. All Ryo would see, every waking day, were the angels' white, blank, empty stares, and all he would interact with were their emotionless and mechanized reactions. Soon, the only true feeling that would remain was his hatred for the cause of all the pain and suffering that had befallen him. As everything else faded away, any and all vacant space was rapidly taken over by his insatiable thirst for revenge. All that he was enduring, and anything he would still have to withstand, it would all be worth it, when he finally got to sate the craving that thrived in his darkness-filled heart.

One day, about six months of training behind him, Ryo got up early in the morning as usual, got dressed in his training garb, and walked all the way up those enclosed stairs and through the wide open corridors that led to the training grounds. He was still not even close to the doors and already he could feel something was different. The silence was sharper than usual, the air heavier, thicker. As he neared the exit, instead of the mayhem that was always a constant outside, he could feel dozens of presences, anxious in silent anticipation of something. One step out the doors was all it took for his eyes to witness what his mind had already told him.

“Ryo, welcome. Today you will be moving on to the next level of your training.” Archangel Raphael was a few steps ahead in the grass, and behind him a huge crowd of white-winged warriors stood perfectly still, in organized rows “I have designated a fighter to face you in real combat. He will be brandishing his regular weapon. You, on the other hand, will fight unarmed.”

Ryo was surprised by the announcement, even though he did not show it. Although he had been anticipating, for a few days, that some sort of test would be coming (since his training had begun to feel stagnant), he still wasn't expecting to go up against a full-fledged angelic warrior in an open fight. Much less at a purposeful disadvantage.

"This will serve to show you how you will feel in a real battle situation if you lose your weapon, and are forced to fight barehanded. It will also serve as a test of how well you have learned your lessons thus far." The archangel continued. There was complete silence in the usually tumultuous fields while he spoke "There is only one outcome to this battle that will allow you to continue your training, and every warrior here will bear witness to it."

"Very well." Ryo finally replied out loud. Determined not to show any sign of reluctance or weakness he advanced beyond the Archangel, and kept his chin up as he gazed at the vast lines of angelic warriors "Who will be my opponent?"

The warrior that stepped forward and revealed himself as Ryo's adversary brandished a long spear as his weapon. "This is Raze." Raphael declared from behind Ryo.

"Raze huh? A white-winged, empty-eyed creature, all dressed in white robes... who would've guessed... humph... you won't be the one to stop me. You're just another obstacle that I need to overcome." "Well, let's get started then." Ryo spoke directly to his opponent.

"If you think I'll let you shame me in front of my fellow warriors, you are sorely mistaken." Raze voiced his words with a strange accent, as if not used to English, or most likely to any human language. He had his eyes completely fixed on Ryo, as though there was no one and nothing else around the two of them "Be prepared, half-breed! Don't think I'll go easy on you! This is not a training match anymore."

“Humm? Well, this is different... shame huh? At least this one shows some kind of emotion... maybe this ’ll be a good change of pace from all the training... and what did he call me? What the hell did he mean by that!?”

Ryo watched silently as Raphael commanded all the other warriors with a few words spoken in the angels’ strange, ancient language. In a few moments they’d formed a wide circle around both Ryo and his opponent, as well as the Archangel. With their arms and hands outstretched forward and towards the ground, all the angels started chanting a few incomprehensible words, and in an instant a perfect circle of pure golden light was drawn on the ground, shining brightly.

“This fight will end only once one of the contestants is either incapacitated, or steps out of this circle.” Raphael flapped his wings and slowly lifted himself a few feet above the ground as he said this “You may begin.” He announced, and then flew back to take his place outside the round arena.

Ryo could clearly see the determination in his opponent’s expression as the angel readied his weapon. No, not simply determination. There was something else. Raze looked at Ryo as if he despised him... for whatever reason this was so, Ryo would use it to his advantage. His main priority would be to disarm his adversary; it would be far too dangerous to allow the angel to keep his weapon while Ryo fought unarmed. A single clear strike would be enough to end the fight, and he could not let that happen.

“So, what’re you waiting for, creature?” Ryo lowered his stance, and spoke with a provoking tone “Are you gonna stand around parading your wings at me all day? I have better things to do...”

Raze sneered in annoyance “Impudent insect... this will be over soon enough. I’ll send you back down to where you came from, dead or alive!” As soon as he was done talking, he lunged towards Ryo with a thrusting attack.

The taunting had worked, Ryo's opponent seemed angry enough, and had made the first move, as well as the first mistake. Ryo sidestepped swiftly to his right, and managed to completely evade the attack. As he reached for the angel's weapon and took hold of it, he noticed his opponent strangely releasing it without any resistance. It was only when his feet were off the ground, that Ryo became aware of the angel's brutally fast movements. A clear sweep had raised both his legs up in the air and the sky filled his view, as he fell with his back to the ground. As if time had slowed down, the spear was slowly removed from his hands, and just as he felt himself hit the grass-cushioned dirt, Raze reentered his field of vision, regaining his balance, and raising his spear, ready to thrust it again, this time downwards.

With a hasty sideways movement Ryo was able to evade the onset at the last moment, by rolling a step away from his opponent, who buried his weapon deep amidst broken leaves of grass. Quickly raising his legs, Ryo rolled back onto his feet, and turned to his opponent, just in time to feel a powerful blunt force hit him in the face. Raze had dashed forward again and attacked him with the staff section of his weapon. Stunned, Ryo stumbled back and raised his arms to try and block any incoming attacks, only to get hit by a powerful kick to the stomach that sent him flying backwards. Sprawled on all fours, his vision still blurry from the impact to his face, Ryo could see his adversary opening his huge white wings, readying another assault. He struggled to get back up, and readied his arms for defense.

It took but a moment for Raze to be right in Ryo's face. Using the momentum the strength of his wings had given to his quick dash, Raze shifted his body's weight to lend his horizontal slash increased force. In a move that surprised even himself, fuelled solely by his will to survive, Ryo bent his body backwards so rapidly that his head reached the level of his waist in a mere instant, while his balance did not sway. As soon as he felt

the stream of air rushing past him, he quickly raised himself back up. His opponent's back was turned to him due to the missed attack, so he grabbed both of Raze's still outstretched wings and delivered a powerful knee strike to the angel's back, only shortly before the feathered members slipped out of his grasp.

The angelic warrior staggered and let out a loud scream of pain. He fell to one knee, but kept a steady grip on his spear. Ryo dashed towards Raze, and without stopping, he reached for the back of his hunched shoulders and pushed himself upwards, jumping and twisting around mid-air, to land with one foot on the spear, forcing it to the ground, out of the angel's grasp. As his opponent looked up in surprise, Ryo quickly delivered a powerful right hook to his face. Without allowing the stunned warrior to fall flat on his side, Ryo grabbed him by the collar and unleashed a barrage of straight punches. He was screaming fiercely as he kept punching with all of his strength, until Raze opened his wings and managed to push himself away through the air.

Breathing heavily, his heart skipping beats and fighting to jump out his throat, Ryo grabbed the spear off the ground and threw it behind his back, far away from the limits of the circle of light. Even if not as he had anticipated it to go, Ryo had managed to disarm his opponent. Now they were on even fields. He watched Raze land a few feet away, struggling awkwardly to remain upright. He closed his eyelids and took a deep breath, concentrating to regain his steadiness. He would win this. He could do it.

The angel spat on the ground and wiped at his mouth. His sleeve was stained dark red "You think this will make it easier for you to beat me? Do you actually think you're capable of fighting one-on-one, evenly, with a soldier of God?!" Raze folded his wings and inspected the state of his own face with one hand, before shaking away the numbness enshrouding his head "How impudent can you get, halfling? Even if you had the skill and power to defeat me, it wouldn't be near enough to match the years of

practice and experience all of us have had!” Spite and disdain towards Ryo, as well as self-admiration, seemed to inflate the angelic warrior’s words as he spoke them with an angry voice.

“You talk too much.” Ryo said briefly, as he took the time to weigh his options. He was very much aware of just how much strength the angel probably had over him, as he’d been watching them train for months. And on top of that, Ryo still hadn’t learned how to control his vital force at all, nor was he even supposed to use it, if he intended to keep his body’s health from deteriorating further *“well... let’s see how this goes... maybe he doesn’t know I can’t use the life stream like he can? This would probably buy me some opportunities as he should be wary of going all out...”*

While Ryo was considering what would be the best way to approach the situation, his opponent had already lost his patience for waiting. With a strong wave of his wings, Raze suddenly dashed towards Ryo, giving the impression he was going to try and tackle him. As soon as Raze got near, Ryo sidestepped, but his adversary stopped dead in his tracks using a single flap of his wings, and turned to face him with a smug simper on his lips. The creature had again performed a feint to get Ryo to open his defenses, and once more he had fallen for the trick. An inhumanly fast and powerful uppercut to the gut cleared all the air from Ryo’s lungs, and just as soon as he felt the intensity of the blow radiating to every last inch of his body, he knew, after all, he stood no chance of winning. A set of stone solid fingers viciously wrapped themselves around Ryo’s throat, blocking the entrance of any air at all, and lifted his whole body off the ground.

“Ugh... agh... damn it... I can’t let this creature stop me... no... I... I won’t!” But the resolve slowly seeped from Ryo’s mind as he felt his vision blurring from the lack of oxygen. His heart thundered in his ears; his lungs ached for even the smallest breath of air, and his frenzied mind was begging for release, like a caged wild animal, ready to kill for it. A sudden surge of adrenaline spiked his awareness. He grabbed his enemy’s arm

firmly with one hand and, using all the strength he could summon, he delivered a strike with his other hand to the elbow joint of the creature's arm. Raze immediately released Ryo and stepped back, grabbing at his arm in pain. As soon as Ryo recovered his standing, and without stopping to even get some more air into his lungs, he dashed forward to attack. But the angel vanished from his field of vision, and not a second later an impact from behind knocked him to the ground.

Disoriented, Ryo quickly turned on his back and raised his arms and knees defensively, but his opponent was already upon him. Dashing above, Raze grabbed him by the vest and pulled him upright. He kept Ryo suspended in the air, stopping him from trying to escape, and punch after bludgeoning punch, Ryo felt the pain clawing at his mind, and eventually – much sooner than he would expect – begin to subside. He knew he wasn't going to hold on much longer as he tried helplessly to break Raze's hold on him. The angel was too strong, and his senses were abandoning him. There was nothing he could do.

"... No... not after all that's happened... I can't lose now..." Ryo could hear Raphael's voice in the background, speaking hastily in the angels' language, probably announcing the end of the match. But Raze wasn't stopping. He wasn't going to stop, either. He screamed out loud in anger as he kept striking at Ryo's face with an unending flurry of punches. With each hit, Ryo's senses slipped further away from him. The pain vanished and both his arms dropped alongside his body, weightless. Only the shaking blows to his head kept going *"Karin... mother... father... Mike... you're all... I..."* The archangel's thundering voice was the only audible sound beneath Raze's enraged outcries. Ryo could feel Raphael's presence approaching *"I... have to... avenge... I... I'm... sorry..."*

One final scream from the archangel signaled Ryo's consciousness abandoning him for good. The last image Ryo's brain caught, before falling asleep, was that of the angel's face demonstrating pure fury and hatred as

he struck at him over, and over, and over again... and then it all went black. Then there was blood... everywhere, there was only blood, enveloping him, gushing from in front of him, spraying through the air, spilling over his face, over his arms... he could even feel its bitter taste washing over his senses, infusing his mind with infinite unknown bliss. Screams and shouts and hollering voices were everywhere, and amidst all the black and crimson, white was born... there were white feathers floating around him, slowly falling to the ground, gracefully landing on pools of blood, getting stained dark-red as ripples diffused around them... and then, silence.

Chapter 14:

«Regrets...»

“Mike, come on! Let it go!” A jovial voice spoke hastily, marked by a slight tinge of annoyance “It’s been half a year since all of that happened! How can you still keep crying about it, after all this time?!”

“You have no idea how I feel... The things I did...” Michael lay on his bed staring only two feet ahead of his face at the corner wall of a small room, his body almost completely covered under the black feathers of his wings “There’s no forgiveness... And there’s no forgetting, either.”

“You were brainwashed by the angels weren’t you? So *they’re* the ones to blame! Not you!” The lively feminine voice insisted.

“You don’t know how it is... I wasn’t brainwashed, I just... saw it in their own eyes... And in those moments, it seemed pretty clear that it was what had to be done...” Despair overflowed through Michael’s words as he sat up. Despair from a feeling of impotence, from being forced to surrender, unable to change even a small part of all that had happened. He looked directly into two big black eyes that stared back at him, attentively, as he spoke “But my conscience kept screaming louder and louder, until I couldn’t hold on anymore. And then I remembered everything that’d made me human once. But it was far too late to stop anything... There was no going back anymore.”

“But... still, you didn’t really know what you were doing...” The girl spoke reticently.

“I did! Perfectly! Somehow... it just felt necessary. You can’t know how it feels, you’re lucky you were born what you are. I don’t even know who, or what I am anymore... I haven’t been a human, or anything like it, ever since I was... *transcended*... but I wasn’t an angel for long either...” Michael looked away from the girl’s face, his mind filled with frustration.

“Yeah, and I’m glad you weren’t!” She raised her voice with authority, opening her eyes wide as she slapped Michael in the arm. She paused, looking at him sideways, from the corner of her eyes, for a moment, as if warning him not to contradict her “You’re one of us, now! As you’ve been for six whole months! And it’s about time you feel at home here, too!”

“How can you consider me one of your own when I’ve ruined what you’d been fighting for, over the past twenty years?!” Michael questioned her, in anger. Anger not directed at her, but at himself. After a moment he looked away once more, and fixed his gaze on the floor “If only I had known... I would’ve said no... I would rather have died right then, fighting that damned angel, than have to forever endure the knowledge of what I would do.”

“Oh, come on...” The girl was ready to get seriously angry, when a third presence approached their room.

Michael looked at the slightly open door in surprise as a tall figure dressed in long black robes stepped in and called his name “Yes, Amano?” He replied, reaching for the edge of the bed.

“Come with me, we must talk.” The demon’s very long and straight white hair rested on his shoulders, in clear contrast to the pure black color of his vests. Michael stood up and walked to the door. His eyes lingered on the girl’s for a moment, before he faced the newly arrived presence “Rachel, you should head to the training quarters, and finish your practice for the day. I fear we need to be at our utmost strength for the upcoming events.” The demon stated, before stepping aside and signaling Michael to go on ahead of him.

“Yes, I will! Don’t worry about me!” Rachel replied hastily, getting up and stretching her legs.

After having taken Ryo to the Holy Realm, Michael had been banished back down to Earth. The archangel in command, Raphael, had felt that he was no longer able to serve their mission since his mind had been tainted

by doubt, remorse, and fear. Feelings he should not, in any way, have indulged. He was deemed a failure as an angelic being; seen as one who cannot let go of his human life to serve God. He had been expelled from the Holy Realm. As fate would have it though, the banishing process was not strong enough to wipe Michael's memories clean... neither his human memories, nor the ones he had obtained as an angel.

Six months had passed since Michael was at his deathbed. Hopeless, he lay in a grass field covered in mud, the torn and ravaged angelic robes around his body soaking beneath heavy rain. A fallen angel. His once majestic white wings, and his, briefly so, snow-white eyes, had turned pure black, tainted by the banishing process. His hair, void of pigmentation, had become completely white, signaling his supposed blank mind. In that moment, when Michael was just waiting for death to reach him, his mind and body drained of any strength or will to go on, a tall, one-winged being had come to him. A dark figure had landed in front of him as thunderbolts exploded and filled the black night skies with monumental flashes of white light and gallons of water violently poured down from dark clouds, threatening to wash everything away. Eventually, an open hand had been extended to him. Amano, an elder demon, had felt Michael's presence as he fell to the Human Realm.

Word of Michael's identity, and of what he had done for the angels, had spread through most regions, easily swaying the general consensus in favor of his execution. But even though some of the older demons, particularly Gitaxis, who governed most of Europe's domain with stern and strictly unforgiving sovereignty, had reacted negatively to the idea of sparing him, Amano had taken responsibility for it, and as the heir to the oldest and first demonic clan in existence, he had exacted his authority.

Since then, Michael had been living with Amano's clan, amongst the ancient demon's closest friends and soldiers. He had spent the latter half year learning their ways and training to fight by their side. Slowly, but

steadily, he had managed to overcome some of his fears and a small amount of the regret and despair that constantly threatened to consume his sanity and destroy his mind. Months had passed before he had been able to accept that these beings might be the closest thing he would ever be able to call a family again.

"You! What are you doing down here?! Do you have a death wish, traitor?"

"... I..."

"Hummm... Even after performing all of your horrible tasks like a faithful little dog, you were banished... He continues to use irony as his play tool, at every corner, does he not?"

"I just wanna die... please... please, free me from this curse..."

"Weakling! Thanks to you, humanity's greatest hope for freedom may be lost. I will not let you die until you have done your part in trying to set this right!"

"..."

"Besides, the fact that you retain your memories tells me you are worth more than I would give you credit for. Your force of will must be stronger than you even realize... Now, get on your feet. You are no longer his pet!"

That talk still haunted Michael's dreams every night. It constantly reminded him of what he had done. But during the six months living under the supervision of the harsh demon that, beneath the sheer violence of a thundering storm, had lent him a hand and forced him to get up, Michael had come to realize that he had been saved, and given a new purpose in life.

Michael walked alongside the one-winged leader through the peaceful streets of his clan village. A great and beautiful garden with an astounding variety of flora could be seen ahead, at the farther edge of the village. Large oak trees lined the center of the street they were following, as if dividing it in half and there was a row of small rustic houses on each side. Some had their doors wide open, inviting anyone to enter at no risk, while others displayed only a small unclosed threshold through which escaped the rich fragrant smell of a warm meal being prepared. It was already past mid-

afternoon, and soon the sun would start to set over the horizon. Children played happily on the streets, enjoying the last few minutes of free time before their mothers called them in for dinner.

Michael noticed a group of small children in an opening between two houses to his right, gathered expectantly around a water well, and stopped, curious as to what they could all be staring at. All of them looked about six or seven years old as they stood on the tips of their toes, struggling to look into the depth of the well, with their small, still undeveloped wings. The sound of splashing water was heard, before a wave seemed to stream up through the well and suddenly spray everywhere, splashing the group of children. Some of them stepped back, and others fell clumsily on their bottoms. A chorus of awing sounds erupted amidst the small demonic boys and girls as a pair of wings opened wide in the sky, obscuring the view of the sun. A young boy flapped his dark feathered members a few times in place, before going into full-fledged flight, circling the area around the well as sparkling droplets of water slowly stopped falling from his soaked clothes. The joyfulness and pride with which the boy boasted his probably very recently learned ability to fly mesmerized Michael as much as it appeared to enchant the smaller children.

A few minutes had passed before Michael realized he'd stopped in place and completely forgotten what he was doing or where he was going. He looked to his left and saw Amano patiently waiting, puffing a large cloud of smoke into the air, his old wooden smoking pipe held under the grasp of his left hand's clawed fingers "Sorry!" Michael exclaimed as he hurried near Amano, who silently restarted his walk down the street "So... what is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"It's been a long time since your fall from the Holy Realm, Michael. Back then I didn't have much appreciation for your person, as you may understand." Michael kept walking with his eyes set on the ground, listening to the ancient demon's words in silence "But, in the time that has

gone by, you have proven that your heart really is clean. You were just a kid, and you were thrown into all of this without the kind of wisdom it would take to know any better. You've told me more than once that the promise of saving your best friend was what had driven you. Even though, at first, I didn't think that possible, I believe I've come to understand your motivations."

"That doesn't change any of what I've done... at all..."Michael stated in a low voice, without raising his head.

"No. It doesn't. What's done is done, and nothing will ever change that." The ancient leader's voice was strong and determined, but sympathetic and with no hint of prejudice. He inhaled two long puffs from his pipe; the remaining tobacco leaves inside crackled as they lit up and slowly turned to ash. Amano slowly exhaled the smoke, and then reached down to clear the ashes from the pipe on the ground. These would soon scatter, gone with the wind "What can be controlled, however, is that which is still to come. It is time for you to stop dwelling on your past actions as something that will condemn you for eternity, and instead, use their memory to fuel your will to fight, in order to help shape the future into a better reality than the present one."

Michael listened intently to Amano's words as they reached the Old Garden. This was the largest open space in the village, encompassing over a mile of terrain. Dozens of different tree species, some spanning centuries in age, soared tall in the skies, covering everything beneath them under the shade of their long branches and lustrous foliage. The strong pure scent of fresh air, mixed with tens of different flower aromas still managed to dazzle Michael's senses, even after the long months he had been living under the clan village's embrace.

Amano continued his speech as the fiery yellow, late afternoon rays of sunlight peered through any open space between the tree branches above their heads "Being turned from a human into an angel, what *they* call

“transcendence”, changes the way you experience everything around you. It completely suppresses your emotions, supposedly clearing your logical thought process from any and all kinds of encumbrance. The angels are created to be as faithful as they can to their mission, and therefore nothing may come in their way... emotions have no place in their minds. But the fact that you remembered what had once made you human, and that this side of you managed to overpower the angelic predetermination to ignore any kind of feelings or desires, means that your will is very powerful.”

Amano stopped for a moment, regarding Michael’s troubled figure. The long straight scar running down from the right side of the demon’s forehead, all the way to the edge of his colorless lips, splitting his right eyebrow in two, was momentarily highlighted by a stray ray of sunlight, catching Michael’s attention “It is extremely rare these days for us to find a fallen angel, but when we do, he or she has no idea of what has happened.”

Michael was surprised to realize that among all the knowledge he had been endowed with during his transcendence, the effects of the banishing on a victim of the process was not present. He had no clear idea of what a fallen angel would go through, after being banished. He wondered, to himself, if this was so as not to influence the angels tasked with banishing their brethren.

“You see,” Amano appreciated Michael’s silent consideration as he went on “during the banishing, an angel’s mind is wiped clean of every episodic memory he has ever had. The slumber that comes afterwards is proportionately linked to how long he has lived as an angelic being. The body and mind sleep, as the brain heals from the shock, and adapts to a new existence. All that remains is semantic memory, allowing the individual to retain his basic survival skills and knowledge of the world, but leaving no trace of what his past self once was. Not with you though. You retained all of your memories, you had no period of adjustment. This is nothing if not a clear testament to your force of will, Michael.”

“But... I never *wanted* to remember what I had done!” Michael raised his voice in frustration as he spoke “I can’t even look myself in a mirror! I wish I could just forget all of it...”

“You’re not supposed to forget anything, you’re supposed to live with it. Don’t linger on the past and allow its weight to suffocate you, learn from it and use it as a stepping ladder to rise above yourself!” The old demon spoke with clear emotion and certainty in his voice.

“Why would you do so much for me? After all I’ve done... I don’t deserve this, Amano...”

“I’ve taken it upon myself over the past months to train you personally and try to reshape you into a true soldier. *Why* isn’t really important...” Silence stood between Amano and Michael for a few seconds as he seemed to consider his thoughts before continuing “A dear friend once did the same for me. Maybe I am merely trying to repay the universe for the kindness it showed me.” Michael knew there would be no further discussion on his mentor’s past, but he was satisfied to take as much as he had gotten “You have improved a lot over these months, and have proven that you can become a great asset to our forces. It is time to put the past behind you, and start living the present you’re faced with.”

Michael stood in place, silently looking Amano directly in the eyes. Infinite wisdom and knowledge seemed to be contained within the ancient demon’s abyssal gaze, as much as it transpired through his every word.

“In time, all of it will become less hard to endure... you’ll see.” Amano said, and he placed a hand on Michael’s shoulder, slowly nodding in approval, encouraging him to move on.

“Thank you, Amano... for everything.”

“You’re welcome, child.” Bright orange light seemed to envelop the demon’s wing, giving it an aura of blazing fire “The sun is setting, we should return.”

“Yes. I didn’t get any training done today. I should start early tomorrow!” Michael was feeling the first hints of enthusiasm in months. Amano’s words had genuinely helped define a purpose to set his mind upon.

“Very well. And by the way, you should give Rachel the attention she deserves.” They had begun walking back to the central building in the village. Michael looked at Amano, surprised at hearing his personal advice “She’s been trying as hard as she can to make you feel welcome here.”

Michael knew he was blushing. He was unsure of how to respond, having always regarded Amano and Rachel’s relationship almost as that of father and daughter “I know... I really do.”

Returning to the training quarters, Michael stopped at the entrance, and stood there, watching as Rachel performed her deadly dance.

The Kusarigama, an uncommon weapon outside of Japan, is comprised of a Kama – the Japanese equivalent of a sickle – attached to a long chain that, on the opposite end, connects to a metallic weight. The fighting style that uses this weapon resembles a dance in a lot of aspects, as the user has to maintain continuous movement in order for the weapon to keep swinging around his or her body, rendering an outstanding and unmatched momentum to the attacks delivered.

Rachel Asura was a pure demon-born girl. She had practiced over years with the Kusarigama as her weapon of choice, and so had become extremely proficient with it, and even though she was taunted by many of the older demon soldiers for being too young, she was feared and respected by twice as many. Considered as one of the most powerful warriors under Amano’s command, she was one of his five generals. Over the thirty years that had passed since Amano had found her as an orphan child, alone on a battlefield, all of her clan members and family fallen in a fight against an angelic force, she had improved and developed her abilities relentlessly, reaching farther than many had over the span of hundreds of years.

Long, wavy, snow-white hair undulated in the air around Rachel's figure, as she swung her weapon in a mesmerizing motion. A slim and captivating silhouette was overshadowed by two dark wings, folded neatly on her back, as not to disturb the swift movements. Gracefully swinging the Kusarigama, Rachel noticed Michael, and suddenly turned his way while outstretching her arm, and released the weight. The chain stretched and the wall right next to Michael's left shoulder trembled with the impact.

"So... you feelin' better, crybaby?" Rachel said, winking. A bright, cheery look accompanied a provoking smile on Rachel's gentle, thick lips, as she gazed towards Michael from beneath hair locks that surrounded her dark eyes.

Michael approached Rachel with his hands up signaling peace as he split a wide-mouthed grin at her "For a minute there I actually thought that'd hit me! You're a danger to those around you!"

"Hah! Everything under control, dummy!"

"Well, yeah... actually I am feeling somewhat better." Michael admitted, taking a more serious tone of voice "Amano is... really wise. His words know exactly how and where to reach you."

"Oh well, hundreds of years putting up with every kind of creature... guess he had to wise up, huh?" Rachel laughed as she spoke.

"I guess he did. I wonder... was he really a pupil of the original demon?"

"Yes, he was. But it was much more than that. He was the first of Kohryu's offspring... the first human awakened by the father of our race. Kohryu was a father *and* a brother to him." Rachel's eyes acquired a sadness that was very unusual in her, as she approached the subject "Amano was never the same again, after his death."

Michael was wary of insisting on the subject, but his curiosity needed to be satisfied “How did that really happen? The angels had no knowledge on it...”

“No one really knows. After more than a millennium walking the Earth as the strongest and most ancient creature on its surface, about twenty years ago, Kohryu was somehow killed by an unknown enemy. Who or whatever did this, no one ever saw it. When Amano found Khoryu, he was already dead, just like his wife. His son...”

Michael looked away, saddened. Rachel bit her lower lip, and cringed, but Michael waved it away with a smile before she could apologize “Who could’ve killed him? I know it wasn’t an angel...” Michael inquired further. He couldn’t help being captivated by the whole mystery enveloping the first demon’s existence on Earth.

“No angel could defeat him... countless had tried, and not one came even near.” Rachel answered. Michael knew perfectly well how some of the most ancient and powerful angels to exist had perished trying to hunt Kohryu down over the centuries, including one of the Firstborn. After all, he had retained all the memories acquired in his transcendence “I don’t remember that much about Kohryu, I was still young when he died. But I can tell you he was by far the most powerful warrior I’d ever seen.” Rachel spoke as if resigned to the fact that she would never know exactly what had happened.

“Damn... well, enough of this subject. I can see you don’t really like talkin’ about it.”

“Amano is like a father to me... I still remember how much he hurt from losing Kohryu...” Rachel conceded.

Michael was touched by her saddened look. He yearned to see her smile again “Hey, it’s almost dinner time. I suppose we could call it a day, and go enjoy a nice hot meal together?” He pulled at her hand as he took a step back, towards the exit.

A cunning smirk appeared on Rachel's lips "*Heh...* you're just afraid I'll kick your ass again!"

"Hummm... would you? I don't know... and I guess we won't find out today either! Come on!" Michael insisted as he went around Rachel and gently pushed her forward with both hands on her hips.

Rachel stood in place for a second, looking over her shoulder at Michael. Her pale lips parted just slightly to form a delicate smile as she allowed their intertwined looks to linger on each other for a moment longer "It's nice to see you so light headed and open hearted, Mike. I'm glad you're finally getting over it."

"Thanks, Rach..."

For Michael, that night went by softly as he slept, for the first time in months, without having nightmares about Ryo and his parents haunting him. The coming days of training would be faced with renewed strength and spirit.

Chapter 15:

«Deep Changes»

*Karin's voice echoes through the darkness, abruptly shattering the null silence that enveloped reality "Help me, Ryo! **RYO!!!**"*

“**NO!**” Ryo’s eyes were suddenly wide open as he sat up. His own scream muffled the sound of Karin’s distressed voice, playing in his mind “... Agh... huh? Where... am I? What... the hell?”

Right next to him was an angel with no hair on his head, fully dressed in long white robes that interlaced around themselves and nestled on top of his crossed legs. The creature was floating a few inches above the ground, levitating as if held in place by an unseen force and not by the use of its wings, although these were fully extended, and almost covered the length of the entire room, one wall to the other. The warrior had his legs crossed and his arms resting on top of them, as if meditating, while his eyes were lightly closed. There was a strange warm aura around him; Ryo felt pure energy seeping from the creature’s body towards his, seemingly forming a protective coat around his every muscle and bone, healing and refreshing him. Ryo looked around and recognized the room he was in as a healing room. He had been in one of these before, to have some serious wounds healed.

“You’re safe, Ryo. Don’t worry.” Archangel Raphael’s voice made itself heard from behind the other angel. He was sitting on a nearby bench, with his back hunched forward. The weight of his head was supported by the hand around his chin and mouth. He was clearly troubled by something.

“Ugh... What... Happened? Last thing I remember that... angel... Raze...” Ryo made a slight pause. His mind was confused and blurry “He was tearing me apart... and it didn’t seem like he was gonna stop...”

“He wasn’t going to...” Raphael spoke gravely. He seemed disturbed by the lack of discipline and obedience his soldier had shown “But you stopped him by... your own means.”

“I stopped him? How can *I* have stopped him? He was overpowering me completely! I could feel myself losing consciousness!” Ryo was in disbelief. It made no sense to him that he could’ve somehow turned that fight around.

“Well... what matters is that you have won the encounter.” The archangel showed no intent of further discussing or explaining the subject “You have proven that you learned your lessons well, and soon you will begin the next step in your training.”

“No! I haven’t proven anything!” Ryo raised himself up from the bed he was lying on. The confusion in his mind slowly faded away, and he felt his body healed, his strength restored “I lost the fight in every way possible!” With the commotion, the healer interrupted his process. He slowly lowered himself to the floor, and folded his wings. Raphael dismissed him “I can’t possibly compete with a creature that can use its vital force freely like that, when I have no idea how to do it!” Ryo carried on, demanding answers “No matter how I gave it my all to fight him, whenever I was about to land a successful attack he evaded it using means that I have no way of overcoming! How will I be able to face demons?! You have to teach me how to use the life stream!”

“But you are not an angel, boy! You cannot use the life stream as we do; otherwise your body is the one to suffer! Look at yourself in a mirror... you almost don’t look human anymore! Your body will continue to be transformed. It will continue to decay every time you sip from that forbidden cup.” The archangel spoke in a warning tone “What you have to do is become stronger, faster; continue your training, improve your abilities, and make sure you best your opponents in every way you can.”

Ryo was silent. He was looking down at his hands, frustrated. At that, the archangel went on, trying to prevent him from becoming too dispirited “Demons are not like us; they cannot use up their inner energy freely like our warriors do. If one does so, it will be greatly drained of its strength because it will deplete its body’s resources. As I have already told you, only by consuming angelic blood, can demons accumulate greater life stream surges, so you have no reason to fear them!”

Ryo looked up, straight into Raphael’s eyes “That won’t matter when I’m dead. I stood no chance against your soldier.”

“Raze was not supposed to fight you like he did. He was instructed to face you on your own grounds, and stop the match if it was clear he had won. He was acting on his own, allowing pride and hatred to guide his actions.” The next words Raphael spoke were meant to cement the knowledge that disobedience was severely punished “Had you not finished him off, he would have been banished after the fight.”

“But... how *did* I... finish him off? Last I remember I was being beaten to death, and then it all went black... and then I was dreaming...” Ryo’s confusion was almost palpable as he spoke.

Raphael remained silent for a few moments. He spoke only when he realized there was no way of evading the subject “You went berserk. You used up too much of your vital force to defeat Raze. You cannot allow yourself to lose control like that again, or soon you will be too far gone.”

Ryo leered at the archangel “Are your soldiers’ lives so worthless to you, that you don’t even care if one dies on your own training grounds?” His words were fully embedded in defiance and spite. The lack of sentiment the angels seemed to share amongst each other, towards their own race even, was beginning to disgust him.

“I may be willing to train you, but don’t think that means I will accept your impudent comments.” Raphael’s tone turned stone cold “It is not your

place to judge us, boy. Only our father was reserved the right to pass judgment, here.”

“... Whatever...” Ryo let his body slide back down on the bed.

“Tomorrow you will begin your swordsmanship training. Make sure you are ready.” The archangel got up and turned to the exit with no other words.

“Goodbye, archangel.”

Alone in the room, Ryo raised himself up and went to wash his face on the nearby water surge. After so much time interacting with the angel’s technology, Ryo no longer found it strange that water would pour out of a plain object next to the wall, with no kind of connection to a pipe or anything else of the sort. Water surges, although serving the same purpose as faucets in the human world, were far from similar.

These devices were composed of a large spherical object, about six inches in diameter, encircled in strange golden designs. The chain-like markings, when touched, would be activated, and a hole would open on the front surface of the sphere, through which water would pour down into something similar to a sink. The sphere, according to what Ryo had been told by the archangel a long time ago in answer to his own curious inquiry, was constantly processing Hydrogen and Oxygen molecules available in the surrounding air, to create water that would become liquefied and contained within it. There were also larger water surges, coupled with what resembled dark brown, circular bathtubs. These surges could be activated to instantly heat the water as it streamed out, everything done through simple touches of one’s hand.

Ryo was still numb from the beating he’d taken... *“I ‘finished him off’ huh? So... I’ve killed someone... I don’t really remember it, but... strangely I feel nothing towards this... have I changed so much that the idea of having taken a life doesn’t even haunt me a little bit? Shit...”* The water, running down from the larger water surge as he readied a warm bath, reminded Ryo of one of his last calm thoughts before coming to this place.

The moments before being informed of his parents' deaths, when he was in a similar situation, in the bathroom of his old home. He remembered thinking if he could've had any control over what had happened to Karin. Metatron had later told him that a person always followed her life's path, leading to a predefined destiny... *"Is human life really so insignificant? Is there no free will at all?"*

With the tub full of warm water, Ryo deactivated the surge. The water's surface slowly became quiet as the ripples and small waves dwindled, and with the tub's dark color behind it, Ryo's reflection slowly became visible. He was profoundly surprised... he didn't look like himself anymore. It had been months since Ryo had seen his own image, since there were no mirrors in the angels' realm, but even so, he had not expected this big a change. The visage of his eyes was really strange, even disturbing: the pupils had become larger, and what seemed like thin black veins stretched outwards from them. His hair was completely white as well as his eyebrows and even his eyelashes. All the hair on his body seemed to have lost its once characteristic dark brown color. A few minutes went by in total silence, and Ryo just stood there leaning over the tub, gazing into the reflective surface as a ghostly image of his former self stared back at him.

Ryo later fell asleep in the water's warm embrace. It was already halfway through the night when he woke up shivering in the cold water, and left to wander the corridors in search of his room. It took him only a few seconds to fall asleep again, once he'd made it into that square, uninviting bed. His body and mind were still exhausted and he was in need of a good night's sleep, but his subconscious would not have it that way. Karin's voice, screaming for help, continuously haunted Ryo's dreams. Her image shouting his name, looking at him with that terrified look of pain and fear written over her face during the last seconds of her life, would be burned into his mind forever, always reminding him of the hatred he felt.

But this was what would continue to push him forward... he would do whatever he had to, in order to get to the creature that had taken all of his loved ones from him. And when he did, that creature would suffer what Karin and his parents had suffered, tenfold... and Ryo would savor that suffering... deeply...

Chapter 16:

«Mind Over Matter»

The following day Ryo woke up, got ready, and headed to the training grounds as he had been doing over the previous months. This time though, it was different. Before, every other angel that passed him by would look at him, and then look away, as if he wasn't there, as if he wasn't even worthy of eye contact. Now... now almost every angel in his presence would direct their attention at him, either staring directly, or from the corners of their eyes. They leered at him, and went around, avoiding any kind of contact. It seemed as if they were disgusted by his presence, or maybe even afraid of him. Which one it was, Ryo could not tell. But it didn't really matter anyway; he did not wish to gain any sort of respect or kindness from these creatures, any more than he did from the demons. He was in this place only because he had to be, in order to gain the strength he so needed.

The time was spent practicing sword basics. After having become so used to holding his weapon, Ryo almost felt as if it was a part of his own body, an extra limb. Actually being able to unsheathe it, and try it out on some target dummies felt exhilarating. The sword's movement; the sound it made cutting through the air; the way it felt to free the blade from its prison, releasing its power with so much swiftness; how his whole body reverberated with the impact when the edge came into contact with its target... it was all fascinating for Ryo, and for the first time he was actually enjoying his training. He eventually became aware that his katana was the only companion that he actually felt at ease with. Even though it had no conscience of its own, it accompanied his every movement, and was completely in synch with his own mind. It would always share in his intentions and beliefs, regardless of what they might be.

Together with the swordsmanship daily training, Ryo had begun trying to get in contact with his vital force, secretly, at night in his own quarters.

He had first started by trying to focus on his own body, to concentrate his mind solely on the task of perceiving any and every change within him. Simply sitting still, quietly listening to his own heartbeat, feeling the circulation of blood through his chest and limbs, the in-and-out of air in his lungs, the almost impossible to avoid random thoughts that crept into his mind, but quickly vanished.

Then, once he felt completely in synch with himself, he would try and actually materialize even the smallest hint of energy on the outside of his body. Days went by before his first real accomplishment: being able to produce heat from his palms. Ryo could not believe it when he'd first seen the air distorting with high temperatures in front of his eyes, caused by his own hands. He'd felt exhilarated by his first designful inhuman prowess.

Every night from there on, Ryo would spend about an hour trying to better his control over this, and each time he would feel even more drained and tired than he had already been from the whole day of training. But he could also feel, as the weeks went by, that he was getting gradually better at it, mastering his control over his own mind. After some time he could create sparks from his fingertips without great effort and his command over temperature had also improved: he could both increase and decrease it all around him, at a few seconds' delay.

With the passage of time, Ryo's skills kept increasing exponentially, the outside world as much oblivious of his existence as he was unaware of – and uninclined to think of – humanity's daily life. Six months were what it had taken for sparring with the angels to have become much simpler, easy even. Ryo could match and overcome most of them in terms of swordsmanship, reflexes, overall movement, and even the ability to read and predict an adversary's onsets and intentions.

He could feel it as the whole ambience around him became heavier and harsher as he further developed his fighting skills. It had gotten clear that all of those creatures wanted him gone, or even better, dead. They were

afraid of his strength, and of how he managed to evolve so rapidly. The archangel, Raphael, though, he was different. He kept training him, and didn't show the same hatred and spite the others did. There was definitely something else in his mind. It didn't mean that he wished Ryo any good though, and Ryo made sure to keep that in mind. It just meant his teacher had other intentions, which did not involve getting rid of him, at least for the time being.

Slowly, as the never-ending dance between Sun and Moon dragged on, Ryo's appearance was getting farther and farther away from that of a young man, and closer to something entirely not human. From time to time, he would look at his own reflection in the water, and recognize even less of himself, some more of his humanity gone. His eyes had eventually become completely black, as the dark veins expanding from his pupils had fused together and covered all of the remaining white color of the sclera; his mouth and jaw had slightly distorted to house his dentition, which had developed to become more protuberant, sharper and longer, somehow resembling an animal's fangs. He'd had some trouble getting used to the fact that his fingernails had become much sturdier, and had grown sharp, into what could be seen as small claws. His snow-white hair had grown past his shoulders, forcing him to tie it in a knot behind his head during training, and his whole body's skin had a ghastly appearance.

Some of these changes were due to the steady and relentless flow of time, but most were, possibly, caused by the continuing practice Ryo had maintained of his vital force. As the archangel had warned him, his body was gradually becoming more and more altered, but, even though every time he used the life stream he felt drained and consumed, Ryo did not really feel as if his body was degrading. His physical condition was, in fact, getting better with each passing day. Whatever this meant though, it was beyond Ryo's knowledge, and the archangel clearly wasn't going to tell

him anything else either. He was beginning to suspect that maybe there was another, yet to unearth, reason for these changes, whatever it might be.

The fruits of his efforts were maturing, as Ryo was more and more able to control the life stream at will: he had mastered the ability to generate flames by causing the molecules in the atmosphere to vibrate intensely enough that they would heat up to a point of igniting; flash freezing a liquid was possible as well by reducing its temperature radically. This meant that creating ice out of thin air, by condensing and freezing the free water molecules that exist in the atmosphere, was within his reach as well.

As his understanding of the underlying processes evolved, Ryo's control over all of these skills got sharper. Using his vital force to increase his physical abilities enabled him to move faster and have increased strength. An alternative to that would be distorting the space time continuum, as he had seen some angels do, to instantly move from one place to another, or even what had happened a long time ago, when Ryo had instinctively rewind the flow of time to avoid being hit by a bus. But these processes were all extremely exhausting, and as Ryo had found out, consumed his vital force radically.

About one month later, Ryo was interrupted during a bout with a sparring partner "That's enough." He heard the archangel's voice calling his name from behind him, and immediately the angel he was training with halted his movement and assumed a bowing position, with one knee on the ground. Ryo watched in surprise as Raphael approached "That's enough for today, Ryo. Go rest up."

"But it's still midafternoon... I'm not done yet." He interjected "I can keep up for the rest of the day."

"Tomorrow you will be facing a final test to your skills. Too much time has passed in your training, you must begin your intended mission." Raphael's tone left no room for discussion "Demons are more and more abundant, and we need to exterminate them once and for all."

“I’m not your pawn, archangel.” Ryo replied with stone cold seriousness “Don’t think just because I agreed to train with you here, that I am a soldier who’ll follow your every command like your angels.”

“Such impertinence.” A hint of anger peered through Raphael’s expression “Don’t forget you swore before God. When you were accepted to begin your training, you pledged your loyalty to our mission, under Metatron’s guidance. Vows are not broken, here in our realm.”

“I did not pledge to obey your orders. I accepted to follow the mission of exterminating demons, and that is what I’ll do. How and when I do it, is up to me alone to decide, and not you.” Ryo’s finality matched the archangel’s. Forced to constantly interact and live with the angels, he had learned to subdue his emotions, and maintain strict control over his temper “I will destroy every demon I can, and in return you will tell me which one killed my family and loved ones, and where I can find it. That was the deal, and that is what will be carried out. **Not** your orders specifically.”

Raphael was surprised by the sheer strength in Ryo’s tone. For an instant he appeared to be at a loss for words “Your training here is complete, boy! You need to start facing real battles if you want to keep improving.” Noticing Ryo’s resolve did not seem to flinch, he took a different approach to the subject “And besides... it was my understanding that you wished with all of your heart to have your revenge? Am I mistaken?”

“... No... you’re not.” Ryo yielded, although not pleased to accept Raphael’s logic.

“Then stop complaining, and appreciate all that has been given to you here. You are what you are now, because I have made you that way.” The archangel took advantage of the opening in Ryo’s mental shield.

“... *Humph*... very well. Choose my opponent wisely... I wouldn’t want you to lose a valuable soldier.” Ryo retorted in a spiteful voice before turning his back on Raphael “Until tomorrow, then.”

Ryo left the training grounds without looking back. Whatever came at him the next day, this time he would crush it without any kind of hesitation. Nothing was going to stop him, not after all he'd been through.

When he reached his room Ryo undressed and went to take a bath. He was happy to be free from the bright training garbs which he already felt sick of, as he activated the water surge and tuned it for a high temperature. He stepped into the tub, and allowed the warm sensation of the water cleansing his skin to relax his body. While he lay there, submerged in complete silence and tranquility, Ryo thought back on everything that had happened since he was caught by that angel when he was falling from Lemuris Castle's highest tower.

The nightmares he had been having... that strange room... the demon with the long blade, and all that blood. Those dreams had become much less frequent, but it still bugged him not knowing their meaning. Was it really a demon that had killed his birth parents? Could it be the same one that had killed Karin, his parents, and probably Mike as well? Thinking about it cool headedly, Ryo realized the creature that had saved and brought him to the Holy Realm had seemed different from the rest of the angels he had encountered ever since. The strange, sad look on its face never left Ryo's mind, and it had felt as if he'd met it before, somehow... but he had never again laid eyes on that particular warrior since then, so there was no way of knowing why.

All of those mysteries still remained unsolved, floating around in Ryo's head. Getting to the demons would definitely help solve some of them... but on top of that, his revenge awaited him, and it could not come any sooner. Hot steam filled the room, numbing Ryo's senses as his mind traveled from memory to memory, until he eventually fell asleep. A pair of dark, crimson eyes awaited him in his nightmares.

Chapter 17:

«Religion»

Bright yellow rays of light covered the Earth, heating the atmosphere, warming the planet's surface and nourishing all life, above and beneath it. Only a couple of hours had slipped past noon, when four warriors neared Meadars' coordinates. After what had seemed like an eternity flying high over the clouds, following the GPS locator on Rachel's phone, Michael's back and wing muscles were burning from exhaustion.

The rapier – a long and thin, straight-bladed, two-edged, one-handed sword – had been Michael's weapon of preference ever since he had undergone the transcendence, which had endowed him with advanced knowledge on all kinds of weapon handling. This particular discipline allowed him to have the edge he wanted in combat: since holding such a thin and light sword with one hand was of no effort, it gave him increased mobility, allowing him to evade his opponent's attacks and deliver quick slashes and thrusts to vital points, before readying a final crippling strike.

Day by day, Michael had bettered his prowess in battle, continuously training with Rachel and the others, and it had been months before his first mission was finally explained to him: under Rachel's command, along with two other warriors, he was to travel to the remote village of Meadars, where Amano had sensed, among little more than one hundred inhabitants, the presence of none less than three humans who were strong enough to be turned.

"This is a rare occasion. Surely there must be a reason for three people that have such strong will to be in an area as poorly populated as this one." Amano had spoken to the four warriors he had chosen for the mission. He had summoned them to his private quarters for briefing "Usually this only happens when a great tragedy befalls a certain people, and drives its individuals to a state of such anger, resentfulness or hunger for revenge,

that their spirits become capable of breaking through the cycle.” He had explained “I’m sending the three of you, together with Rachel, because you will most likely be faced with some kind of opposition.”

“Yes, commander!” Both Brad and Vernon had exclaimed in unison. Rachel had remained silent, apparently troubled by something.

“Michael. Take this opportunity to test your own strength and become aware of what you need to improve on. If you do encounter angelic enemies, do not forget that even though you were once one of them, you are now no more than a target in their sights. Likewise, when the time comes, you must not hesitate.”

“I understand.” Michael, eager to prove his worthiness, had answered only with clarity and promptness.

“Okay. As you all know, mass panic will not help you in any way on your mission. Besides, allowing yourself to be recognized by the humans is strictly forbidden, as you well know. So this is to be a stealth mission first and foremost. All of you are to precisely follow Rachel’s orders. Go get ready, then, and depart as soon as possible.”

Night and morning had elapsed since they had left the clan, and each time Michael had looked at the GPS map, he had felt the dot representing the village’s location was actually moving away from them. The one time during which Michael had not even noticed the minutes passing, had been the splendorous moments before, during and after sunrise. The view of the stars slowly fading away as the pitch-black sky became infused with a light, blue hue. The sun being reborn into the world, from far away under the clouds; its glorious fiery rays steadily reacquiring their former strength, ready to shine in full force for a short duration, to once again be inevitably lost under the horizon, giving continuity to an unending cycle. It was just as natural, as it was magical.

Those moments had, in a way, reminded Michael of the message he had retained from Amano’s words, nearly three months before, when he had felt

lost. Since then, he had been reborn and, with renewed purpose, he'd been giving his all to putting the past behind him and moving forward; to rewriting the broken cycle that had become his life.

Once finally only a few miles away from their destiny, the warriors swooped down, and, all of them glad to feel solid ground beneath their soles, proceeded on foot. Perfecting the ability to create an optical illusion in order to hide their black wings and give color to their dark eyes was utterly necessary for demons to dissimulate themselves as humans, so any fully fledged operative had been taught this skill accurately. The remaining demonic traits could, in most situations, be covered with clothes, hoods and gloves without looking too suspicious, and since creating a shield that reflected light around their wings, turning them invisible to the naked eye, wasn't too exhausting, it didn't pose much of a problem.

Situated in the middle of a deserted area, the small village was almost completely isolated from any other signs of civilization. Even so, right upon nearing the entrance, the warriors noticed it strangely looked almost as if it was abandoned. No villagers in sight... no children playing on the streets... complete silence. Was everyone in their houses, in broad day light?

"Let's try this grocery store, see if we can find someone." Rachel proposed "I'll do the talking."

"Sure, baby, you do anything you want..." Brad retorted from behind Rachel as he poked at Vernon with his elbow, widening a jesting grin on his face "Such a young delicacy shouldn't be contradicted under any circumstances!"

Rachel kept her pace without looking back. Michael noticed her look of annoyance. He had come to know it well over time. Even though Rachel made her best efforts to maintain the calm behavior a leader should always have, Michael could almost read her thoughts, written over her face,

slightly covered under the shadow of a wide hood "... *moron*...". He couldn't help a quiet laugh, which he made his best to keep to himself.

At the store, the owner's eyes greeted the four travelers with a strange nervous attitude, his voice not seeing the light of day.

"Hello there, good sir." Rachel said vividly, ignoring the fact that they had not been welcomed into the store.

"*Uh...* howdy, strangers." The man finally replied with a flinching voice "What can I... *uh...* help you with?" A forced, unnatural smile was awkwardly painted over his face.

"Well, we were just passing by your village on our journey, and we noticed it's completely deserted out there!" Rachel sounded genuinely surprised as she spoke "Did something happen here?"

"What? No! Everything's fine!" The owner said hastily "*Err...* I mean, our village has always been like this!" He cleared his throat, trying to regain some composure "We're a very quiet people... everyone's... well... just... enjoying the comfort of their homes! Yeah."

"But where are your children? Why aren't they playing outside like they should be?" Rachel insisted, trying to maintain a casual tone.

"*Uh...* well, that's of no concern to you!" An angry tone overtook the owner's voice, surprising Rachel, as well as Michael, who stood beside her "Furthermore, strangers are not welcome here. You should leave as soon as possible!" The man waved his hand harshly before stepping back from the counter, and turning around, apparently to continue organizing the contents of a shelf lined with all kinds of food spices and condiments.

"Very well... don't worry, sir, we'll be out of your way in no time. We'll be staying only for the night." Rachel discreetly signaled the others to leave "Have a good afternoon." She concluded, with no response from the store owner, as they walked away.

On his way out of the store, Michael was surprised by a loud male voice screaming “Hey, get back here!”

A boy slammed against Michael’s legs before falling on his bottom. As he got back up on his feet, the boy quickly hid behind Michael “No! Get away from me!” He cried out, grabbing at Michael’s pants.

“Oh come on now, boy...” A man dressed in a long, buttoned up overcoat approached, panting heavily “Why are you running from your own dad?”

“You’re not my dad!” The boy screamed, from his safe hiding spot, behind Michael’s legs.

“Bah! Get over here, right now!” The unknown man said, sounding frustrated, as he reached for the boy.

Michael stopped the man from grabbing the kid, placing a firm hand on his shoulder “Stand back, sir. What’s going on here?”

“The boy’s playing a prank, that’s what’s going on!” The man exclaimed in irritation. Large beads of sweat ran down the angry-red skin on his forehead.

“No! These men have my dad in a basement!” The boy looked up at Michael with desperate, tearful eyes “I think they’re hurting him! Please, help us!”

The man laughed out loud, whipping his face and nodding his head in an embarrassed looking gesture “See? Are you really going to believe this? Don’t you see he’s just trying to trick you?”

“The boy doesn’t seem to want to go with you...” Michael said warily, measuring the man’s reactions.

“Well, that’s none of your business! Who are you to tell me how to treat my own son?!” The man sounded outraged. As he started getting increasingly agitated, Rachel noticed other presences, sulking in the shadows, watching them from windows and doors left ajar...

“Let go of the boy, Michael.” She said, in a serious tone.

“Huh?!” Michael was about to argue “But... Rache-”

“Right now.” Rachel commanded, interrupting Michael’s speech “We’re sorry for disturbing you, sir. We didn’t mean to intrude.”

Michael remained silent, clearly aching to speak out, as he heard the boy screaming “No! Please, help us!” The infant’s voice cut deep into Michael’s conscience, but Rachel’s stern glare was set upon his own, ordering him to stand down “Don’t leave me with him, please!” The little kid clawed at Michael’s arm with his small hands, crying for help as the man reached for him. Michael looked away and pulled his arm free of the child’s hold. He lowered his hood even further, sinking his face in gloom, and walked away, without looking back.

“Shut up, boy!” The man screamed, as he grabbed the kid “That’s enough! Thank you for showing your friend some manners, miss. Have a good day.” He thanked Rachel in a harsh voice before picking the boy up and taking him away to a nearby house, while he kicked and screamed the whole way.

“We should rent a couple of rooms at the inn to rest up and think things through.” Rachel suggested to Brad and Vernon, who fell behind her as she hurried along to catch up with Michael.

“Why’d you do that?!” Michael immediately lashed out as Rachel approached him “That man wasn’t the boy’s father!”

“There’re a lot of people watching us. We can’t afford to cause a commotion like this... the mission comes first. We’ll consider what to do when we’re alone.”

Unable to agree with Rachel’s decision to abandon the child, Michael went ahead to avoid an argument. At the inn, on entering, followed by the others, he was welcomed by a completely opposite attitude, compared to the store owner’s.

“Greetings, young man. How are you, today?” The man at the counter surprised Michael with a pleasant voice, showing no signs of nervousness whatsoever.

“Uh, just fine, thank you, sir.” Michael stated in an awkward voice “I’d like to rent a couple of rooms for me and my companions, please.”

“Oh, straight to business, huh?” The innkeeper sounded overly friendly as he started making inquiries “Where ya’ll from?”

“We’re just passing by. We’ll only be spending the night, to rest up, and continue on our way.” Michael tried avoiding the subject.

“Well, those are some mighty strange outfits! Why all the hoods, and gloves when it’s so hot outside?! I almost can’t see your faces!” The man insisted, maintaining a strangely warm smile on his face.

“Uh... well-” Michael was struggling to evade the innkeeper’s questions as Rachel stepped up and interrupted him in a jubilant voice.

“Good afternoon, sir!”

“Well, hello there, missy! I was just asking your friend why you’re all wearing such concealing vests in this heat... I don’t mean to sound nosy... just curious, that’s all!”

“It’s a custom where we come from... we stick to our roots, you know? We always wear this type of uniform.” Rachel spoke lightly, with no hint of doubt to betray their rouse “Don’t mind us, though! We won’t be of any bother!”

“Oh, no worries!” The man spoke casually, dropping the subject with a wave of his hand, before he questioned, as if out of simple curiosity “But *where* did you say you were from?”

Rachel laughed joyfully “I didn’t!” Her tone was relaxed and cordial as she talked her away around every question thrown at her “If I did, then I’d have to teach you all about our home!” She said, with fake enthusiasm “But we’re all far too tired for that now... maybe in the morning?” She left the

subject hanging in the air for a second, but pressed on before the man had a chance to insist “Could you give us the keys to two rooms, please?”

The innkeeper’s face betrayed his silent frustration “Of course. Will you be sleeping as a couple, or with separate beds?”

“Double bed for us and a room with two beds for our friends, please.”

“Here you are. Both rooms are on the second and last floor, to your right. Twenty-one has the double bed. Enjoy your stay.” The man said, outstretching a hand holding two keys, labeled 21 and 27.

“We will, thank you very much!”

Rachel took both keys, and handed one to Vernon as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“*Hoho*, so the little missy has the hots for the boy!” Brad exclaimed.

“So it seems, Brad!” Vernon laughed as he spoke “How cute!”

Rachel lost her patience. Turning around, she displayed her fangs in anger “Quiet, you two! It looks much less suspicious if we stay as a couple!” She snapped, but still spoke in hushed tones “And besides, why the hell should I justify myself to you?! I’m in command here, and I won’t tolerate any more lack of discipline! If you keep this up, you’ll be answering to Amano when we get back!” Her tone was dead serious.

Silence stood in the hallway for a few seconds as both Vernon and Brad looked dumbstruck at Rachel’s reaction “*Ergh...* kay... just kidding... sorry...” Vernon was the first to apologize.

Rachel was pleased by the dismayed look in their faces, but she did not show it “We’ll go to your room when it’s time. Be sure you’re ready to follow the mission.” Rachel declared with no place for questions, and pulled Michael by the arm into their room, before slamming the door shut.

“Damn...” Brad said as he and Vernon were left standing in the hallway.

Surrounded by the safety of four enclosing walls, Rachel and Michael removed their heavy cloaks, and let the optical shields dissipate, revealing their folded wings. A few hours of rest would help recover their strength from travelling and using their vital force. But before that, Rachel had to scout the village in search of their three targets. All of the higher ranking warriors' ability to concentrate and expand their minds had been trained thoroughly in order to heighten their senses, allowing them to locate human and non-human presences within small areas, and measure their spiritual levels.

Michael's eyelids were feeling heavy as he lay sideways on the bed admiring Rachel's beautiful, slender figure, sitting on the floor. For the past fifteen minutes she had been perfectly still, with her eyes closed lightly and legs crossed, without ushering a single sound, almost as if she had even stopped breathing. Michael felt drowsy and was just about to fall into a dream world when Rachel opened her eyes and spoke calmly "All done. It seems that boy was telling the truth. There are thirteen human presences in an attic, just a few houses up the main street. Among them, are our three targets."

"Okay." Michael strained to focus his sight, and force the sleep away "We should wait for night time to move."

"Yes, it'll be easier to go unnoticed." Rachel agreed.

"Right." Michael spoke coldly, with as few words as possible.

Rachel got up on her feet and joined Michael on the bed "... Are you still mad at me for making you surrender the boy?" She asked, with a worried look on her face as she sat down.

Michael was reluctant to speak up, but still, he did "That child was completely terrified and asking for our help... we just let him be taken away, screaming..." He did not look Rachel in the eyes, clearly disturbed by the subject "I had enough of following orders without thinking of what's right or wrong when I was with the angels..."

“We are not abandoning the boy, or anyone else!” Rachel exclaimed, as she put her hand over Michael’s arm “But we can’t just rush in to save them, and reveal ourselves in the process! We have to think things through, and figure out what’s going on... Amano was the first to admit to me that this whole event was really sketchy. He warned me to take the utmost care in this mission, that’s why he sent four of us on what would otherwise be a simple one-man scouting mission.”

“What if they hurt the boy? His blood will be on our hands...” Michael’s pitch-black eyes were surrounded in an aura of sadness and preoccupation.

Rachel looked at Michael with caring eyes “They won’t... if they were going to, they would’ve done it already.” She said, trying to put his mind at ease “And besides... we won’t be able to help anyone if we’re revealed. How do you think these people would react if they knew what we are? You think they’d still want our help then?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right... sorry, Rach.” After a small moment of silence, he looked her in the eyes “Sorry if I doubted your judgment.”

“It’s okay, Mike... the fact that you care so much is one of the many things I love about you.” Rachel’s lips displayed a tender smile as her eyes remained fixed on Michael’s, making him blush. She noticed the reddened skin on his cheeks, and her voice acquired a sly tone “And, you know... seeing as how we’re alone and we have a few hours to kill... we could... enjoy ourselves...” Her thin fang-like teeth were lustfully biting her lower lip in an alluring smile.

“Huh? Wha... uh...” Michael felt his face heat up. Rachel’s captivating look as she got closer to him; her beautiful lips openly showing a sign of desire; her deep, pure dark eyes, fixed on his own with such an enchanting look... He was at a complete loss for words.

“Just kidding!” Rachel exclaimed as she burst out laughing “You look really cute when you’re embarrassed, you know that?”

“*Ergh...*” Michael was annoyed as well as inevitably drawn by Rachel’s cunning nature. He thought, for an instant, that he should have seen that one coming “Yeah... thanks... or something like that...” He drew a resigned smile.

“So cute!” Rachel kept laughing as she admired Michael’s annoyed face “Well, we should get some rest while we can. Who knows what we’re gonna face later on...” She let go of the subject, not because she was tired of it, as she could not seem to get enough of playing around with Michael, but because there was urgency in readying for the mission. Her voice became serious as she carried on “I still can’t piece together what the hell might be goin’ on in this place... I mean, why are these people holding hostages in a remote village in the middle of nowhere?!”

“I suppose we’ll find out when we make our way into that basement, right?” Michael declared, in a tired voice.

“We sure will. But I’ve had a bad feeling about this ever since Amano briefed me... we should tread carefully.” Rachel noticed Michael’s exhausted eyes “Let’s rest up, okay?”

“Sure.” Michael sat up on the bed, before slowly standing up “You take the bed. I’ll just lie down here.”

“Oh, come on!” Rachel spoke in an annoyed tone “Don’t be a dick, it’s a double bed, we can share it!”

“*Errr...* you won’t mind that?” Michael asked her, with a surprised look.

Rachel looked bewildered as she laughed quietly to herself “So cute...”

Michael sighed deeply before sitting back on the bed “Okay, okay, I get it...”

He awkwardly lay back beside Rachel, sticking to the right side of the bed, his wings aching for a position with greater comfort than folded beneath the full weight of his body. Rachel looked at Michael with a cute

smile, her face reading “*Silly*” in his mind as she nodded her head. Gently, she raised herself up on her elbow and reached for his left wing motioning him to unfold it, which he did, feeling the immediate gratitude of his feathered member. She positioned herself on her side, with her right wing relaxed under her body, and placed her left arm and leg slightly over Michael as she rested her head on his chest, and covered him with her left wing.

Michael heard his own heart beating faster than usual, as he felt Rachel’s body heat and the soft touch of her hand on his shoulder. He knew she could hear his heart as well, pulsating strongly in his chest, right next to her ear... but as she remained in silence, his nervousness quickly vanished. Michael wrapped his arm around Rachel’s waist and folded his left wing over her entire body, and in a matter of minutes they were both fast asleep in each other’s warm embrace.

When night came, the four warriors were rested up and had gathered on Brad and Vernon’s room to proceed with the mission. They dropped down through the window and used their wings to soften the landing, making almost no noise. Quietly, they approached the house where the hostages were being held. Brad and Vernon quickly went around the house, checking for any way to enter unnoticed, while Michael opened his wings and jumped in the air, to quietly circle the house inspecting the roof. They all rejoined with Rachel to think of another way in, as all the windows and doors were shut tight and there was no entry point from above.

Michael knocked on the door... complete and utter silence for a few seconds... He knocked a second time...

A couple of footsteps were heard approaching the door, before a voice spoke, sounding suspicious “Who is it?”

“A gas leak has been detected under your house, we have to get in to fix it... it’s an emergency.” Michael declared through the locked door.

“Huh? What gas leak?! You’re not getting in this late!” The harsh voice replied, without opening even a small threshold.

“I’m sorry but we can’t allow the situation to remain like this.” Michael insisted, as Rachel was urging him to do, standing right next to the door with her back flattened against the wall “You’re endangering a lot of people, and not only yourself. If an explosion were to occur the whole village would be affected!”

“Well, there’s no way to access the basement right now, it’s sealed! You’ll just have to find another way to fix it...” The man sounded unsure of what he was saying.

Realizing this, Michael pressed on, trying to tip the argument in his favor “Just open the door, we’ll take care of the rest, sir. Don’t force us to call the Sheriff this late into the night...”

“Damn it, who the hell are you anyway?” The man demanded, as he opened the door just slightly enough that he could take a look outside.

As soon as she saw the door open, Rachel slid her hand through the threshold, and suddenly jerked the door open, breaking the security chain into pieces as if it was made of plastic. She rushed in and jumped on top of the man behind the door, with her wings wide open. She forced him to the ground and landed on top of him, with a firm hand clutching his mouth, and her knees over his chest and arms, locking him in place. Quietly, Michael got in, followed by Brad and Vernon, who closed the door.

Michael inspected their surroundings, under the yellow dim light coming from the small lamp in the ceiling. There was no one else in the room. A hallway led out to the rest of the house right in front of the main door, while to the right was an open door into the empty kitchen. Rachel signaled him to search down the hallway, but as she did, the unknown man managed to free his mouth from her clasp “The lord will help me, and light will shine upon thee! The end of your kind is soon to come, Demons!” He said in a low, rough voice.

“Huh? What the fuck!?” Brad exclaimed, looking at Vernon, perplexed.

“He must be from some religious cult... look at the amount of crosses and amulets he’s wearing around his neck!” Vernon pointed out.

The man started citing some sort of prayer, asking for salvation and way into the afterlife just shortly before Rachel placed her hand around his mouth once more, sinking her clawed fingernails into his flesh. A muffled scream of pain just barely escaped through Rachel’s fingers as blood trickled from underneath her fingers “Shut the hell up, human!” She spoke violently, lowering her face almost to the floor, to look into her prey’s eyes. Her fangs were showing as she growled, and a crimson glow was forming around her gaze. Within seconds, the man had stopped fighting back, and remained in utter silence, staring blankly forward with terrified gaping eyes. Rachel looked at the others “Boys, you two check the house for other people. Mike, look for the entrance to the basement.”

The house appeared to be empty, the remaining people were probably all down in the basement. Michael opened a door that led him to a bathroom, another one that led to a soulless bedroom, and one that was simply a storage closet. He returned to Rachel, frustrated that he could not find the way to the basement, but then remembered to check the kitchen again. There was a door concealed at the far left end of the room... as he opened it a man suddenly jumped out, striking at him with a large knife. Michael swiftly evaded the thrust, grabbed the man’s arm and twisted it, making his attacker drop the weapon. He quickly reached for the man’s throat and tightened his fingers around his neck, raising him in the air. It was the same man who was with that kid earlier, now also wearing a huge golden cross and other religious amulets around his neck. The anger and frustration Michael had felt from not being able to protect the boy from this man’s hands now showed in his ravaged expression.

“*Argh!* Demon!” The man shouted as loud as he could, while gasping for air, clawing at Michael’s arm “*Argh...* why... isn’t my cross pushing

you away?!” Michael threw the man fiercely to the ground, as he would a stuffed toy. The human inhaled heavily as he crawled on his back until there was no more floor behind him, only a kitchen cabinet “Ach... Why isn’t it working?! You... your kind shouldn’t be able to withstand our holy amulets!” Michael’s assailant spoke in disbelief, as he grabbed at the cross around his neck, and displayed it in his hand, outstretched in front of him.

Michael rushed at the man on the floor with inhuman speed, while grabbing the crucifix between his fingers, bending it like wet clay beneath his grasp “You’ve been reading too many folklore tales!” He leveled his face with his prey’s “Nothing can save you from me!” The growling tone in his voice was brutal, as he bared his sharp teeth “Now tell me where the boy is! And what the fuck are you doing in this village?!”

The man’s eyes revealed a madman’s resolution where they should be filled with fear. He laughed out loud in Michael’s face, as he spoke “You are the ones who cannot be saved! I’m not afraid of dying; God will welcome me with open arms! And all of you will burn underneath His holy light!”

Michael growled out loud as he grabbed the man’s arm in a furious frenzy. His eyes were wide open releasing a dark-red stream of pure energy. He twisted the fanatic’s arm until he heard the sound of the elbow joint snapping “*Aaarghhh!* Please, God, save me!” The man cried out in panic. Michael kept forcing and twisting, increasing his strength. He could feel the bones dislocating and splintering as the flesh stretched to its limit. The look of agony and pain on his enemy’s face was fueling his thirst for blood. He could picture the man’s weak flesh tearing apart, his arm ripped from its socket, and it *felt* real, right.

“That’s enough, Mike!” Rachel said, as she approached in a hurry. At the sound of her voice, Michael regained his senses and realized how far he was going. He released his opponent’s broken arm, and knocked the man out cold with a single punch to the face. He was both disillusioned and

relieved, but he knew the latter would have much greater weight in his cooled mind, later on.

Brad and Vernon had rushed to the kitchen as well, from hearing the commotion. Together, the four of them cautiously descended the stairs to the basement, led by Rachel. Downstairs, a shocking image revealed itself. Eleven men and women were strapped to wooden chairs, their clothes shredded and soaked in their own blood... most of them were on the brink of death, having lost consciousness a long time ago, but a few had been able to resist what had probably been intense torture, and kept their lucidity. Seeing Rachel and the others, they begged for help, while fear overflowed from their voices and facial expressions. Their despair was such that those men and women were willing to ask for help from creatures that clearly terrorized them.

“What would drive these men to do this?!” Brad asked in bewilderment as he rushed to free the nearest victim “Why would a religious cult want to brutally torture people like this??”

“You! You’re the cause of our suffering! It’s because of you that they’ve done this to us!” A woman screamed out as tears rushed down her blood-smeared cheeks.

“What? Why would you say that?” Brad demanded, approaching the woman to untie her “We’re here to help you!”

“No!” A confused man screamed from the middle of the room “Your existence is the reason we’re in this position in the first place! You should all just rot in Hell, **demons!**”

“Why you ungrateful bastard! I’ll teach you some manners!” Vernon said in anger, stepping towards the man.

“Stop right there, Vernon!” Rachel commanded. Slowly, she approached the man and spoke to him in a softer tone “Sir... we have no idea what you’re talking about. Why did these men do this to you?”

“Because of you! To lure you here!” The imprisoned man exclaimed. Dry blood masked almost half of his face; there was a large wound in his head, beneath a patch of crimson-stained gray hair “We thought they were crazy, torturing us, to lure *demons*! But they were right after all!”

“What?! Lure us?” Rachel looked taken aback for an instant “A trap... shit!”

“Rachel...” Vernon spoke with an eerie voice from behind her “Don’t you... sense that? I think... I’m pretty sure I can feel a strong presence getting closer...”

“Ach...” Rachel closed her eyes for an instant, to concentrate “An angel...? No... more than one... two... three, four...” She suddenly reopened her eyes with a distressed look “There’s at least six of them coming... crap, it’s an ambush! We’ve gotta go!” She untied the man in a rush as she spoke.

“But we can’t leave these people here!” Michael exclaimed as he broke the ropes tying down a half-conscious woman, who fell to her knees against his arms “And we haven’t completed our mission yet! We came here for the targets, remember?”

“I remember clearly, Michael! But we fell right into their trap! And we can’t defeat them, just the four of us! We’ll be slaughtered if we stay here!” Rachel’s thoughts were clearly divided as she broke the ropes binding one of the unconscious victims, and gently laid the woman down on the floor “We can’t turn the targets here... it takes time and effort! And if we leave, they won’t hurt these people any further!” She insisted, as if trying to convince herself of the right call to make.

“They won’t?! Look at what they’ve already done to them!” Michael was exasperated, unable to accept the fact that they would have to abandon those poor men and women.

“Rachel, we gotta leave! They’re moving quickly, they’ll be here in a matter of minutes!” Brad pushed Rachel further as he untied another one of the hostages “Let’s just take the three targets with us and flee!”

“Ugh... fuck!” Rachel was split between two very different choices: stand and fight, and possibly lose the hostages and their own lives in the process; or take her targets and complete the mission, uncertain that the other hostages would be safe.

“What’s your call, Rach?” Michael looked Rachel in the eyes, nodding his head. He would support her decision, whatever it was, putting aside his personal feelings.

“Alright, untie the rest. These three are our targets,” She said, pointing at two badly beaten up, unconscious men, and a woman that still retained her senses “each one of you pick one up, and let’s go!”

“What?! Where’re you taking us?!” The woman demanded to know “No! Let go of me, demon!” She screamed, trying to resist as Vernon picked her up.

“Shut up! We’re saving your lives, human!” Vernon looked at the woman in his arms with brutal ferocity, clearly tired of the spite and hate being shown to them.

As the four got ready to leave, two more men arrived at the house. They descended the stairs in a hurry, with small firearms in their hands.

“Don’t think you’re getting away! The harbingers of justice are already on their way, there’s no escape, foul creatures!” One of them screamed as he pointed his gun at Rachel.

“Begone!” With a single swipe of her arm, Rachel released her weapon, and sliced both of their opponent’s necks, then dashed forward pushing them aside, clearing the way for Michael, Brad and Vernon, who carried the three targets. As soon as they got up the stairs and outside the front door, they all opened their wings and flew away, as fast as they could. They

did their best to concentrate on calming their minds and bodies, reducing their spiritual levels to a minimum possible, in order to avoid being detected. Getting back to base with the extra weight would prove to be a tiresome task, but they could not stop until some good miles were put between them and the angel warriors.

Despite the obvious hardships, Michael and the others had managed to escape the ambush and successfully rescue the three targets. After a few hours of flight they landed on an inhabited landscape, near a cavernous area, to light a fire and spend the night. The two unconscious men did not recover their senses throughout the whole journey, making it somewhat easier. The woman on the other hand, had isolated herself from the demonic warriors. Hours had passed before she had opened up enough to tell Rachel her name: Sarah. It brought a smile to Michael's lips, to give a name to the life they had saved. Regardless of how much gratitude was shown them, Michael found it infinitely gratifying, just to know that because of them, Sarah was safe from harm's way.

Back at base, the three hostages were taken for medical care, and Rachel went to speak with Amano about what had transpired "Humans! They're using humans to do their dirty work now, Amano!" She exclaimed, after having meticulously recounted the events "This is going too far... we're not supposed to be fighting humans!"

Amano took a few steady puffs of his smoking pipe. The fragrant smell of tobacco filled his private quarters "So, the angels are going this far already... Raphael must be desperate..." He seemed to consider his thoughts for an instant "Using religion to turn humanity against us has forced us to exist in hiding for millennia... and now, they're convincing people to fight us... were there any casualties?" He questioned with a worried look, as if he had just remembered it.

"I... I had to... we were being ambushed... time was completely essential, and two armed men got in my way as we were about to leave..."

Rachel spoke in a low voice, as if ashamed of what she was about to say “They would have shot us... I reacted instinctively... I... I killed both of them...” She confessed.

Amano remained silent for a few seconds, regarding the old wooden desk they were sitting at, from in between his interlocked fingers. The wrinkled skin under his eyes, distorting the clean, long scar on his face, revealed how concerned he was, carefully weighing his next words “Rachel... I know you probably don’t feel too much empathy for them... you were born one of us, and you see humans as creatures to avoid during your missions, or targets to turn. But, they’re not invaluable only as our possible future siblings. The whole reason we exist... the entire philosophy that stands as the foundation of our clan... we cannot take human lives...”

“I know... I’m sorry, Amano...” Rachel could not look her fatherly figure in the eyes. She kept her head low, in shame.

“Well... I always knew it would come to this eventually...” Amano said in a soft voice. He reached out and placed a hand over Rachel’s face in a tender gesture. He looked her in the eyes with a calm and reassuring stare, that let her know she should not be ashamed of what she had done, simply sorry for it “Our forces have been getting more numerous as time goes by, and I knew it was only a matter of time until Raphael took this step.” He made a short pause to relight his pipe, taking a few short puffs from it “I know how *we* will act. I’m just worried how other clans might react when this situation presents itself to them... will the other leaders also take the choice of not killing human opponents?”

“But... how *are* we supposed to do this? We can’t kill them, but if they’re attacking us with deadly force, how do we defend ourselves?” Rachel questioned Amano, her voice filled with doubt and uncertainty “And if they’re informed of our presence beforehand, it will be that much harder to go unnoticed and avoid attack... How will we lead our missions from now on?”

“The angels cannot know of our actions. We have to be more cautious; plan our missions more meticulously, so as not to allow them to predict what we will do or where we will be.” Amano was voicing only a part of his thoughts, as Rachel, who knew him almost as deeply as she knew herself, could read the disquiet and worry in his face “As for encountering human opponents, they must be incapacitated with no threat to their lives...” He made a long pause, apparently immersed deep in his thoughts. The tobacco leaves in the bowl of his pipe were no longer burning “Well... just go rest up for now, Rachel. I will call a meeting tomorrow with everyone, to explain these events.”

“Okay...” Rachel agreed reluctantly. She got up and turned to leave, her mind troubled with everything that had happened.

“By the way,” Amano called out, before Rachel exited the room “you did perfectly out there, child. You have proven your worth yet again. Good job.” He said with a pleasant fatherly smile on his face.

Rachel could not help a smile “Thanks, Amano.”

The following day, every warrior under Amano’s command assembled at the main hall, in the center building of the village. Over one hundred warriors were gathered, with no idea what the meeting might be about.

“Greetings, friends. Thank you all for gathering here.” Amano spoke in a strong voice tone. He stood on the edge of a small indoor water fountain, in the farthest wall of the room, facing the crowd, so that his words would be heard by everyone present “As some of you may already know, Raphael’s forces have adopted a new strategy in the war. On our last scouting mission, Rachel, Michael, Vernon and Brad were faced with Human opposition. These attackers were aware of our existence, and were indeed ambushing our warriors.” Gasping sounds were heard throughout the crowd “They tortured a group of human civilians in a remote village, forcing their spirits to become stronger through agony, pain, and despair so

that we would sense them. They lured our presence, and then proceeded to inform the angels of our warriors' arrival at the site."

Chaos erupted as more and more soldiers questioned what they should do "How are we supposed to fight humans?!" "How can they do this?? They're going too far!" "What'll we do now?"

Amano's thunderous voice echoed throughout the room "**SILENCE!**" Each and every warrior was silent within instants "Chaos and confusion among us are simply catalysts for the angels' victory! It is of no use to think of their reasons. Just like we have been living in secret since any of you can remember, so we will continue. Humanity being more aware of our existence, or less, will not change things. For now, we will carry on as we have always done, simply taking greater care to ensure that our enemies do not find us out."

Amano looked at the crowd of warriors in front of him for a moment. No one dared to speak. He would make sure his words would not be lost to any one of his warriors "Humans, as you all know, are of no threat to us in close quarters combat. We will have to be even more cautious to remain unrecognized during missions, and if there are indeed human opponents, you are to disable them without casualties, with no exceptions! I will not be leading an army with human deaths piling up along its path! Anyone who disagrees with this is free to leave and join another clan." Silence throughout the hall marked the loyalty shown by every warrior "Very well. From now on, every mission will have to be dealt with even more delicately. You can return to your daily routines now. Thank you all for remaining strong."

Chapter 18:

«Cold as Steel»

White, empty eyes, staring right into his mind. Cold, emotionless, unmoved... these were the words popping into Ryo's mind, as he gazed upon his opponent.

Once again, in the midst of a circle composed of dozens of angels attentively watching him, Ryo was faced with a soldier he was to battle and defeat to prove himself ready to move on. This one, unlike Raze, would not be moved by any kind of provocation. He was completely focused on the battle, on his mission to best Ryo in armed combat. Standing ready, with its gigantic broadsword at its side, the creature emanated a powerful and intense aura.

This time though, they stood on even grounds. Ryo's katana was with him for the fight, and if his adversary was one hundred percent determined on defeating him, then his own resolve would just have to go beyond what the angel's mind could fathom. Nothing would stop Ryo from reaching his sworn enemy and tearing him apart... and whatever stood in the way of his vengeance would just as well be rendered asunder.

“You may begin whenever ready, warriors.”

As soon as Ryo heard the archangel's voice signaling the start of the battle, he leaped forward with inhuman speed, his sights trained on quick and unchallenged victory. A mere moment was what it took for him to reach his adversary. As soon as the angel registered Ryo's proximity, he unleashed a powerful horizontal slash that cleared everything in its path. Passing above the angelic warrior, though, a shadow was projected down... *“So, it seems this one is determined to kill me without a second's thought as well... that'll just make it easier to clear any kind of conscience problems I might feel after this is done.”*

Dropping down right behind the angel's back after a swift summersault, Ryo unsheathed his katana and delivered a lightning fast slash that cleaved one of his opponent's wings right off. Dark-red blood gushed everywhere and the angel faltered forward. Both surprise and pain were shown in his face as he recovered and turned back to face Ryo, but none of his focus seemed to have abandoned him.

"So, he managed to minimize the damage... he's skilled... that slash would've cut him in two if he hadn't evaded... but that wound will leave him weakened..." But, in no time and much to Ryo's surprise, the creature was upon him, its sword aimed straight at his chest, in a thrusting onset. A small twist of Ryo's body and a nudge of his own blade allowed the huge sword to miss its target, fiery sparks being born from the clash and grind of metal against metal. Ryo hastily rotated in place and, following the movement of his opponent passing by him, delivered a quick one handed thrust of his own. The long blade of his sword reached the angel's back just in time, puncturing his right shoulder to shatter the clavicle bone, as the warrior continued forward, and stumbled to the ground, where he would remain, motionless, for a few seconds. After swiping the angel's blood off the edge of his katana, splattering it over the grass and dirt, Ryo returned the weapon to the enclosure of its sheath.

"Give up while you still can, angel. There's no need for your existence to end here." Ryo stated, in a cold, calm voice as if he was making no effort to fight.

The angelic soldier slowly raised himself back to a standing position. He was apparently unmoved by Ryo's words "You have not killed me yet, because you have not been able to." He said, with surprising clarity, supporting some of his weight on the large sword by his side "Do not try to make it sound as if you are sparing me, halfling. You are not fooling anyone here... and you will not get another lucky hit, so be ready to face your doom!"

The angel pointed its left hand towards Ryo and in an instant a lightning burst quickly traveled through the air to reach its target in a matter of milliseconds. Ryo's whole body tensed up uncontrollably and he lost, for a mere moment, the notion of space and time. He was on the ground, his muscles stuttering from the shock, when his vision became clear again. The angel was upon him, as if out of thin air, with his weapon pointing downwards, held by two hands *"How can he move so fast with such grave injuries?! He should be incapacitated by now!"* These were the thoughts crossing Ryo's mind, while time flowed in slow motion, each crawling second rapidly draining him of precious vital energy. He managed, with great effort, to roll out of the sword's descending trajectory, and get back on his feet. As he released the flow of time back to its normal speed, the strain over his body immediately decreasing, the angel's sword buried itself deep in the ground.

Without wasting time in idle considerations, Ryo dashed in for the killing blow. The earth shook beneath his feet as the angel forced his sword sideways, cutting through the ground in Ryo's direction. He immediately abandoned his onset and jumped away, to avoid being torn in two by an extremely powerful slash as the creature's huge blade released itself of its earthly prison. Dirt and leaves of grass scattered everywhere through the air in a wide arc behind the broadsword.

As soon as Ryo's feet were steady on the ground, his opponent was already dashing forward, a trail of dark red blood streaming through the air behind him, readying a sideways attack. Ryo quickly ducked, but as the great sword missed him by only a few inches, the angel surprisingly did not stop his movement and instead kept rotating his body. Performing a complete circle around his own axis, Ryo's enemy then delivered a quick downwards slash surprising Ryo, and forcing him to unsheathe his sword partially, to take the blow head on. Stunned by the impact's sheer force, Ryo fell to one knee. A powerful kick to the stomach caught him off guard,

lifting him right off his feet, followed by a strike from the hilt of his opponent's sword, which knocked him back through the air, rolling to the ground.

Down on his back, trying to recover his senses, Ryo opened his eyes and strained to focus... his opponent was high above him, floating in the air, his one remaining wing flapping twice as strongly as it usually would. With the huge sword held over his head between both hands, the warrior folded his wing, and began his descent. Ryo's mind regained its lucidity as a surge of adrenaline rushed along his bloodstream *"Shit... this one I won't be able to block!"* Pushing himself out of the way with all of his strength, Ryo swung back on his feet when, right beside him, his adversary came crashing down with an attack so powerful it could have encompassed the thundering force of a falling meteor.

Dust and gravel flew all around him as Ryo turned back towards where the creature stood and, with all his determination, delivered the final slash that would end the encounter, sideways, at neck height *"Say goodbye, creature!"* But when he expected to feel the slight resistance of his opponent's spine splitting, separating the head from the rest of the body, instead his blade was stopped dead with a sudden metallic clash. Ryo dashed back with his sword ready to block anything that came at him. The dust slowly settled and Ryo realized what had happened, as the archangel Raphael stood a few steps ahead, sword in hand, having blocked his attack just an inch away from its target's neck.

"That is enough. The match is over. You have won, Ryo, and have proven your worth, just as well as your determination, and ruthlessness." Raphael spoke calmly, as two female angels dressed in long, fully white robes hurried behind him to check Ryo's opponent for injuries "This is how you must face the demons, always. A second's time hesitating is enough to allow your head to fall off its shoulders..."

Ryo's heart was racing, his vision almost tunneling to a view of his opponent. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath "*Humph...* very well..." He replied harshly "You can thank your master for your life, creature." He directed a despising look at the defeated angel.

"*Ergh...* I have not lost yet!" The warrior cried out, pushing the healers away from him.

"Enough! Accept your defeat, Jonathan!" Raphael spoke imposingly "The match is over when I say it is over. Now stand down, and go tend to your wounds, soldier."

"... Yes... sir." The warrior accepted reluctantly, but without question.

Raphael waited for Jonathan to allow the healers to help him out of the circle, and then directed his speech at Ryo "As for you, Ryo, go to your quarters and rest up for the night. Tomorrow you will be given your first assignment."

Ryo's upper lip twitched in an open display of anger before he regained his composure and sheathed his blade "I've already told you, archangel... You can't order me around. What I want from you is the location of my enemy, and you will to give it to me. Fulfill your end of our bargain."

The archangel was unmoved by Ryo's provoking tone "All in due time. Not until you are ready. For now you will be accompanying my soldiers on their missions, and you will have plenty of demons to slay along the way."

"But I *am* ready! I've proven it already!" Ryo insisted.

"No, you have not! *I* will tell you when you are ready." Raphael spoke loudly, losing patience "And don't forget you have your part of the agreement to honor as well. You vowed that you would assist our forces in riding the Earth of demons. Before you earn the right to receive the knowledge you desire, you have to deliver results."

"... Very well..." Ryo, with no way around it, granted the archangel the last word on the subject.

“Your uniform will be delivered to your quarters before morning arises.” Raphael sheathed the short golden sword in his hand and threw it to a soldier near him.

“Archangel, both of us know what your... *forces*... think of me.” Ryo’s words were spiteful, but he took on a warning tone. He looked around himself, scanning the white-winged crowd with his dark glare, and not directly at Raphael as he spoke “If any one of them tries anything against me in any mission of yours, don’t think my priority will be any other than getting rid of my obstacles... be them demonic, or angelic in nature.”

“Do not worry. I fully trust my soldiers’ loyalty. You need only worry about finishing off the demons that stand in your path.”

“You seem more eager to kill them, than to actually protect the human kind...” Ryo stated clearly, leaving his irony-drenched words to hang heavily in the air.

Raphael stood quiet for a second, before he turned around to leave “Be sure you are ready for your mission, boy.”

Ryo walked away from the archangel without so much as a second longer wasted on their discussion. The angelic soldiers cleared a path for him, not out of respect, but both in clear contempt and dismay. Ryo paid them no attention. His mind wandered. Anxiety filled his soul “*So... tomorrow I’ll finally be facing the creatures that caused all of my suffering... and all of their suffering...*” He felt somehow exhilarated, frenzied even. The fight had left him hungry for more, unsatisfied. For the first time since his whole world had decided to crash and burn around him, dragging him down with it, he felt as if he was taking back the reins of fate. He had become aware of the growing power inside of him, and it felt *good*. The dire creatures that had taken everything away, that had reaped the innocent souls of his loved ones... their pain and blood alone would satisfy his lust “*Mom, dad... Karin... Michael... they’re going to die for what they did to you... all of them... they will suffer... finally... hah... hahah...*”

A sudden fit of laughter rasped at his chest from within, haunting his mind, born maybe of the sheer ridiculousness of the turn his life had taken. Determination and desire, if too intense – and chaotic, especially – may easily invite madness in, and walk hand in hand with it, right up your wide open front door. Ryo was perfectly aware of this. But was lunacy really such a bad trait? Was his sanity worth holding on to, and did it really matter at all?

“Hahahahahahah!” He burst out laughing. He stopped dead in his tracks and nearly stumbled against the wall as hysterical laughter erupted from his throat until tears strolled down his face. He slid down to the floor and grasped at his hair with both hands. His mind was irrationally filled to the brim with emptiness. The crazed laughter reflected his compulsion to abandon reason and logic, both having lately served only the purpose of plaguing his conscious mind with shattered memories and corrosive emotions. The empty stone hallways that led to Ryo’s room were, for the infinitely long minutes that it took him to purge his state of mind of the turmoil that racked it, filled with the ominous, direful echo of a madman’s laugh.

Come morning, Ryo awoke with a clear mind. The small hours of the night had become the memory of a bad dream; a nightmare that had, if nothing more, allowed him to wave away the control which he so fought, constantly and tirelessly, to keep. Now, his objective was once again clear in his mind. He picked up his uniform for the mission, already laid out for him on the room’s single piece of furniture that was the wall-mounted stand. The idea of displaying the same uniform as the angels felt abhorring, but at least it would be a change from the training vests he had been wearing for the past year. After getting dressed in the fully white, baggy pants and short overcoat provided for him, he strapped the simple belt from his training garb around his waist and secured his katana’s sheath on it. He opted to leave all the heavy armor behind as he felt it would slow him

down, and only picked up and equipped the golden and platinum greaves and gauntlets.

Fully vested, he headed for the main hall, where Raphael would be holding the mission briefing. He entered in silence, as a crowd of angels stood, gathered before the archangel. Raphael began speaking in English as soon as he noticed Ryo stepping among his soldiers. A European city, part of the United Kingdom, situated on an island surrounded by the North Atlantic Ocean, was being attacked by demonic forces. Human military and Special Forces had been dispatched to the island. Full blown war throughout the entire city was going down. Fifty angelic soldiers would be sent to annihilate all of the demons on site.

“What the fuck?! Demons are directly attacking a Human city?” Ryo asked, baffled by what he was hearing “After thousands of years in hiding, they suddenly decide to start attacking on a large scale?!”

“It has been some time since the human public became aware of the demons’ existence on Earth. They have already created several types of Special Forces to fight them, using their own means.” Raphael explained, as tens of angels looked back at Ryo in disapproval of his interruption “But it is our duty to rid the world of the demons’ existence. Humanity is doomed if we do not, as they fight a losing battle.”

“But... how did this happen?” Ryo insisted. It made no sense to him, that after so much time in hiding, demons would just boldly start roaming the Earth, invading human cities “What do the demons have to gain from attacking a city like that? And why now?!”

“That is not of our concern.” Raphael stated coldly “The enemy’s reason and motivation does not matter. They are, all of them, to be eliminated. Thousands of humans are depending on us for survival. The description of a creature at the site matches that of a clan leader, Hanya. He is one of the most powerful demons in existence. Be ready.” After speaking directly to Ryo, the archangel addressed his soldiers. He spoke a few short words Ryo

could not begin to understand, and dozens of angels answered in perfect unison with one single word in their ancient language.

Within instants the soldiers all started orderly abandoning the hall. Raphael approached Ryo and spoke in a lower voice “Ryo, you’re to follow the lead of these warriors, and once you arrive at the city you’re free to kill every demon you can. You have your chance for revenge... take it.”

“I will.” Ryo answered shortly.

“Since you are not gifted with wings, take this.” The archangel extended his open hand; at the center of his palm rested a silver ring with designs similar to those on the magical bracelet Metatron had lent Ryo, and which he had been wearing ever since “It is clear you have, on your own, learned how to control the flow of life force, so I take it you will be able to accompany our warriors through the skies. I have charged this ring with vital energy. You can use it to replenish your strength as you travel to the mission site. The levels of energy stored are small, so you cannot rely on it to fight. Only draw from the ring to travel, otherwise it will soon be emptied.”

Ryo took the ring, and placed it around his right middle finger. As it had been with the bracelet, the strange designs around the magical object emitted a fiery glow as they circled around before locking in place. The ring acquired the exact right size to fit Ryo’s finger as a warm feeling flowed through his skin. He felt the energy stream emanating from the object.

“In a few hours you will have the chance to face the creatures responsible for all the pain you have had to endure, Ryo. Take advantage of this opportunity, and make sure their corruption spreads no further!” Raphael encouraged Ryo’s thirst for revenge, to which Ryo gave no answer. He turned his back on the archangel and followed the remaining angels through the exit in silence.

Outside, in the training area, the soldiers opened their wings, and in orderly rows of ten at a time they took to the skies *“Hummm... it shouldn’t be too hard to lower gravity’s pull on me enough to allow me to float... and mimicking the effects of a pair of wings with energy surges... let’s see how this works.”*

As Ryo internalized these mental tasks, he erased everything around him from his mind, and concentrated only on his own physical and spiritual manifestations. He raised an energy field around him that would contradict the force of gravity. Within instants his feet were rising off the ground, his body becoming weightless. He felt his strength being drained to maintain this effect constant, and focused on the ring around his finger to create an open link to the energy stored within it. The last wave of angels was about to lift from the ground, and Ryo had to follow them to pass through to the Human Realm. He pictured a great pair of wings within his mind, and aimed to materialize this image on his back. Slowly, he began feeling as if two extra limbs were sprouting from his back, the control over their movement being directed to his back muscles. He tried moving his newly acquired wings, and was surprised by how natural it felt. A single flap of these energy-based limbs propelled him feet away from the ground, where he remained for an instant, slowly hovering in place thanks to the energy field around him.

The remaining angelic soldiers were flying ahead, so Ryo clumsily did his best to follow them up through the clouds. Far away in the skies, where the first row of angels had reached, a great circle of light had come to life; initially as a small star-shaped light surge, it grew from its own center, rapidly expanding to form what looked like a gigantic halo which, as the angels reached it, had become big enough to encircle the whole army. Within this portal, the blue sky and white clouds seemed strangely ethereal, as if nothing but an illusion.

As the first winged warrior reached the circle he phased through it and disappeared, followed closely by his brethren. Ripples were created as each angel touched the water-like mirrored surface, expanding all the way to the halo's edge. Ryo reached the surface with an open hand extended forward, unsure of what expected him on the other side, or of what it would be like to pass through this strange portal. With another flap of his ethereal wings his hand immersed itself on the fluid surface, before the rest of his body slipped through. He felt as if he was piercing a small layer of cold water at a very slow speed, as if actually moving under water. A chill ran along his spine and he instinctively held his breath and closed his eyes tightly, as his face came into contact with the portal. In no time, his whole body had been sucked into the cold unknown.

Ryo opened his eyes as a strong gust of air hit his face. He became aware that he was rapidly flying down amidst misty white clouds, with the opposite orientation to the one he was following on the Holy Realm when he had entered the portal. Ahead of him, an angel calmly corrected its course with a steady flap of its wings. Ryo strained to do something similar as he descended through the skies with an uncontrolled momentum. He contracted all the muscles on his back in an attempt to beat his still untrained wings with as much strength as he could fathom. His head was stunned and his senses shaken as he suddenly stopped mid-air; at both his sides, two dark-red long incorporeal objects entered his field of vision, reaching forward, completely halting his advance, in a powerful motion. He shook his head and looked around himself, trying to regain his balance before he realized that what he had seen was, in fact, what his fabricated wings' manifestation looked like. Ryo tried to put all the commotion and confusion behind him, and focus on his objective. He hurried to reach the angels' silhouettes that were already far away on the late afternoon, fire-colored horizon.

The whole way to the island, Ryo's mind was perplexed with what he had just learned from Raphael... *"How can the world have changed so much since I left? People at war with demons... and angels visiting the earth... what the hell happened down here? What can possibly have triggered such a drastic change?!"*

Flying... Ryo's first time flying through the skies, and yet... his mind was so dumbstruck with the thought of all-out war between humanity and the demons, that he did not even think about what he was doing, and simply kept going. He followed the angels along their trail, all of his thoughts merging both on the ridiculousness of what he would encounter at their destination, and on how important it had become to actually defeat the demons threatening humanity. Ryo was unsure of just how long it had been when the island came into view as the angels broke through the clouds.

Upon arrival at the outskirts of the destined city, Ryo witnessed a police patrol car driving by, lights flashing and siren buzzing, followed by a series of black trucks, probably transporting soldiers to the epicenter of the encounter. Where they stood, the only detail indicative of disturbance was the sight of a few clouds of smoke far away, overshadowing the setting sun behind the city's tall buildings. They proceeded to follow the vehicles, flying overhead, and, as they approached the inner most parts of the city, chaos became a constant. Pedestrians were fleeing and screaming wildly, pushing and shoving at each other in desperation, alarms honking loudly and cars speeding by towards the bridge leading out of the city. Just a few blocks away, the real fight emerged. Squadrons of human soldiers equipped with all kinds of artillery, ranging from regular firearms such as handguns, shotguns and machine guns, to much more advanced technology that Ryo had no idea even existed, such as energy shields, large electrically charged blades and even some kind of stealth camouflage, were fighting against small groups of demons.

“Disperse soldiers. Every last demon is to be executed. Godspeed!” The commanding angelic soldier screamed out, making his voice heard throughout the skies.

As the fleeing people witnessed the arrival of the angelic soldiers, most of them stopped in place; a great crowd began praising the angelic beings, thanking God and firmly crying out that the demons’ time had come. Ryo was surprised that so many of these men and women appeared to be religious followers, and that they did not seem even a bit surprised by the whole situation... *“In less than two years... so much change... has human society changed even more than I have, even after I abandoned my humanity?”*

As the angels engaged their targets, so would Ryo. Despite how much the human world might have changed, the demons were still to be at the root of the problem. And besides, the hour of their reckoning was finally at hand. Ryo allowed the wings and shield he had created to dissipate. He dropped to the ground; it felt safe to have solid ground beneath his feet once again. He took a deep breath as he looked around, only a few feet away from his enemies *“I’m... going to enjoy this...”* He thought, as much surprised by what he was feeling, as he was determined to allow those same feelings to take over, and guide his blade through the flesh of his enemies.

Ryo faced the closest group of demons and became aware that one of the creatures had spotted him *“The first one to perish!”* Immediately, Ryo’s mind felt light, even slightly dazed and his heart rate shot up as he dashed forward with one hand on the sheath of his katana, and the other on its grip, ready to slash at the smallest hint of a command from his adrenaline intoxicated brain.

“You! You’re here!” The demon cried out as Ryo approached. It somehow appeared to recognize him. Surprised by this strange reaction, Ryo stopped dead in his tracks, cautiously reading the demon’s every movement “But... why are you with the-” Just in that instant, the demon’s

speech was cut short and its facial expression changed from a mix of surprise, confusion and joy to blank emptiness... its black eyes were wide open as its head slowly tilted back and fell to the ground, separated from the crumbling body. A fountain of crimson blood erupted from in between the creature's shoulders.

An angel stood one step behind the fallen body, sword in hand "You're not here to chat with the enemy, creature! You're here to destroy them! Now make yourself useful an-" But the angelic soldier was interrupted as well when a demon flew by and grabbed him by the wings, pulling him up high.

"That was not the reaction I was expecting... what was that... look... on the demon's face?" Suddenly, loud shots fired from his right side awakened Ryo's mind and he instinctively evaded out of the bullets' trajectory and dashed toward their source. Just as he was about to unsheathe his katana, he noticed he was face to face with two human soldiers. The frightened look on their eyes, as they both tripped back and fell to the ground, dropping their weapons, stopped him.

"Why are you shooting at me?" Ryo asked, in surprise "I'm not your enemy!"

"Uh... wha..." One of the soldiers seemed utterly confused as he looked directly at Ryo's face.

"Shit... You think you can fool us, creature?? You're just another demon!" The other soldier screamed at full lungs as he quickly reached for the small arm holstered at his waist, and aimed it straight at Ryo's head.

Two rounds were fired from the weapon, forcing Ryo to raise and unsheathe part of his sword to reflect the bullets "No! I'm not a demon!" He cried out, dropping his katana and raising his hands "We're here to fight them! Just stay back and-"

Ryo's line of thought was broken when he perceived a massive power source approaching him at an exceedingly high speed *"What the... who..."*

what... is this power?!” As Ryo recalled his focus back to the soldiers on the ground, a powerful gust of wind brushed his hair and both their bodies were instantaneously cleaved in half before he had any chance to react. Blood gushed everywhere as the soldiers’ loud and sudden cries of agony quickly faded away with their lives. Ryo immediately stepped back and took a defensive stance, his fingers brushing the grip of his katana. A tall demon appeared beside him swiping its huge scythe, splattering the soldiers’ vital fluids in a perfect arc all over the ground. A grim voice came from its mouth, as it extended an open hand towards Ryo...

“Greetings. I am Hanya, leader of the Vassari clan.” The ancient demon introduced himself, with a short bow of its head “I know perfectly well who you are, Ryo, and I am here to present you with the chance of joining us...” The creature’s deep voice flowed harshly between its colorless lips, which were abnormally stretched to cover the large extruding fangs on its mouth. The white skin around the demon leader’s abyssal eyes was riddled with long and thin black veins that gave his face a haunting, undead appearance. “Follow your destiny... or die here, with your angel companions. Which will it be?”

Ryo remained silent, cautiously regarding the monstrous creature before him with a cold, probing stare.

“No answer...” The demon carried on “Look around you... we’re at war! The time for indecisions is over. Choose your side!” It spoke proudly with its chin held high. Two large twisted horns, one protruding from each side of the creature’s bald head, completed an image that closely resembled what the devil was usually represented as, in folklore.

A small, irony-filled, smirk formed on Ryo’s lips. He kept gazing at the demonic leader for a few moments as that smirk grew into a grin and he eventually started laughing at the creature’s astonished expression, waving a hand over his face, in a jesting gesture “... Hahah... hahahahahah...”

“?! *Ergh...* what do you find so funny, child? Have you gone mad?!” The demon questioned with a disturbed look on its face.

“Hahahahah... You...” Ryo struggled to stop himself from laughing further “You... actually thought I’d join you?!” His eyes were bulged in astonishment. A fleeting moment of silence passed, before Ryo’s facial expression changed completely. His upper lip twitched in hatred and spite as he carried on speaking “You just murdered these two men in cold blood... was that... your attempt to convince me, stupid creature?!”

Hanya looked outraged at Ryo’s remark “The humans turned on us! I will not stand and watch my kin be murdered by these ungrateful beings!” He exclaimed in anger.

“Oh, but you won’t have to!” Ryo’s eyes had acquired a maddened look as he spoke. The deep thirst for vengeance was starting to consume his very being. His mind ached for the idea of tearing these demonic creatures apart “I will be the one to rid the world of your unnatural existence!” “*You’ll never hurt another person again... demon! Your blood is mine!*”

Hanya appeared somehow disappointed at what he was hearing “So be it, we have no need for you anyway.” He raised his large scythe, spinning it around between the gruesome, clawed fingers of his right hand, before slamming it’s blunt end against the ground with thundering force, cracking the stone floor beneath his feet “Are you any better than the angels? Show me how you intend to *rid the world of our existence!*”

As Ryo got into stance and readied his weapon two angels came to help fight the clan leader and both tackled the creature at the same time. Pushed back by the force of the impact, Hanya lowered his stance, without ever losing his balance. One of the angelic warriors jumped forward with his two handed sword ready, preparing a sideways dashing attack, while the other one flew around the demon to attack from behind. Hanya swiftly parried the frontal attack leaving the angel defenseless, and then performed an extremely fast back flip timed exactly right to evade and jump over the

second angel's dashing attack. As he landed, a single inhumanly powerful swipe of the demonic leader's scythe ripped both angels' bodies to pieces.

Suddenly turning to his back and swinging his weapon upwards, Hanya pierced the chest of a third opponent that had approached him stealthily trying to catch him off guard. The attack lifted the angel's body by the torso and swung it around like a ragdoll over the demon's head, without a single delay to the circular motion, splattering the body against the ground in front of Ryo. As the angel screamed in pain on the ground, flapping his wings trying to remove the huge blade from his chest, the scythe mercilessly ripped all the way up through its torso and head, freeing itself.

Ryo stood ready for any kind of attack the demon leader might launch at him, but though unwilling to admit it, the sheer power displayed by his opponent had made an impression on him. The angels that had attacked the creature had resembled mere puppets in its hands. As the other angelic warriors became aware of their companions' presences vanishing, they started to converge upon Hanya's location.

"Are you going to let me kill all these noisy insects you call your fellow warriors? Or do you intend to fight me yourself?" Hanya challenged Ryo.

Ryo raised an eyebrow "Why would I call these creatures my *fellow warriors*?"

Hanya looked around himself for any threat before answering "You wear their uniform and you fight by their side, do you not?"

"Simply circumstantial... I am here to end your life, and the lives of your brethren. Not one of you will make it out of this city." Ryo's voice was cold, detached, focused. But his mind was urging him to release his anger.

Hanya's laughter came out, resembling a deep growl "Look around you, boy! That arrogance will be your death!"

Anxiety filled Ryo's state of mind. His heightened senses made him completely aware of every presence around him. Hundreds of humans, either running for their lives, or doing their best to fight the demons off; dozens of angelic creatures engaged in battle, place holders with no real role or meaning to him, just presences to be aware of, in case they tried to turn on him... and then, over thirty demonic auras filled the center of the city; the object of his vengeance, his prey.

"Now you will all have your last breaths, wretched creatures!"

Chapter 19:

«Bloodbath»

As the angels started descending upon Hanya, leaving the weaker demons unchecked, the nearest creatures turned to face Ryo. Being aware of the faceoff between their leader and this defiant being, their goal was clear: it must die. One after the other they had started rushing towards Ryo and, one after the other, they would perish at his feet.

One single demon got to Ryo first. Armed with two small swords, it flew directly at him, trying to take the initiative and catch him from behind. Ryo could feel the creature approaching him as clearly as he would hear the siren on an ambulance. He leaped backwards, twisting around in a back flip, and in the exact moment the demon was passing underneath him, a bright flash signaled the end of the creature's life, as two pieces of its former self continued forward with the momentum left from the rushed flight, and stumbled to the ground, painting it dark-red.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, Ryo sheathed his katana and rushed towards the nearest group of demons. Three opponents stood in his way, the middle one being the first to attack, interrupting Ryo's approach with a direct, double handed thrust aimed at his chest. Using his sheath, Ryo easily parried the attack and stepped into close quarters with the demon. He then partially unsheathed the blade of his katana and, outstretching his arms in a sudden movement, forced the edge horizontally to the creature's neck, slitting its throat. Desperately trying to survive, the demon grabbed both of Ryo's arms in an attempt to prevent him from removing the blade from his neck; behind him, the other two demons dashed towards Ryo from the sides. With an impulse of sheer force, Ryo sheathed his katana, crushing his adversary's throat and freeing his weapon, and quickly turned to his right and delivered a horizontal slash that beheaded one of the other demon warriors, before swiftly thrusting the

metal of his sword straight through the head of his third enemy, all in a movement so swift and seamless that it would appear the three reaped lives were but characters in a play, practiced over and over to near perfection.

All around Ryo, the battle waged on. Faced with unexpected opposition from the Human soldiers' advanced technological weaponry, coupled with the arrival of the angel warriors, the demonic forces would lose the fight. But Hanya's tremendous power alone threatened to reverse the outcome, as more and more angels lost their lives facing him. The remaining demons' morale had increased with the arrival of their leader and the angelic warriors' focus shifting to him... Ryo's initial assault had been so swift that they had yet to realize how their numbers were thinning.

Two demons were engaged in combat with a group of humans. Four machine gun wielding soldiers slowly walked in circles as they unleashed a continuous barrage of bullets upwards, directed at their foes. The demons were deeply focused on their flight maneuvers, swiftly evading from side to side, waiting for the end of their opponents' ammunition to strike. Ryo took the opportunity and rapidly approached them from the ground. He timed his onset to match a moment when the two demons were close together, strained his legs and leaped upwards with as much strength as he could possibly give his jump. He delivered a powerful slash while unsheathing his katana as he passed by one of his enemies, splitting the creature in two clean halves. Whilst the other demon was surprised and confused with what had happened, Ryo released an energy burst to the sky, stopping his ascension and giving him the momentum he needed to rapidly drop head down towards the ground, slashing his remaining opponent as he passed his side, slicing the creature's chest wide open. Twisting around and flexing his muscles to soften the fall, Ryo landed in front of the human soldiers, followed by the pieces of his two demonic opponents, as their crimson fluids rained down upon them.

The blood soaking Ryo's hair and clothes was giving him an exhilarating sensation of power and satisfaction... finally being able to release all the hatred and anguish he had built over the last year, and using it to avenge his loved ones' deaths was proving incredibly liberating. There was no hint of hesitation in his mind, just as there was no remorse. He was doing what he was meant to do. Until he had found and vanquished the one demon that had destroyed his life, Ryo would not rest, and every creature of its kind he encountered along the way would perish. He would put aside any remaining humanity he had within him, if he must. The bloodshed would, rather than shock and disgust him, feed the growing darkness in his revenge-crazed soul.

As Ryo readied himself and advanced towards the next demons that would fall victim to his blade, an ominous and powerful voice thundered, its echo spreading throughout the battlefield, carried by an unnatural gust of wind, simultaneously flowing in all directions: "Brothers! Focus on the halfling! Find his presence and obliterate him, before he surprises you. I'll bury the angel puppets myself!"

Hearing this, the remainder of the angelic army concentrated its forces on Hanya "You will not defeat all of us, dem-" The remaining syllables failed to escape an angel's lips and the sentence was left unfinished, covered by the sound of blood gushing through the air, as the creature's body was ravaged by a clean vertical slash from the clan leader's gigantic scythe.

The demonic presences all started converging on Ryo's location, which only served to increase his ecstatic state of mind "*You'll all die right here and now!!*"

Three foes rushed extremely fast towards Ryo, directly facing him, while two tried to flank him with arms ready. Tapping into his vital force, Ryo slowed down the flow of time and dashed forward cutting off his opponents' advance. As their dark feathered wings flowed through the air

in slow motion, their faces showing pure determination in following their leader's orders, they slowly continued forward, oblivious to the fact that, in but an instant, their lives would be extinguished. A rapid flash signaled the middle demon's head being separated from its body, as Ryo dashed past the creatures. Quickly turning around and sheathing his katana, he released the flow of time back to its natural state and again rushed towards his two remaining opponents who were now stunned and surprised with the sudden spray of blood in their midst. Turning to face its dying fellow warrior, the right creature too was obliterated without even having noticed what had happened. As the third demon realized what was going on, the two headless bodies still standing before him, he reacted and suddenly released an immense outburst of energy, sending anything around him flying away through the air, including Ryo, who could not manage to keep hold of his weapon or its sheath.

The two warriors which were trying to flank Ryo a few instants before converged upon him using a combined attack, taking advantage of the fact that he had been stunned and unarmed by their companion's desperate outburst. One of them released a lightning bolt that hit Ryo and electrocuted him, as the other one advanced to try and get a finishing blow using a pair of long swords.

A blurry shadow rapidly approached Ryo's much diminished field of vision as his muscles tensed up uncontrollably... without his katana to defend himself, Ryo was left with nothing but his agility and reflexes. The intense electrical discharge had left him at a big disadvantage, completely open to an attack, unable to visually distinguish his enemies' movements. But the demon's presences, however, were distinctly readable. Sensing the proximity of his advancing foe, and concentrating to regain control as he felt the electrical shock's effects fading, Ryo readied himself to react as quickly as he could to his enemy's attack.

Two feet away from him, his opponent's blurry silhouette held up both its arms in a cross, seemingly about to deliver an attack with dual weapons... this would leave very little chance of evading the attack, as basically one hundred and eighty degrees in front of it, the creature's strike would hit its target at least partially. Ryo waited until the very last moment possible to try and regain as much control over his body as he could, and then, straining his legs with all of his strength and kicking the ground away, he leaped backwards. As his feet regained ground level, he stumbled back, unable to maintain balance. His chest burned from a large, distorted X-shaped wound now carved onto it, blood smearing all over his torn uniform.

But the pain did not, in any way, bother Ryo. It would only make him more alert, increasing the adrenaline in his bloodstream to even higher levels. He felt overwhelmed with a sense of excitement and pure ecstasy "Is that the best you can do, creatures?!" He screamed at his opponents as he recovered his stance.

The two demonic warriors approached Ryo once again, the one who had managed to injure him again directly from the front, and the other one farther behind. Their presences felt so intense they could be twin lighthouses in a sea of darkness as Ryo's senses became abnormally sharpened. It was as if they were surrounded by light, marking their location and dictating their every movement, rendering their advances as easy to read as a child's book.

As the nearest demon readied his attack, trying to repeat the dose, the one behind him jumped up, opening his wings and preparing a descent, a spear aimed directly at his enemy. Ryo's mind relentlessly urged him to move forward, asking for blood, demanding vengeance as flashbacks of all the pain and suffering he had endured rapidly flowed through his memory. Once his enemy breached the boundary that turned him into an immediate threat, weapons once again held above his shoulders in a cross, Ryo

stepped forward, outstretched his arms and grabbed both edges of the blades, stopping them dead in their tracks. Blood gushed everywhere, as the creature tried to force its swords down.

“You’re mine!” Ryo hollered, his voice distorted with a growling sound. The demon’s expression was one of pure fear as Ryo screamed out loud, releasing a dark-red mist of pure energy from his eyes. Ryo tightened his grip on the blades and suddenly twisted downwards, breaking them into pieces. The demon stumbled back bewildered. Ryo drew his arms backwards and violently shot them forward as he dashed towards his adversary, with all five fingers on each hand extended and completely tensed up. Metallic splinters from the demon’s destroyed chest armor flew around, glistening, as the creature released a long cry of agony that was soon muted, drowned by the blood spurting from its mouth. Ryo lavishly enjoyed the last moments of terror seeping from the unholy creature’s stare as his arms pierced amidst its internal organs before ripping it’s chest apart, bathing him, from head to toe, in demonic blood.

Without a moment’s thought, sensing his airborne enemy preparing to dive down, Ryo jumped in his direction with inhuman agility and speed, reaching him in mere fractions of a second, and delivered an extremely powerful straight punch to the gut. Fully stunned and breathless from the surprising attack, the creature dropped its weapon and lost control over its wings, almost immediately losing consciousness. Air rushed through his white hair and dark feathers, as the demon’s brain tried to regain control over his senses. But it took only a short moment for a violently strong impact to cause the demon to black out, as Ryo had dragged him down by the head, smashing him directly into the ground with extreme force.

A presence approached from behind, its mind and spirit intent on a killing blow. A strict and quick evade to the side, and a large, dual-handed axe dropped down at an impressive speed, ramming into the ground with a loud noise. Ryo twisted around and kicked his opponent’s hands free of the

weapon's handle, and then delivered a powerful elbow strike to his hunched back. As the creature lay on the ground, Ryo recognized it as the one who had surprisingly managed to disarm him... he instantly grabbed and twisted its neck, breaking its spine without giving it another chance to perform a desperate attempt at survival.

No more than twenty demonic presences remained alive within the city's boundaries, most of them gathered around Ryo. The warriors were keeping their distance, considering how to engage their enemy. It seemed they were facing a ruthless and blood thirsty creature, much more powerful than anything they had ever expected to encounter in that city. All around the wingless warrior, a trail of their companions' blood and severed body parts covered the ground. The creature moved once again then; walking in a slow pace, it picked up its long, bloodstained sword and its sheath. It stopped near the unconscious body of a warrior, and coldly ran the edge of its sword down through his neck. As their fellow warrior shivered on the ground, his life abandoning their plane of existence, the remaining soldiers took another step back.

Recovering his strength, now rejoined with his deadly sharp partner, Ryo knew the battle was won, even if victory was not already taken. His opponents' eyes betrayed their readied stances. They were terrified of him. And so they should be. Their strength was no match for his. The training he had endured and the amount of will power, sacrifice and determination he had put into it, coupled with all the accumulated negative feelings that had fed his anger for so long... he felt unstoppable... and there was nothing to be lost. The worst that could come out of an encounter with an enemy would be death, which would only mean the end of his suffering. But no... nothing would stop him... not before *their* deaths were avenged "*All of you... you will all pay!*"

Meanwhile, the Humans had retreated and concentrated most of their forces on evacuating the streets of any civilians. Having heard the demonic

leader's message clearly, the soldiers had received the order to withdraw and focus on rescuing the people, and to remain prepared while the events unfolded. At that moment, witnessing the demons' numbers rapidly decreasing at the hands of that unknown warrior, it was clear to them that their captain had made a good call.

The initiative now his, and aware of his opponents' fear, Ryo prepared to end the battle as quickly as possible. His enemies were nervously and cautiously stepping back or circling him. He could not afford to take much longer or to waste much more of his resources as Hanya was rapidly cutting through the angelic forces' numbers, and he would soon be upon Ryo.

A group of two demons stood their ground nearby, both wielding a short one-handed sword and a small shield. This setup allowed for optimal defense and parrying options while sacrificing sheer offensive strength. Knowing this, Ryo acknowledged that a direct attack would be foolish. His katana sheathed by his side, he dashed towards the two warriors, who readily prepared their shields for defense while keeping their blades ready for counter-attacking. Ryo halted in front of them; turning sideways he raised his katana horizontally over his head and unsheathed it just enough to release a glimmer from its edge, simulating a direct attack from above. As soon as his two opponents reacted, raising their shields for a parry, Ryo twisted his waist as fast as he could while lowering himself to a crouched position as he rotated three hundred and sixty degrees around himself, and then released an extremely powerful slash that sliced the demons' legs at the knee cap level, severing all four of their combined lower limbs in half.

The creatures fell on their backs screaming in pain. Ryo quickly got up and stepped forward, impaling one of them through the chest before it had the chance for one last breath. To Ryo's right side, the other injured demon had turned around using his arms for support, and was flapping his wings wildly, trying to escape. Ryo removed his blade from the lifeless body in

front of him, and with a fast slash he cut off one of the other creature's dark feathered members, permanently preventing it from getting away.

Having no need to waste any more time finishing off an incapacitated opponent, Ryo sheathed his sword and dashed towards the next lamb in line for slaughter. The creature, upon acknowledging its time was up, lost its nerves and turned around, running towards its nearest companions. These, in turn, started stepping back, instinctively getting closer to each other as Ryo ran their way, behind their fleeing companion. Each of these warriors' faces dictated his thoughts, filled with fear as they all stood their ground, their weapons readied by their sides, their lives ready and waiting to be taken by Death. Ryo took the opportunity and, upon reaching his opponents, kicked the fleeing creature in the back sending it stumbling forward against one of its comrades, and then, with one single slash decapitated the two standing demons almost simultaneously. The two grounded warriors, realizing they were staring death in the face, began begging for mercy... terror was written all over their panicked expressions, as the blood from their companions' severed heads showered over their faces. Ryo stared at them for a moment. There was no mercy left in him, not for these creatures. Without a second thought, he finished them off *"Mercy... **they** weren't given any kind of mercy!"*

This city, in the short span of an afternoon, had gone from a peaceful normal human city, to a battlefield, and now to what would somehow resemble a slaughterhouse. Body parts and gore were scattered all around the destroyed scenery. The human soldiers stood back, witnessing this carnage unfold before their eyes. One after another, the demons perished by the unknown, wingless warrior's blade, just as in turn the angelic warriors' lives were crushed under the gargantuan force of the demon leader. A visage of pure horror... men of faith, as most of them were, probably imagined this was what Hell would look like.

Three angels remained alive. Locked in battle with one of the most powerful demons alive, they were struggling to survive, having thus far barely managed to injure their enemy. As the three last standing soldiers fighting for the Holy Realm, they were cautiously trying to use their combined strength in a last effort for victory.

The last two capable demon soldiers stood together, trying to help their fellow warrior, who had lost both his legs and his left wing... their enemy, slowly turning his back to his last victim, would soon direct his attention at them...

“We’re going to die! What can we do against this monster?!” One of the demonic warriors exclaimed, in despair over his helplessness.

“Panicking won’t help us, Sam!” The other one answered, making a clear effort to keep his wits as he checked their injured companion’s pulse. Blood loss was quickly wearing down the grounded warrior’s vitality. His pain-stricken whimpers sounded weaker with each passing moment.

“Well, *look* at him!” Samuel screamed, as he looked at their dying brother in arms “Didn’t you see how easily that beast did this to Phillip? How do you want me *not* to panic?!”

“I know what you mean... but we came here ready for battle, ready to fight for our clan...” The other warrior spoke slowly, as if he was trying to convince himself as well as his companion “And that’s what we’ll do. I’m not saying we can’t feel fear... we just can’t allow ourselves to succumb to it!”

“Shit...” Projecting his voice as far as he could, Samuel screamed for help, trying to reach out to their leader “Master Hanya! We can’t beat him alone, join us!!”

But the reply he received was not the one he had wanted to hear, nor from whom he had wished to hear it “He can’t help you, creature. You’re on your own... die a warrior, or die a coward. You choose.” Ryo steadily walked towards the two demons as he spoke these heavy words. The initial

ecstasy and excitement that had filled his spirit had eventually settled down. He had become completely focused on his objective; one he would thoroughly enjoy. In his mind it was clear: destiny had finally caught up with all of these unearthly creatures, and he would be its harbinger.

“I’ve made my choice, Sam. If you decide to run, take Phil with you. He can still live. Goodbye, brother.”

“No, Dean, you don’t stand a chance! **Don’t!!**” Sam screamed and reached for his fellow warrior to try and stop him.

“**AAAAARRRGHHHH!!!**” The warrior screamed as he blindly ran forward, weapon readied above his head. Step after step, the fear evaporated from his mind. Each moment ushered him closer to the cold, ghostly visage of his enemy, and he realized there was no escaping the fate that awaited him. He would die there, following his clan leader’s will, and fighting for what he believed in. Embracing his destiny, the warrior pushed on. With each approaching stride, time slowly crept by, until a sharp sudden pain struck him... it lasted only for a brief moment, bringing with it an infinite darkness that engulfed him in a warm embrace of peace and tranquility.

In another mind, a different point of view revealed a bloody, gruesome death. Samuel watched, unable to stop his friend. Dean ran forward, approaching their enemy, and with a sudden flash his head jumped off his shoulders and his body fell, stumbling to the ground in a dark-red mist of demonic blood, past that lonely figure. The figure of a wingless, long-haired monster, which stood still, the edge of its blade shimmering under the moon’s light, dripping blood... the figure of a bringer of death...

“Why?! Why are you doing this?? This is not what was supposed to happen!” Samuel, screamed, demanding an answer, as dark tears of despair strolled down his face “Why do you fight by the angels??”

“You’re wrong. I do not fight by anyone. I follow my own path of revenge,” The wingless devil spoke with a bone-chilling coldness in his

voice “and ultimately it will bring me to my final destination: the moment in which the Human kind is free of all of your unnatural species.”

“But... how can you betray your own fate?” Samuel questioned.

“My fate? What would *you* know of that? But *I* can tell *you*, creature, that in your fate only darkness awaits!”

“Nooo!! AAAAARRRGHHHH!!!” Screaming at the top of his lungs, the demonic warrior released a bolt of concentrated electricity directed at his opponent, who immediately leaped out of its trajectory, evading it completely. Taking the little time the maneuver had given him, Samuel grabbed his injured companion by the arms and, opening and flapping his wings with all the strength he could muster, he turned to the skies to flee. He took one last look over his shoulder before escaping, but what he saw was the image that would haunt his nightmares for years to come: the wingless devil, almost on top of him, his long katana readied at his side, a cruel bloodthirsty grin splayed across his lips amidst locks of ghostly white hair.

His eyes shut tight, Samuel flapped his wings with every last hint of strength in his body. It didn’t matter where he wound up, all he wanted was to escape the monstrous creature facing him, and survive another day. A few minutes flew by before Samuel was able to reopen his eyes... looking around he saw nothing but the night sky before him, the stars and the moon’s reflection highlighting the vast ocean below “*I... I’m... alive?*” He looked back and saw that the island was already getting farther away on the horizon. Still feeling his grip strong around Phillip’s arms, he remembered he was not alone and a feeling of relief swept over him.

“We made it Phil!!” He turned his gaze down only to find he was holding a couple of severed arms, leaving a trail of blood in the air behind him. Startled half to death, he let go of the body parts which fell into the oblivion of the deep, blue sea. A feeling of immense fear crept over him once again, and he kept the beat of his wings as steady as he could.

All throughout his voyage for salvation, Samuel was continuously plagued by the terrifying visage of his opponent suddenly closing in, his bottomless eyes releasing a dark-red stream of pure energy “*How did I... make it?*” His mind utterly blurred by fear and exhaustion, still mostly in a state of shock, it was far beyond him to notice the faint presence flying high above him, behind the clouds, tracking his trajectory...

Chapter 20:

«A gruesome Encounter»

“So... it really is happening, huh?” A gorgeous blond woman, looking to be in her mid-thirties, was seated at the wheel of a convertible sports car. Deep-seated resolve marked her light-blue eyes, behind a pair of plain eyeglasses, as she directed a refined and mysterious, yet stern, gaze at the agent before her.

“Yes, madam! We were strictly instructed not to let anyone through.” The soldier at the roadblock answered “The city of Nevelyn is under martial law; the army has seized control due to the known crisis.”

“My name is Nina Stark; I’m a detective from the Lemuris P.D.” Nina displayed her badge “I’m currently working on a very important investigation, and need to be allowed into the city.”

“Sorry, I can’t let you through.” The soldier insisted, nodding his head in an indication that, although he would very much like to help, there was nothing he could do.

Nina tried to keep her calm as she spoke “I don’t think you understand; it’s absolutely essential that I get to that city.”

“It’s for your own safety. Sorry, detective.”

“Out of my way, agent! Do you want to lose your job?!” Nina spoke boldly, staring directly into the soldier’s eyes “Impeding a police investigation is a crime against your own nation!”

The soldier was clearly caught off guard “But... are you crazy?! The place is like a warzone!” He exclaimed “There are demons and angels fighting, everywhere!”

“I did not ask for your opinion!” Nina replied harshly, as she put the rental car into first gear, revving up the engine.

“Fine! Suit yourself.” The soldier gave in, as he signaled another soldier to move the vehicle blocking the road “You’ll end up getting killed!” He screamed as the car’s tires screeched loudly and dirt lifted up in the air. In seconds the vehicle had disappeared into the horizon, rapidly heading towards the army occupied city.

[About three months earlier]

“What do you mean *Ms. Sutherland isn’t here?! She’s been institutionalized in this place for over half a year! She wouldn’t just check out without informing us!!*” Inspector Charles H. Smith had lost his patience. After over fifteen minutes insisting with the attendant at St. Mary’s mental institution to get some clear answers, he was now speaking to the person responsible for patient admittance.

“Inspector, you must understand; Ms. Sutherland was not forcefully institutionalized. She remained here as long as she wanted to.” The well-mannered, middle-aged woman explained.

“Yes I know that! It’s been only little over a week since I last had the chance to visit her!”

“Well, last Sunday, she signed herself out.” The woman said, briefly.

The inspector’s eyes widened as he heard this “And you didn’t think to warn us?!” He questioned in disbelief.

“Why should we? Who are we to judge if she wanted you to be informed or not?” The woman spoke with a stiff face, as if indifferent to the inspector’s outraged expression “We do not get involved in the private lives of our clients, Mr. Smith.”

“You idiot!” Charles banged his fist on the counter “Did you even stop to think how many murderous criminals may be after such a renowned

investigator? She was in a completely vulnerable situation here, and you didn't even consider that a factor?!"

"Maybe she just wanted to get away from the force, and have some free time for herself, away from all of that?" The woman suggested "Again, we are not here to make any kind of judgment."

"You're all crazy! The world is lost... all the bizarre happenings out there aren't enough apparently! The Human being is also losing the capacity to reason!" Charles had his hands in the air, waving them in frustration "Shit... Well, did she leave anything behind?"

"She left one personal belonging, yes. But, as the name itself implies, it is **personal**."

Charles' eyes first showed relief for a brief moment, before his voice became sharp "As of now, this is an open investigation. If you want to be charged for obstruction of justice, keep going that way. Otherwise, bring me that item, right now!"

"Is there a warrant I should see?" The woman's lack of cooperation seemed unrelenting.

Charles shortened the distance between his stare and the woman's face as he reached forward, placing both hands on the counter "I swear to God, if you force me to lose precious time getting a warrant, I'll make it a personal goal to close this place down." He stopped for a second, making sure he was being listened to, and not just heard "I'll check your records and history from the first day you opened, and I can guarantee that I'll find something, no matter how small, and I'll drag this place to the ground!"

The woman regarded the inspector in silence for a few seconds before replying "... Very well. I'll be right back, inspector."

"What the hell is wrong with these people?! Aren't those demons enough? ... Shit... Nina... where did you go off to?! ..."

After a short while, the woman returned, carrying some sort of book
“Here you go.”

“Her diary...” Charles realized, as he received the leather-bound object in his hands.

“Yes. You can take that away now, please. I have no wish to witness you invading someone’s privacy like that...” The woman retorted in a negative tone.

The detective frowned “Expect to hear from us if something happens to the detective because you didn’t warn the authorities of her disappearance!”

“Goodbye, Mr. Smith.”

Charles was just closing the door to his car, as he sat in the sun-heated driver’s seat lowering the window, trying to lighten the sultry ambience, and already the diary was weighing on his hands. He undid the knot on the strap and opened it without losing another moment *“Let’s see what was in your head... hopefully you left some kind of clue that will help us... the last entry...”*

[September 5th 2014]

It's been so long since I last wrote in you. Sorry for the long absence...

Shortly after I overdosed on those pills the department psychiatrist prescribed me, I was brought to a local institution for mental support... a private psychiatric hospital ... a fancy one, at that. I had to accept to remain here, in treatment, as long as the doctors deemed necessary for my recovery, otherwise I wouldn't be allowed to work in the force anymore... 10 months have gone by.

The first 2 months I spent them half asleep, under the effects of the medication... My memories of them feel blurry, and vague. But one thing is for sure: those months helped me get some much needed rest, with my head clear of all that had happened... and from anything at all, really...

The next 4 months were basically what it took me to get myself up again. Smith visited me basically every week,

sometimes more than once. He kept me company when I most needed it, in this lonely place, and thanks to his help I managed to reconstruct all the pieces I had put together regarding my daughter's untimely death, along with all the other strange happenings and facts that I uncovered. Even after so much time, there was no clue as to what had actually happened... and that body I had examined in the morgue...

But now, another 4 months later, it all came to make sense. The final piece of the puzzle was given to me... to everyone... and what an unbelievable piece of information. 2 days ago, the existence of otherworldly creatures was confirmed... holy and unholy entities from different planes of existence than our own came into contact with the Human kind. A small village was attacked by a group of demonic creatures that left with 2 gruesome deaths behind, and about 10 injured villagers that showed serious signs of torture, as well as the abduction of 3 other people, who've

yet to be seen or heard from again. Not only that... Angels came down from the skies to subdue the Demons...

Religious leaders from all over the world have spoken to authorities, stating that they've been in contact with God-sent entities for weeks, and that they were expecting the coming of those Demons, as well as many other future attacks of the sort. They claim they were ordered by the holy beings not to disclose any of it until it was actually proven, because they would be discredited as false prophets, and would not be given the rightful attention. In truth, that is what would most certainly have happened before clear evidence of the Demons and Angels' existence had been shown... but is that enough to prove they're speaking the truth? Aren't they just trying to use these recent happenings to their advantage, to try and exalt the church?

Already the balance of power is threatening to shift... what will become of modern society, if Religion takes the upper hand once again, as in ancient times? News channels

from all over the world have started referring to this as the beginning of a new age... A. R. - Anno Revelatio.

But... even with all of this going on, I can't stop myself from thinking about what it means... everything is telling me to accept that my daughter was killed by something involving demonic activity! And that would mean that the body we had in the Lemuris Town Morgue was actually the body of a Demon!

And what would that say about the fact that Ryo survived the incident? And how did the Demon die?! And did the Demons also kill Ryo's parents? ... Ryo and Michael... would they also be dead? Or abducted, just like those 3 victims at Meadars?

So many questions... but now it seems I have much more to follow up on. I don't care if I lose my job anymore, it's time I left this place. I will not rest until I find out the whole truth about what happened. This journey may, and probably will, lead me to very dangerous situations... I

don't want anyone else to be involved. That is why I am writing this last entry...

Smith, if you're reading this, as you surely are, I want to make it clear, that I wish to be left alone to follow my path.

You've been a good friend. Thank you so much for the support you gave me over these harsh months... but now it's time for you to forget about me, as the journey I'm about to undertake, I must make it alone.

Goodbye, for good, dear diary.

Nina Stark Sutherland

[0 years, 3 months A.R.]

Having made it through the roadblock, Nina sped her way to the city of Nevelyn. It had been about twelve hours since reports had made it all over the news of a demon attack on the city. The largest scale demonic crisis to date... while up until then the creatures had only attacked in small groups, this time it was all out war. Out of nowhere, tens of hellish, winged creatures had swarmed on the city to start murdering everyone in sight.

It had not taken more than an hour for the recently created Special Forces for Anti-Demonic Activity - S.F.A.D.A - to arrive at the site to combat the threat. Since then, hours had gone by. Recently, on every radio station, news about the arrival of angelic warriors had been announced, but shortly after that it seemed all hell had broken loose... the last report had been something like "*Armageddon is upon us*", and it stated that everyone, without exception to the media, was to be evacuated from the city.

Now, only a few miles away from her objective, detective Sutherland's senses were overflowing with anticipation and enthusiasm. After all the months she had spent suffering in ignorance over her daughter's death, she was finally close to something that might help her unravel the truth. Before, her life had lost all meaning; but on that moment, the anxiety of uncovering such a mystery filled Nina's heart, giving her the will to step on the gas pedal, headed towards one of mankind's most feared encounters of all time. Even though the detective thought herself ready for anything she might have to witness, it was far from the truth... despite all the gruesome murders of which she had witnessed the end results, nothing could prepare the former *L.A.P.D Shark* for the events that were about to unfold.

On the outskirts of Nevelyn, chaos reigned as dozens of civilian-occupied vehicles rushed their way out of the city. Honking for their lives, the people fought to escape first to safety; soldiers lined the roads, trying their best to control the desperate masses, guiding them to the closest,

quickest escape route. Cars smashed against each other, but their drivers could not care less for the damage, as they continued on their way through the overflowing sea of vehicles, to a much desired safe haven.

The roads detective Nina was now driving on were, in striking opposition, completely free of traffic. Five minutes of speeding to the center of the city was what it took for utter chaos to give in, being replaced by a ghostly absence of life. Every living soul had already been evacuated and the inner circle of Nevelyn was completely deserted of human life. As Nina got closer to Central Square, where the demonic attack had actually begun, the picture around her got darker and grittier... abandoned vehicles smashed against trees, traffic lights and buildings, soon gave way to dead bodies lying around, either having been trampled by other fleeing people or ran over by cars.

A block away from the site, the scenery was already a gruesomely accurate representation of what had been announced on the news: broken and mangled corpses covered in gore, destroyed vehicles, newsstands, phone booths, trees... blood splattered on the ground and walls, where body parts and carnage painted a picture of horror and devastation. Amidst the human victims, Nina could also see the remains of demonic creatures, their dark monstrous figures riddled with bullets or completely burned to a crisp. It seemed the anti-demonic forces had managed to make some damage, but not nearly enough. The demons had clearly taken the upper hand.

Detective Nina was driving slowly now, anticipating, with as much expectation as dread, what she might find... were the soldiers all dead? Had the demons already left? Or were they still fighting, up ahead? There were no gunshots... one more slow turn around a street corner, and she heard screams a small distance away. She quickly got out of her car, and proceeded on foot. All around her now, there were remains of dead creatures, demonic creatures. Corpses cut in half, decapitated heads, limbs

separated from their respective bodies... whatever had made this, it was ruthless and unwavering in the attack. The creatures' dead faces showed horrible expressions of terror, fear and pain. Had it been the work of the Angels?

Suddenly a loud scream was heard. Nina looked to her right towards a large square, and spotted what resembled a demon running forward, screaming as its huge black wings opened wildly, holding a long sword above its head with both arms. In front of it stood a wingless figure, long white hair streaming down its shoulders and back. It remained completely still, in a hunched position. Pulling out her gun, ready to aid the demon's opponent, Nina rushed her steps and prepared to take aim, but her advances were halted by a sudden flash accompanied with a loud metallic sliding sound. The demonic creature stumbled to the ground, headless. Blood gushed everywhere and the body twitched as the unholy existence it had once housed evaporated.

The lonesome figure, dressed in blood drenched white clothes, slowly advanced towards another demon, standing a few feet away. Nina took cover close by, behind a car, watching. The demon screamed and suddenly released a white flash of light from his hand, directed at his opponent, who swiftly evaded. The creature then opened its wings and jumped upwards, holding another body with both hands... was it trying to escape? Nina covered her mouth in horror as she realized the body being held by the fleeing demon appeared to have had its legs cut off. With an inhuman maneuver, the wingless figure was suddenly on top of the demon, and another reverberating metallic sound echoed. A body mass fell to the ground but a pair of wings flew away into the distance, leaving a trail of blood behind.

The white-haired warrior landed calmly, looking upwards towards the fleeing creature, and aimed his hand in its direction. It seemed he was preparing to do something when, out of nowhere, came a shadow flying

right at him. He evaded sideways, and the broken body of a white-winged being smashed against a wall, releasing a cloud of feathers, and fell to the ground, lifeless.

“Oh my God! Is that... an angel?! Shit... what the hell did that do him??”

“Now, child, you will see what a true demon is capable of! You will not go unpunished for what you did to my brethren!” A monstrous creature had appeared next to the white-haired warrior. Its huge black-feathered wings, wide open, overshadowed its tall dark figure. The giant scythe in its hands imposed fear, as the rounded blade gleamed under the moonlight, covered in blood... Nina’s skin prickled at the view before her eyes *“Shit, I gotta help that guy... he won’t stand a chance against this monster!”*

A stone-cold voice then stopped Nina from stepping out of her hiding place. The white-haired warrior spoke with such calm that it was as if he was not seeing the same dreadful figure Nina was “This is where and when you meet your end, clan leader. But don’t worry; none of your kind will escape the fate that my blade brings. The rest will soon join you.”

“Well... whoever that is, he’s a deluded fool!” Nina thought, bewildered and astonished by what she was hearing *“How can he really think himself capable of beating this... thing?!”*

From behind the tall demon, came an angel, rushing with its sword aimed at the creature’s torso. For a moment, Nina felt relief, as she thought the angel’s preemptive strike would hit its target. This feeling rapidly faded away, and horror crept back into her mind. The monstrous demon easily evaded the angel’s attack by stepping to the side without even looking back, and as its opponent passed by, the creature grabbed him by the top of the head with its long clawed fingers, jerking the white-winged warrior to a sudden stop, stunned. The demon then placed the edge of the huge scythe behind one of the angel’s white wings and, with a sudden movement, chopped both of them off his back. The warrior cried out in agony, his body

completely suspended above the ground by the head, as blood streamed down his legs accumulating in a gory crimson pool on the ground.

Swiping its weapon clean of blood, the demonic creature raised its head and violently bit down on the angel's neck from behind. The holy being twisted and screamed while the blood was sucked out of its body. Time seemed to have stopped in Nina's head. She watched in horror the visage of a dying angel, screaming and clawing at the demon's arm, and at the horned head behind it... how many seconds or minutes went by, the detective would not be able to say... her body had been completely frozen in place before that horrible picture.

A loud snapping sound signaled the angelic creature's demise. The body fell to the ground, limp "You will meet the same end as this wingless puppet, halfling!" The demon's harsh voice resounded gravely while he wiped his mouth of the smudged blood on his lips and chin.

"Jesus Christ... what... the... fuck..."

Surprisingly, the lonely warrior seemed perfectly unmoved. He had calmly watched the angel's horrifying death without even blinking, while slowly sheathing his long Japanese-looking sword. There had been no answer to the demon's threatening sentence. Nina could have sworn she had even spotted a smile across the man's lips as he readied himself to a lower stance, holding his weapon by the side of his left hip.

The demonic creature's devastatingly imposing presence was terrifying, yet Nina could not help noting its grim features: a clean-shaven head revealed a pair of long, twisted, ram-like horns projecting themselves to each side; beneath them, two pure black eyes were surrounded by long, branching, black veins as if darkness spread out from the creature's very soul. This slowly led her gaze to a jaw lined with oversized teeth and fangs which protruded from behind closed lips. The huge black-feathered wings now folded allowed a closer look at the intricately adorned black and yellow vests, covered in what Nina assumed to be the blood of countless

angelic warriors. In front of the dark being, stood its opponent, silently in place. Upon a closer look, the white-haired warrior definitely wasn't human either. He had similarities to the demons, his skin noticeably pale, and eyes completely dark... but there were no wings on his back, and he was clearly fighting with the angels. Or rather, against the demons, at the very least *"Who... or what are you?"*

Both opponents were still, their weapons ready for a clash, looking straight into each other's eyes. All around them, the early night air enveloped the view of a ravaged city in a strange and unexpected stillness. The air was extremely heavy and sharp, as the seconds slowly crept by... Nina felt as if, at any moment, anything could happen. She had no idea of what to expect, or even who these creatures were exactly, but somehow she felt as if the outcome of this battle could alter the course of human history itself.

Suddenly, the demon dashed forward with unnatural speed. With wings wide open, he raised his giant scythe high in the air, and then swung it down with enough force it felt as if the slash would have cut through virtually anything in its path. The wingless warrior swiftly evaded to the side, and with one single movement unsheathed his sword and attacked in a horizontal arc, with such overwhelming speed and accuracy that Nina could almost picture the demon's head falling off its shoulders. Using the tip of the scythe's metallic handle, the creature was able to protect its neck, though... the sheer force of the impact generated a thunderous metallic clashing sound.

The demonic leader was projected back a few feet and, while he was still recovering his balance, his adversary was already on top of him. With a straight strike, the warrior hit the demon in the gut with the tip of his sword's sheath, and then rapidly twisted in place and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the demon's face, leaving him staggered. Switching the grip on his long sword to an inverted position, the strange man performed a

swift upwards slash aimed at the demon's throat, but the creature managed to recover its senses in time, and parried the attack. Responding quickly, the white-haired warrior took advantage of the momentum his enemy's parry had given him and, rotating around himself, he forced his sword upwards, impaling the creature straight through the torso. Nina's senses were overwhelmed. She was having trouble following both combatants' movements at such dazzling speeds, but she clearly saw *this* moment's picture. She gasped a short intake of air in thrilling surprise at seeing what looked like a swift victory for the demon slayer. Everything and everyone stood still, as if time itself held its breath... blood flowed through the air, gushing from the demon's back as a large portion of the white-haired man's long sword shone brightly, reflecting the moonlight amidst the demonic vital fluid.

Somehow, there was no sign of falter from the winged monster. As its opponent prepared to twist and remove his blade, the creature suddenly grabbed him by the neck with enormous blunt force, jerking him off the ground, and delivered a powerful head butt to his face. Quickly, the demon jumped forward with a single flap of its great wings, and twisted around mid-air. The white-haired man stumbled back recovering his senses as the demon's shadow passed over him. The dark creature landed behind the man's back, in a low stance, holding the huge scythe with both hands, and, with a circular motion, delivered a full moon slash that cut through the ground, lifting a cloud of dirt and stone shards.

Nina watched as blood sprayed through the air, forming an arc from the wingless warrior's position to the ground behind the demon... she looked to the scythe's blade, nervously expecting to find the warrior's body impaled on it, struggling to focus her eyes, but instead she saw the weapon's blood-covered edge buried halfway into the ground. As the dust settled, the wingless figure became visible, stumbling to its knees.

“You’re better than you look, halfling! It took a lot of skill to escape that attack. A real shame you have to die here...” The monstrous demon’s powerful words showed pity for its opponent. There was not a hint of pain in its voice, as the creature removed the long katana from its torso and dropped it to the ground. A bright light shone around its hand, enveloping the gaping wound, and in a matter of seconds the creature’s chest was completely healed

“Oh my god... that monster’s unbeatable... he’s going to die... I have to help him!”

“Kneel and accept your defeat. Die with honor.” The demon demanded.

“Ack...” The lone warrior’s voice sounded faint and weak. It was hard for Nina to tell if he was sobbing with pain or actually laughing, despite how ridiculous that might’ve seemed to her “You think you’ve won already, demon?”

“You are unarmed... you have a deep wound across your entire back, constantly and rapidly bleeding out... and no resources to heal.” The demon stated, calmly “It is unrealistic to believe you can still win. Why delay the inevitable? You will only make it harder... for everyone. I’m sure even the little human observing us would rather have this finished now.”

“Who... what... human?!” The injured warrior’s voice faltered, showing, for the first time, surprise.

“!! It... knows I’m here?!” Nina’s heart rate shot up. Her head felt dazed with the realization of what she had just heard.

The demon looked directly towards Nina’s position. His stare caused a shiver to run down her spine “Come out from your hiding place, human. I have no intention of harming you. I have accomplished what I came here to do.”

Nina, seeing no other alternative, stood up from behind the car. Cautiously, and nervously, she walked over to the warriors, keeping her

firearm ready at her side... she slowly directed her gaze to the white-haired man, who struggled to his feet. As he looked at her, his eyes suddenly became different. His expression showed surprise and confusion as he stared directly at her... *"Huh? What's that... look? His... face... it looks familiar, somehow... but... how's that even possible?!"* Blood accumulated in a large pool around the warrior, but his face was completely blank. It looked as if the pain meant nothing to him. His attention was completely focused on Nina's figure *"Fuck... I have to do something..."*

"Let him go. Please..." Nina said as she stepped between the demon and its prey. She faced the creature and tried to keep her voice from stuttering. Her heart was ready to jump out of her mouth "Don't kill him..."

The demon looked surprised for an instant. He stared in silence at Nina before his hoarse voice crept into her ears "Child, what makes you think I care about anything you, or any of your kind, have to say?"

"But... what have we ever done to you?" Nina questioned in frustration. Her resolve allowed her voice to leave her lips loudly, despite the enormous weight constricting her throat "Why would you hate us so much?!"

"I have no desire, or reason, to discuss this with you!" The demon exclaimed as it took a step towards Nina. It appeared the creature had lost its patience "Move aside, unless you have a death wish!"

"Argh... shit... what am I supposed to do now?!"

"Ugh... Ka... rin?"

"Huh?!" Nina looked behind her in bewilderment "What... did you say?" She closed in on the struggling warrior, turning her attention completely away from the demon "What did you just... call me?"

The warrior's stare transpired utter confusion... his eyes reflected immense pain, sadness and anguish as he stared at Nina's face...

"Please! You! Who **ARE** you?! How do you know her?!" Nina demanded answers, her mind spontaneously bewildered with questions.

The man's abyssal gaze slowly descended to the ground... when he looked back up at Nina, his face was once again cold and emotionless "Get behind me, if you value your life." He said, shortly.

"What? No! I want an answer!" Nina was screaming in despair.

"Come on!" The warrior's dark eyes bulged open as he screamed "Now!"

"Enough chattering! Get out of my way, human!" Startled, Nina turned back towards the demon whose harsh voice sounded impatient now.

"**No!** Please, don't kill him! **I won't move!**" Nina opened her arms wide, facing the demon, as if forming a protective wall between the evil creature and the mysterious man behind her.

"**Enough!**" The demonic being suddenly stepped closer, and its arm moved abruptly. Everything went **dark**.

Chapter 21:

«Unveiling the Truth»

“We didn’t get there in time to prevent anything, Amano. The city looked like a slaughterhouse...” Rachel stood at the entrance to Amano’s quarters. Her voice sounded sour and frustrated as she regretfully reported the bad news.

“How many casualties would you estimate?” Amano questioned direfully, cutting straight to the point.

“Well, most of the human population had already been evacuated, but even so, deaths were surely in the order of the hundreds...” Rachel spoke slowly, but steadily, as she took a seat on the cushioned chair, facing Amano from across the desk “And our own... I don’t know how many warriors of his clan Hanya had taken with him, but from the looks of things, none made it out...”

“I understand.”

“You don’t... seem surprised?” Rachel was confused.

“I already knew most of that, Rachel. One of Hanya’s warriors, Samuel, managed to escape during the battle and flew aimlessly, desperate for help.” Amano explained “Sheer luck, his subconscious, or maybe fate brought him to our doorstep. Vernon sensed his despairing presence passing nearby and flew out to meet him. He ended up bringing him in for medical care. The man was completely terrified... before he lost consciousness he told us that Ryo was there, in Nevelyn, and that he had butchered all of his friends.” The words he was speaking were clearly weighing heavily on his mind “I was still clinging to the hope that Samuel was delirious... but, in truth, I already knew what to expect.”

“I see. Well, it’s true... the halfling... Ryo *was* there.” Rachel confirmed, with a voice that indicated she was sorry to do so “But so was

an army of angels... I'm sure he wasn't the only one killing our kind out there. Hanya got himself and his clan into a suicidal attack."

"So... was Hanya the only survivor? What did you see when you got there?" After a few seconds of silence, Amano questioned Rachel, without turning his gaze away from his hands, crossed together over his desk.

"When we got there, it seemed the battle had just ended..." Rachel spoke reticently "Ryo was just standing there, and next to him, on the floor, was Hanya's headless body..."

Amano's eyes showed surprise, something Rachel did not remember when she had last witnessed "He's already gotten that strong..." Amano spoke slowly, absently voicing his thoughts "Hanya... he will be missed... but he got himself into this... *he* is to blame for the destruction of his own clan." He was still clearly troubled from having learned of Hanya's thoughtless actions "Going on a rampage for revenge against the human kind? That goes completely against all we should stand for! The fool..." It was extremely rare for someone to witness Amano losing his calm, or even raising his tone of voice. Rachel regarded him in silence as he carried on "But nonetheless... he was a powerful and ancient warrior. The fact that Ryo was able to defeat him is... troubling..."

"Uriel was there too." Rachel added after a short pause.

"Uriel..." Amano repeated the archangel's name as if it echoed inside his mind.

"But I don't think he took part in the battle," Rachel continued "it seemed he had just arrived."

"Were you seen?"

"Well... yes." Rachel admitted, before adding "But it isn't all bad news. We may have caught a break. I brought someone back with us... a human."

"A human?" Amano looked at her, for the second time that night, in sheer surprise.

“When we got there Ryo seemed exhausted from the battle. He saw us, but didn’t attack... while Uriel looked alarmed when he noticed us, Ryo just continued cleaning his sword of what I assume was Hanya’s blood, and then slowly sheathed it. There was an unconscious human female lying on the ground. It was when I got near her, that Ryo suddenly turned on us.” Rachel reported, implying that this surely meant something “But Uriel stopped him, forcing a retreat.”

“And Ryo, he obeyed him?” Amano asked reticently, as if he could not picture the event.

“I don’t really think he’d be able to fight back. He had a really nasty wound across his back, and after having fought Hanya and his warriors... he probably realized he had no choice.”

“I see...”

“But he didn’t seem at all happy about having to follow the angel’s command.” Rachel added “Either he doesn’t care much for the angels and their orders, or he was really desperate to protect the woman... or both.”

“Humm...” Amano was immersed in his thoughts “I wonder who she is... where did you take her to?”

“The infirmary.” Rachel answered promptly “She had a pretty nasty bruise on her forehead. Hopefully she’s not... permanently damaged.”

“Have you had someone heal her?” Amano sounded worried.

“Not yet, I wasn’t sure what you’d want us to do. I wasn’t even sure if I should’ve brought her...”

“You did well, Rachel. Even though it goes against our rules, you made the right call.” Amano answered as he got up from his chair and went around his desk, placing a supportive hand on Rachel’s wing.

“Great!” Rachel smiled warmly, relieved “I’ll send in one of our healers, to take care of her.”

“No need. We’ll go there ourselves.” Amano replied as he motioned Rachel to stand up “But first I want to ask you something... and I want you to be as honest as you possibly can on this, child.” He sounded seriously worried “How did Ryo look? What did you... sense from him? Is he too far gone?”

“I honestly don’t know, Amano. His was one of the strangest presences I’ve ever felt... his expression... it was so... cold... he looked down at Hanya’s lifeless body with contempt...” Rachel appeared to be having trouble explaining what she had felt “He actually seemed to be enjoying his death... it was as if he felt no guilt at all for slaying him.”

“We can only imagine how Raphael has distorted the truth, to convince him to fight for them.” Amano considered the implications of what he was hearing “And after all he’s been through...”

“When he spotted us approaching the woman, though, he changed... his look, his whole aura focused on me with such intensity it shook me. His stare was just... *filled* with hatred.”

Rachel seemed to be watching the whole scene unravel in her mind again. She was looking into the void as she spoke, when, suddenly the door to Amano’s quarters broke open.

The sound of loud footsteps tumbled into the room “Rachel! Is it true? Did you really see Ryo?!” Michael was breathing heavily, his facial expression showing nervousness and anxiety.

Rachel jumped in her place at the loud sound of the door banging against the wall behind it “Mike!” She faced Michael in clear surprise as he entered through the door in a hurried pace “Well... yeah... Ryo was in Nevelyn...” She answered him with reticence, looking away from his eyes.

“How... was he?” Michael asked, with a disturbed look. It appeared as if he was not sure he wanted to know the answer to his question.

“Mike...” Rachel’s eyes were filled with sadness as she looked at Michael “I... I don’t think you would’ve wanted to be there... I’m sure he’s nothing like you remember him...”

“But... I helped lead him down that path...” Michael said, as he looked at Rachel with regret and sorrow “It’s my fault... I...”

“There was nothing you could’ve done or said, even if you were there, Mike.” Rachel reassured him “The battle was over, everyone was dead... Ryo left almost as soon as we got to the place.”

“Did he really kill so many of us?” Michael’s voice was full of anguish. Rachel looked away from him, with no answer “They all suffered the consequences of my actions...” Michael said with an empty stare.

“Enough, Michael.” Amano captured Michael’s attention “Hanya and his clan warriors, reaped only what they had sown themselves. It is a tragic end, but one that we could not have avoided. Their own actions sealed their destiny.”

Michael was silent for a moment, looking at Amano as he considered his words “And the woman?” He inquired, as he let go of the previous subject “I need to know who she is, and how she knows Ryo!”

“We are going to the infirmary now to see her.” Amano replied, motioning Rachel with a wave of his hand “You head outside and clear your head, Michael. When she’s awake and ready to speak with you, I’ll send for you.” He said, in a calm and comforting voice.

“... Okay.” Michael agreed, as the three of them exited Amano’s private quarters, and proceeded down the stairs to exit the central building.

Nina was standing alone... all alone, surrounded by nothing but empty nothingness. There was a white void as far as her eyes could see... nothing material, or living, in sight “*What... happened? Am I... dead?*”

Her head hurt as if it was about to explode. With every beat of her heart, blood came rushing to her brain, bringing with it a throbbing pain, that lacerated her senses *“Argh... shit! My head... what... where... am I?”*

There was complete, and utter silence all around Nina. It was as if she could hear her thoughts echoing throughout the hollow ambience *“! That man! I’m sure I heard him say Karin’s name... who... was he?”*

Voices... *“Did I just hear something?”* “Hello! Anyone out there?!” Nina screamed into emptiness. She stopped short as another sharp throb tackled her mind.

The voices started getting clearer... in the distance... two distinct voices, talking amongst each other *“Am I really dead? Or just... asleep?”*

Then, suddenly, the white void around the former detective started to fade. Darkness was creeping over from all directions. Scared, Nina looked all around, turning from side to side, until she fell on the ground disoriented. She shut her eyes tight, hoping for something good, and just lay there crumpled.

After a few instants a hint of light hit her eyelids, softly tearing through the darkness. A deep voice directed itself at her “You are awake. Welcome back, child. I hope you are not too hurt?”

“Ergh... Where... am I?” When Nina opened her eyes and her vision overcame the crippling blurriness blinding her, she immediately sat up startled, and struck her back against the wall, next to the bed she was lying on. Her eyes were wide open as she looked at the demon in front of her.

“Do not be afraid. No one here will hurt you. And please, no sudden movements...” The demon spoke delicately as he regarded her from a chair next to the bed, with no attempt to get nearer “That is a harsh bruise you have there on your forehead. You are lucky for not having internal bleeding. We should not risk aggravating your condition.”

“What... do you want?” Nina’s senses were still dazed. She was having trouble focusing her eyes “What did you do to me, demon?”

“Do not worry, nothing was done to you.” Amano replied slowly, giving Nina’s mind the time it needed to adjust to its surroundings “I will gladly answer any questions you may have for me. In return I only ask that yo-”

“What?!” Nina interrupted Amano’s speech. Her eyes flinched as she raised her voice, clearly in pain “You wanna make some sort of pact?! Is that it? You want my soul?” She carried on in a loud, hurried tone of voice, ignoring the stabbing pain in her head.

Amano laughed softly, his facial expression showing mild amusement at what he had just heard “Just calm down, please. I want no such thing. All that I ask of you is that you be kind enough to answer some of my own questions in return.” Nina regarded him with suspicious eyes, still unable to push away from the reassuring touch of the wall on her back “Would that be okay with you?” Amano clarified, asking permission as to show that he did not mean to trespass on her space.

“What... questions... Who are you?” Nina questioned, reluctantly, after a few seconds of silence.

“My name is Amano. As you can see, I am what your kind refers to as a demon.” Amano said, openly “As I am sure you must be wondering, you are in the infirmary of our clan’s village.”

“Your... clan?” Nina asked, unable to hide her curiosity.

“You may think of us as a family.” Amano explained “I am the head of our family, basically. A family of warriors, and families alike.”

“How did I end up here?”

“You were in Nevelyn, when some of our warriors found you unconscious. Rachel, here,” Amano carried on as he directed his hand at the female demon, standing a few steps behind him “was leading the operation,

and they brought you back here. I believe you were caught in the middle of a battle between a clan of our kin and angelic warriors.”

“A battle?! Your kind attacked the city! The angels came down to stop you!” Nina exclaimed in anger.

Amano looked slightly taken aback by Nina’s ferocity “I am... really sorry for what happened to your city...” He spoke with not only pain, but regret and shame marking his words. Rachel stood behind him in awe at seeing Amano like that. Her eyes displayed both anger and surprise “Believe me... there was nothing we could have done to prevent it...”

“Prevent it?!” Nina retorted in a loud, harsh tone of voice “Why would you wanna prevent it?! You were the ones who raided the city!!” She spoke with such indignation and rage that on that moment, having realized who she was speaking to, she pressed her back with even greater strength against the wall behind her.

Amano strained his eyes open and took a deep breath as he heard Nina’s accusations. Rachel’s wings trembled. She took a step back, and turned to look out the window “*We* did not raid anything, miss.” Amano clarified, maintaining a soft voice “My clan has never had, and will never have, anything to do with such atrocities.”

“You honestly expect me to believe that? After what I saw in Nevelyn?” Nina questioned, perplexed “After what your kind did to us? ... To my daughter?!”

“I can perfectly understand why you would think that... I am afraid there is nothing I can say or do, right now, that will change your mind. In time you will come to see the truth.” As he realized there was no answer from Nina, Amano continued his speech, aware of the hatred-filled stare directed at him “You mention your daughter... I am sorry, but I have no idea what happened to her... I do not-”

“Your kind took her away from me! She’s dead! Because of you!!” Nina screamed out, cutting off Amano’s words. She was leaning forward, away from the wall now, no longer capable of even worrying for her own safety.

Amano’s eyes dropped to the ground for an instant “I am really sorry to hear that...” He said in a deeply touched voice as he looked back at Nina’s surprised face “If there was anything I could do to help you, I would... but I am afraid that is far beyond my capabilities...” The sincerity in Amano’s words was evident.

“**Argh!!** Stop talking like that!” Nina exclaimed in anger “You’re not the good ones! You can’t be!” She screamed, clearly confused with Amano’s words “Monsters like you have been attacking cities and towns all over the world, murdering hundreds of innocent people!”

Suddenly the furious looking female demon stepped forward from behind Amano with unnatural speed. Her pure black eyes emanated an intense dark-red glow and her sharp fangs showed behind her furious expression “**Quiet, bitch!!**” Rachel screamed, her face almost hugging Nina’s “Who do you think you are, talking to Amano like that?!” She demanded from Nina, as the former inspector pressed her back against the wall behind her once again, with surprised and fearful eyes opened widely “If it weren’t for us, you’d be-”

“Step back, Rachel!” Amano interrupted in a firm voice.

Rachel immediately took one single step back as she heard the stern voice “But!” She turned to face Amano “I can’t just stand here and allow this woman to disrespect you like that! I-”

“Now!” Amano insisted, cutting her off. Rachel stepped away from Nina “That is enough, little one. I will speak in my own defense, if I deem it necessary.” He spoke in a more tender tone of voice.

“... Sorry...” Rachel looked away, straining to control her temper.

“You do not need to worry. Just calm down.” Amano reassured her “Please, go see if Michael is doing alright. Knowing him, I am sure he is beyond anxious to come join us.”

“Okay...” Rachel nodded in acceptance, before leaving the room, slowly closing the door behind her.

“Now,” Amano redirected his attention at a scared and tense Nina in front of him “I apologize for this crude interruption. Rachel is still very young...”

“... I... *argh*...” Nina was at a loss for words. Her heart beat fast in her chest, as she struggled to control her heavy breathing.

“I understand your reluctance in trusting me. I just ask that you give me the benefit of the doubt.” Amano spoke slowly as he moved forward in his seat “Just come close, please. Let me heal your bruise, ease your pain.”

Nina sat, frozen in place. After a moment the demon slowly stood up and approached her, reaching forward with his arm. Nina kept her back pushed strongly against the wall, somehow hoping to get past it, away from the creature... its hand slowly reached for her face, and she closed her eyes tightly. She felt the touch of skin against her forehead... the gentle touch of the creature’s clawed hand all over her head... and a strange glow seemed to appear above her eyelids. Warmth enveloped her forehead, and slowly the throbbing pain on her head washed away, magically, as the light faded.

“There. You should be feeling better now.” Amano spoke as he stepped back.

Nina opened her eyes feeling relieved from the lack of pain “... Thank you...” She said, as the demon in front of her slowly sat back on the chair, two feet away from the bed.

“You are very welcome. Would you please enlighten me on some facts that have been troubling me?” Amano kindly requested.

“What could I possibly know, that would help you?” Nina answered, after a moment’s pause in reluctance.

“When you were in Nevelyn,” Amano recalled Nina back to the events in the city “I was told a young warrior was there... he would be neither angel nor demon. He should brandish no wings, yet he surely would not look completely human.” He explained, sounding unsure of what the person he was speaking of would look like “He was fighting against the warriors that were attacking the city... do you have any idea of who I’m referring to?”

“Yes, I saw him...” Nina noticed the look of expectancy that crossed Amano’s eyes as she spoke “He was standing his ground against what seemed to be the leader of the assault on the city.”

“Yes...” Amano urged her to continue.

“But then, the creature took the upper hand. It looked as if the white-haired man was about to get killed so I tried to stop the fight.” Nina explained “But then... I don’t remember much else...” Her memory felt hazy “I think I got knocked out...”

“I see... why did you try to help him?” Amano questioned, trying to understand Nina’s motive “Do you know Ryo, in any way?”

Nina’s mouth opened in surprise “... I’m... sorry?” She said, sounding confused “Did you say... Ryo?”

“Yes. That is the warrior’s name.”

Nina’s face was aghast. She stood in silence for a few moments, weighing what she had just learned and what it could mean “*That’s it! That face! I knew I recognized it from somewhere! That was Ryo! But... how...?*” “How can that be?!” She suddenly inquired.

“Excuse me?” Amano sounded intrigued as he regarded Nina.

“Ryo! How can that man be Ryo?!” Nina questioned insistently “How would a simple seventeen year old boy turn into that... person... in so little time?!”

Amano’s face was emotional as he exclaimed “So, you do know Ryo!” Nina could tell he was deeply interested in what she could have to say.

“He was... my daughter’s boyfriend.” Nina explained reticently “The night she died... they’d gone on their first date...” She paused for a second, a melancholic cloud over her eyes “I think it was his birthday...”

“Oh... so... you are the girl’s mother...” Amano was struck back as he realized this “I am... so sorry, Ms. Sutherland...”

“You know who Karin was?!” Nina suddenly looked ecstatic “Please!” She urged Amano, moving closer to him, to the edge of the bed she was sitting on “Tell me! I need to know what happened!!”

“I-” Amano was about to speak before his attention was caught by loud footsteps approaching the room in a hasty pace.

The door opened wide “You! Please, tell me, how do you know Ryo?!”

“Michael!” Amano stood up, stopping Michael from getting close to Nina “Calm down, boy! That’s enough door busting for one day!” He said, in an annoyed tone.

“Amano... I’m sorry, I tried to stop him from barging in!” Rachel entered through the door, panting.

“Look, I’m really sorry for being rude, but I can’t stand this anymore, Amano! I need to know!!” Michael insisted in clear despair.

“You...” Nina spoke from behind Amano “You’re... Michael...” She said as she stood up and approached them “Ryo’s best friend?”

“Yes, I a-” Michael interrupted his speech to correct himself “Ach... was.”

His sad-looking face touched Nina. She stepped closer to him, with one hand over her mouth as she regarded Michael’s demonic facial features

“What... happened to you?” She asked, as Michael looked away “How did you become like this?”

“I...” Michael just stared at Nina’s face, unable to voice everything that rushed through his head.

“No. Forget about that now... please...” She looked from Michael to Amano’s face, and back as she spoke “I need to know what happened to Karin!”

“Karin?” Michael looked surprised “How did you know Karin?”

“She was my daughter...” Nina answered with a deeply saddened look on her face, not able to hide how much the memory of her daughter constantly reminded her of how badly she missed her.

“You’re... Karin’s mom...” Michael looked taken aback. He directed his eyes at the floor, in a moment of silence “Ryo...” He raised his stare back at Nina’s face, as a warm and somehow sad smile formed itself around his lips “I don’t know if you realize this but...” Dark tears appeared to be accumulating around Michael’s pitch-black eyes and his voice seemed to tense up as his mind brought back countless memories of his best friend. He stood silent for a second “He was really in love with her.”

Nina raised her hands to cover her mouth as her eyes watered up “Yes... I think I do...”

“But I’m really sorry... I... never knew exactly what went on, on that damned night...” Michael admitted with regret “After all that’s happened, I think I ended up trying to put away any thoughts about it, at all...”

Nina took a deep breath and emptied her throat as she held her tears. She was silent, clearly disillusioned with what Michael had just told her.

“Ms. Sutherland...” Amano spoke in a low voice “I can tell you more or less what happened.” Nina’s eyes looked up at him with renewed hope, at what he continued, in a warning tone “But I must warn you that it will not make it any easier on you.”

“Please... just tell me...” Nina requested of him.

“Having someone to blame and persecute for a loved one’s death can sometimes make it easier to handle the loss...” Amano said as he carefully considered his next words “Maybe you are just better off believing that *our* kind really is to blame for your daughter’s death.”

“I need to know the truth...” Nina spoke with resolve, despite how Amano’s words had made sense to her “Please!” She insisted, over Amano’s silence.

“Very well.” Amano conceded. He motioned that everyone present should sit down for what he was about to say before carrying on “As you may remember, that night was Ryo’s eighteenth birthday. His inner potential had remained more or less dormant until then, and it would have just awakened slowly as he became older and matured.”

“His... inner... potential?” Nina asked, in confusion.

“Yes. You see, Ryo’s existence is very special. He is the offspring of a demon and a human.” Nina stood at awe, listening to the words Amano spoke “He was born like any other human child, but in time he matured to become an immortal being, such as ourselves.” Amano continued explaining “This was something that was largely accepted as an impossibility, even if it had been long foretold that a child would come. There were no known cases of successful demon and human crossbreeding, until Ryo came to be. He is destined for greatness... he can be the key to ending the war between our kind, and the angels.”

“... I... well... I...” Nina tried speaking, but it appeared the words would not leave her mouth “I have no idea what to think of this... but... I still don’t see how that explains Karin’s... death...”

“Naturally, Ryo would have become aware of his capabilities on his own and, in time, would have learned to control them.” Amano carried on “But alas, fate did not deem it so. What exactly happened on that night, we do not know. But we do know that Ryo and your daughter were assaulted

by human robbers. Unfortunately, the warrior I had tailing Ryo, John, did not get there in time to stop the events that took place.”

Both Nina and Michael sat in complete silence, expecting to hear Amano’s next words. They looked completely immersed in what they were being told.

“Once he became aware of what was happening, John sent us a message saying Ryo was being attacked, and that he had no chance but to reveal himself to try and stop it.” Amano took a deep breath. He realized perfectly how strongly his next words would hit Nina’s mind “Whatever those assailants did, it must have driven Ryo beyond a state of immense despair. What I believe happened, is that Ryo’s anguish and sorrow became so overwhelming, that his subconscious took control over his body and triggered a huge uncontrolled outburst of energy to protect him. With the untapped potential Ryo has, such an event would simply obliterate everything around him.”

The whole room was silent. Michael was blankly staring down at the floor as he considered the story Amano had just retold. Rachel was crouching beside Michael with her hand tenderly placed on his leg, her eyes showing clearly how much she was hurting from seeing Michael so emotionally beaten up.

“You’re...” Nina was the first to speak, breaking the silence “You’re saying Ryo is the one who...” She paused, staring at Amano’s face, as if not wanting to usher her next words “... who killed her?”

“Well,” Amano weighed his words carefully “Ryo would be the last one to receive the blame as he had absolutely no control over any of what transpired that night.” As Nina remained silent, staring at him, Amano continued “We... tried our best to prevent anything like this from happening. But between that, and trying to conceal Ryo’s identity and location from the angels, we ended up failing to protect him, and the people

he loved.” Amano admitted, with a deeply saddening voice “I am... really... so sorry.”

Tears rolled from Nina’s tired eyes. Her expression was vague, her stare directed at the infinite. She wasn’t actually seeing the same reality that was pictured in everybody else’s eyes. She was lost for a few moments, deep into thoughts about all of what had happened... thoughts on what she had just discovered, and what it meant regarding everything; and thoughts about her beloved daughter... closure... could this really be all there was to the death of her child? A random assault by two wretched burglars?

“Rachel, Michael, we should give Ms. Sutherland some time to rest and put her thoughts into place.” Amano said, as he stood up “This is a lot to take in.”

“Yes, Amano.” Rachel replied from her crouching position, unwilling to let go of Michael’s hand.

“... Yes” Slowly, Michael stood up along with Rachel, without releasing his hold over her soft fingers.

“Go on, I will be right behind you.” Amano said to both of them, his eyes never leaving Nina’s sight, as she sat on the edge of the bed, her hands over her mouth, the tears slowly strolling down her cheeks.

As Michael and Rachel left the infirmary, Amano stood up, readying himself to leave as well “I will send someone to take you to a guest room. You should really get some rest.” After a moment of unanswered silence, Amano turned to leave.

“Wait...” Nina’s voice stopped Amano in place “Are you... holding me here?” She questioned, as she wiped the tears off her face.

“Not by any means, Ms. Sutherland. You are free to leave at any time you want to. We will take you back to your home if and whenever you wish us to.” Amano said, making it clear they meant Nina no harm whatsoever “But I should warn you... unfortunately I believe you will be in constant

danger. Now that I know what your connection to Ryo is, I can safely say that the angels will definitely not allow you to roam unchecked. Anything that links Ryo to his human life will most likely not be allowed to exist.”

“Why... are you doing this?” Nina questioned Amano “And just how am I supposed to believe that angels are out to get me, and that the demons are the good guys?”

“Ms. Sutherland... at the risk of sounding pretentious,” Amano replied “I should say that is a very naive way of seeing things. All too common in human nature. There is really no true good or evil. There are only different perspectives, different views of reality.” Nina’s reddened eyes regarded Amano intently, from behind wet eyelashes “Far from me to say that the angels are evil beings. They do what their leader believes to be the right and just thing to do; and they do so at any cost. Their means may sometimes seem harsh, but who am I to contradict the fact that *a small sacrifice for a greater good* frequently is a correct way of thinking?” Amano questioned Nina in a rhetorical sense “Our kind, we merely do the same... we simply have clearly different and opposing opinions of what is right and what is wrong.”

“But... I saw what happened in Nevelyn with my own eyes!” Nina exclaimed “Your kind took hundreds of innocent lives! How can you say that’s not evil?!”

“Within my kind, as within any other, there are a lot of different groups of individuals. Recent happenings have caused a great division in terms of ideals...” Amano explained “The clans have mostly divided into two separate factions. My clan and I, we continue to follow what our oldest ancestor set out to accomplish. And that does not in any way involve hurting human lives. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for other clans. More and more of them are turning away from our roots... the will to survive, to protect your own species... it is a really strong feeling, and it has unfortunately led many to neglect the value of human life.”

Nina was silent, unsure of how to answer or what to believe in.

“I cannot express how sorry I am for all that is happening to your people... but nothing I can do or say will change the past. All we can do, is try to work for a better future.” Noticing Nina’s tired face, Amano continued “Well... I think that should be enough for now, wouldn’t you say?”

“... I... have no idea what to think of all of this...” Nina confessed with a blank stare.

“You should rest for now, and try to wrap your head around all of this. Not an easy task... but something you certainly have to do by yourself. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like, and I can assure you that no harm will come your way while you remain under our protection.”

“... Thank you...”

“Your gratitude is not necessary, but appreciated, Ms. Sutherland. Please, make yourself at home.”

The ancient leader turned away from Nina, and left the room, slowly closing the door behind him.

Michael sat down on his bed as Rachel entered his candle-lit room as well, and slowly closed the door behind her “Shit... Ryo... really is fighting with the angels...” Michael stated, struggling to take in everything he had learned that night “Rach... what would I do if I ran into him? I... have no idea what I’d say... how... I don’t think I’d be able to fight him...”

Rachel looked at him with worried eyes “It’s something you have to be ready for, Mike...” She said, as she sat down close to him “Believe me, I don’t want to face him anymore than you do. His presence...” She paused, as if remembering what it had been like “I had never felt anything like that

before... such power and determination... his aura felt like it would rend me asunder on its own.”

Michael looked at Rachel’s face for an instant, so close to his own, before speaking “How did he... look?”

“Well, it’s difficult to say. But you’d surely not recognize him for his human appearance... His clothes... they were drenched in the blood of our own. I could’ve smelled its scent emanating from him half a mile away...” Rachel had a disturbed look on her face “It was frightening.” She admitted, reaching for Michael hand.

“Rach... I’m sorry I wasn’t there...” Michael said gently, holding Rachel’s small hand between his fingers.

“It was better this way.”

“He was my best friend for so many years... we were like brothers...” Michael spoke with a faint smile on his lips as he raised his eyebrows, considering his words. He took a deep breath “And now I can’t even imagine being face to face with him... and we’re supposed to be enemies... how did it come to this?” He looked Rachel directly in the eyes, somehow hoping she would have an answer for him, something that would make everything easier.

Rachel was touched by the look on Michael’s face “I...”

A soft knock on the door interrupted the conversation. A threshold opened “Michael?”

“Err... yes, Amano?” Michael answered, for some reason feeling embarrassed by Amano’s unexpected presence. Both him and Rachel instinctively moved a few inches apart.

“Sorry for interrupting.” Amano said, as he stepped through the door “Would you please join me? I would like to have a word with you regarding all of this.”

“Sure.” Michael answered promptly, as he got up, feeling Rachel’s soft stare following him.

“Great, come then, let’s visit the training grounds.”

During the walk down the stairs, Amano remained silent. Michael sensed he was deeply worried about the recent happenings. He had no idea what to say, or exactly what to expect from this talk. When they arrived at the huge double door leading to the training fields, behind the building, Amano slowly opened it with a push of his hand, and they stepped outside.

“The training grounds... don’t they look magnificent and majestic at night?” Amano spoke as he turned to his side, and removed a sword from the weapon rack position near the door “All this tranquility in such a vast and open space, which is usually filled with the harsh sounds of metal and the grunts and screams of warriors.” He wandered as they stepped onto the grass field.

“Indeed... it feels really peaceful at this time. Me and Rachel,” Michael thought back “We usually come here at night when we want to unwind... the moon and the stars are great silent companions.”

“Yes. You and Rachel have grown really close to each other.” Amano remarked with a smile, to which Michael faltered, embarrassed “That is good. Love and friendship... they are what holds our minds together in times of hardship.”

“Ergh... yeah...” Michael was not sure how he should answer.

“No need to be embarrassed, child. There’s nothing but beauty and life in the act and feeling of love.”

“Well... I suppose this is not what we came here to discuss, is it, Amano?” Michael changed the subject, resolved to approach, even if with difficulty, what he thought was probably the reason for the talk Amano had requested of him “I understand it must trouble you to know that I do not

wish to face Ryo in battle... seeing as how it will most likely happen in a not-so-distant future. But don't worry, I-

Michael's speech was cut short as Amano threw the sword he was holding at him "Draw your weapon, Michael."

Michael stood perplexed after having grabbed the rapier on reflex "... What?" He asked with a blank, confused stare.

"Unsheathe that rapier, and attack me." Amano stated plainly.

Michael stood still, collecting his thoughts "But... Why would I attack you?"

Amano's facial expression was serious and cold as he spoke his next words "You will not leave here alive, if you don't."

Chapter 22:

« Paradise Lost »

In a large, richly decorated hall, two powerful looking figures faced each other. Their golden wings shimmered in between the rays of light that entered through the colored glass ceiling.

“Tell me, Raphael,” Uriel’s serene, impassive voice resonated within the vast empty hall with each word of the ancient angelic dialect he pronounced. His very short, straight black hair allowed a clear view of his saddened and empty gaze, directed at the blond-haired archangel in front of him “how does it feel to be responsible for so many deaths?”

“Oh, please, Uriel, spare me your melodramatic ideals.” Raphael, in an annoyed tone of voice, spoke without patience.

“What do you think our father would say if he was here?” Uriel questioned him, in clear disapproval.

“Well, does it really matter? He is *not* here, is he?” Raphael’s words were ironic, defiant.

“You cannot really believe what you are saying...” Uriel looked disturbed by the words his brother had spoken “Have you really begun to think so highly of yourself, that you turn away from what God created us for?”

“Oh, but you are so mistaken. I do not turn away from our purpose. Uriel...” There was silence for an instant before Raphael carried on “It has been over two thousand years since you became an archangel... are you really still bound by such petty thoughts?”

Uriel stared mutely at his brother’s figure, deeply locked in thought. He felt as if there was a stranger before him, and not the brother he had known for millennia.

“Do you really think I’ve strayed from our path? Do you not see what’s around you? Every one of our warriors fights beside me... no conflicts, no doubts... We are winning the war!” Raphael exclaimed, with immense resolve “The demons are persecuted on earth, and we have the strongest tool we could ask for, on our side!”

“At what cost, Raphael?!” Uriel suddenly interrupted Raphael’s speech “Humanity is at war with the demons! Countless lives are being lost every day!”

“Yes! Countless demonic lives are included in those numbers! Uriel, we have managed to rid the world of more demons these past months, than we had in over a century of hunting!” Raphael waved his hands as he spoke rapidly. His white empty eyes appeared immersed in an undeniable truth bound to his words “Don’t you see? The fact that we showed humanity the threat the demons pose, has made the creatures lose their defenses. *I* am finally starting to succeed in purging the world of the mistakes our father made long before he abandoned us! In a single day, one of their oldest clans was decimated!”

“And the cost was the death of a large part of that city’s human population!” Uriel sounded frantic. He took a deep breath as he brushed a hand over his face “Raphael, when I heard you had brought a human boy to our realm, and had transcended him to do your bidding, I imagined you would have a very good reason to do so. You managed to somehow bring Ryo to our side. That was definitely a great accomplishment that reassured me, telling me you knew what you were doing.”

Raphael stood silent. His ego felt boosted as he heard his brother’s words of approval.

“But ever since that happened, your actions have unfortunately begun unmasking your true intentions. You have shown that you have no consideration for human life. You had that poor boy clean up after your mistakes!” Uriel directly accused his brother, ignoring the fact that Raphael

had been leading their realm for centuries “Why would you force a newly transcended soldier to kill the family of his human best friend?!”

“It was the perfect opportunity to test his resolve to the limit!” Raphael justified himself “And I was right! He showed he was not capable of putting aside his emotions as he should have!”

“I had already realized you had become ruthless to a point no leader should be, Raphael.” Uriel sounded profoundly disillusioned “But I never thought you would go as far as using the whole of the human race in our war against the demons.”

“It was the perfect timing, brother! I opened up their defenses, and with Ryo fighting for us, we will finish them off once and for all!” Raphael raised a closed fist in a demonstration of strength.

Uriel looked away from his brother “Your ambition has blinded you. I will stand for this no more...”

“Well, you are not in command here!” Raphael exclaimed vehemently “If you wanted to lead, you should not have conceded the throne to me when the time came to choose!”

“I trusted you to be a wise leader, Raphael! Not a cruel and insensitive one!” Pain and regret seeped through Uriel’s words as he spoke them.

“I guess you were wrong.” Raphael lowered his eyes for an instant, appearing to be dispirited by his brother’s words, before reacquiring his resolve “Regardless of what you think, I am succeeding in our mission. I’m sorry you do not approve of my methods, but don’t think I will allow you to go the same way our elder brother once did!” He spoke in a warning tone, as well as a proud one, making sure it was clear his authority was absolute “If you even try to create some sort of riot, you will not live to see another day. I will not make the same mistake God made by sparing that wretched Kohryu’s life!”

“God does not make mistakes!” Uriel hastily corrected his brother.

“God does not exist anymore, you puppet!” Raphael screamed with wide open eyes “It is about time we made our own decisions!”

There was no answer in the form of words from Raphael’s brother, only a firm, disapproving look that stung much deeper than any word could “Goodbye, Uriel. If this is what you called me here for, I have more important matters to attend to. The Alpha and Omega clan will fall soon, and it will be *glorious*.” Before the stern angelic leader turned to leave, he opened his wings wide to the sides and flapped them with immense force, sending a powerful gust of wind that pushed the other archangel back a few steps. Golden feathers slowly floated to the ground as Raphael walked to the double doors and pushed them open.

“I fear you will come to regret this, Raphael... and unfortunately, when you do, it will be too late...” Uriel urged his brother one last time.

Raphael stopped his stride, but spoke without facing Uriel “I do not need your help. Just cower into your little corner, and let *me* do the work.”

As soon as Raphael left the room, the doors slammed strongly against each other, closing. The beautifully sun-showered hall was left filled only with the presence of a sad, broken figure on its knees... the empty shell of a once powerful and determined Archangel, ready to obey any and all of his Creator’s orders, at whatever cost or sacrifice.

“Where are you father? ... Why... have you left us?”

Chapter 23:

«Determination»

The high ceiling of a small room displayed slowly flickering forms. Ryo was lying down, face up, on the bed of his enclosed quarters, staring into emptiness. The room's naked stone walls and ceiling were lit only by the faint light of a slowly burning candle. In Ryo's head, the strange shadows, projected in front of his eyes, slowly wavering in place, had no logical representation. His mind was drifting between its conscious and subconscious states, as memories of Karin arose, amidst a vast ocean of uncertainties. Hours of isolation had gone by since he had returned from Nevelyn, and countless questions refused to leave him in peace.

“Who could that woman be?” The resemblance to his loved one was undeniable but, disconnected as Ryo might be from human nature and reality, the faint hope that it might indeed have been Karin had quickly vanished from his mind. On the other hand, there was definitely a connection... the woman knew Karin's name... whoever she was, he had to find her. Ryo remembered the surge of energy, the primal impulse that had originated from his mind when the demon Hanya had hit the woman on the face. Ignoring its injuries, his body had leapt forward on its own, instinctively, and in a brief instant his katana was back in the grip of his hand and the demon's head had fallen to the ground. Long seconds had passed, before his body's muscles had alleviated the strain on his rigid, trembling body, and the huge headless demon had toppled to the ground. But, even though he had saved the woman, he had not been able to protect her... *“That damned archangel! He forced me to retreat... now the demons have her... she might already be dead...”*

As his mind continued on a hopeless quest for unattainable answers, Ryo's attention shifted to a sudden, irregular movement of the shadows

drifting on the room's boundaries. A stronger current of air had disrupted the candle's continuous and steady burn. A knock on the door was heard.

"Ryo, I'm coming in." Archangel Raphael's distinct voice sounded behind the door, before it opened slowly.

Ryo kept his stare directed at the ceiling, unnerved by the unwanted presence "... Urgh..."

"I wanted to congratulate you on your excellent performance in battle." Raphael said, as he took a step into the dimly lit room.

"I'd prefer to be left alone, archangel." Ryo retorted, without looking at the unwelcome angel "I've had more than enough of your kind and your orders."

"Well," Raphael continued, ignoring the spiteful tone in Ryo's voice "I also came to inform you that I will soon have another assignment for you."

"*Humph...* I don't see you blue-skinned creatures down there on the battlefield..." Ryo finally directed his gaze at Raphael; an empty cold gaze, overflowing with nothing but hate and disdain "Is everything you do resumed to ordering others around and going down when the fight's already finished?" His words clearly referenced a particular situation "To force unwanted retreats?"

"Uriel..." Raphael spoke his brother's name with a slight tinge of irritation, anger even "I'm sorry for that, Ryo. He acted of his own mind, and went against my decisions." He explained, before adding with intensity "You should have destroyed the rest of those demons!" After a moment of silence between him and Ryo, Raphael carried on "But don't worry. I will be informing you of one of their hideouts soon. You will have plenty of chances to obliterate them."

"Tell me, *Raphael...*" For the first time since he had become acquainted with the archangel, Ryo called him by his name. Not in a friendly or familiar way. He spoke the angel's name with such enmity that it appeared

as though he were slowly spitting out the word from in between his lips
“What exactly do you think will happen in the future?”

“What do you mean?” Raphael inquired. It looked as if the archangel wanted to force Ryo to speak the words himself, playing coy.

“You do realize that, if I live to see the death of the very last demon, I’ll be coming for your kind next, don’t you?” Ryo stated, blankly.

“Well, I don’t think I should worry about that for now.” Raphael answered after a slight pause “As long as we have a common enemy, our truce should be safe, would you not say so?”

“Very well.” Ryo turned his gaze back at the ceiling “Goodbye, angel.”

“Be ready for my instructions.” Raphael advised as he turned away and left the room, slowly closing the door behind him.

Ryo was left alone once again, with only the company of the burning candle, quietly fading away *“That damned creature... I can’t help but feel I’m being played here... sooner or later, your head will roll, archangel... you can be sure of that...”*

With that thought in mind, Ryo picked up his katana and left his sleeping quarters. It was night time once again; the whole day had gone by since he had returned from Nevelyn so, hopefully, the training grounds would be soulless. The thought of seeing another inhuman creature sickened Ryo, and he felt he deeply needed some peaceful time to stare at the infinity of the night sky.

Walking through the richly adorned corridors, Ryo felt relieved to confirm that they were indeed empty. He slowly opened the doors and stepped onto the moonlight-showered grass field. The view was impressive... the night sky was perfectly clear, nothing clouding the visage of the full moon, shining brightly in the midst of hundreds of stars. A few steps ahead, Ryo noticed a shadowy figure lying down on the grass, and halted his stride. Upon becoming aware of Ryo’s presence, the figure got

up to its feet, while keeping its stare directed at the black sky. Its silhouette had an ominous look under the moon's ghostly, blue gaze. Two huge wings overshadowed another, smaller, pair of feather-covered limbs on the creature's back.

“Urgh... another archangel... what the hell is it with these fuckin’ things?!”

“Hello, Ryo.” The shadow spoke as it directed its gaze at Ryo. The creature's fully white eyes shone in a hazy, blue tint, highlighted amidst its remaining indiscernible facial features.

Despite the distance and his difficulty to focus on the creature's face, Ryo recalled its voice perfectly “You...”

“I am really sorry I had to force you to leave that woman behind...” The angel spoke, lowering its head.

Ryo was surprised by those words *“He... knows I was trying to protect her?!”*

“I can only imagine how you must desire to speak with her and obtain answers for your questions.”

Ryo slowly approached the figure in silence. On a closer look, the short-haired archangel's eyes appeared gloomy and heavily-burdened “Why are you telling me this? Who are you, exactly, archangel?” Ryo inquired, intrigued.

“My name is Uriel. I...” The angel seemed reticent, somehow disturbed by Ryo's presence “I wanted to let you know... I only forced you to retreat for your own good. There is much you do not know, and that fight-”

“You know nothing about me!” Ryo interrupted the creature's speech with indignation “Who do you think you are to make those decisions?!”

“I know more about you than you would probably want me to...” Uriel spoke with an emotional voice “and I honestly believe that, in the end, you would have always come to regret not avoiding that fight.”

“*Humph...*” Ryo turned away from Uriel, waving a hand in the archangel’s face “I don’t really care what you, or any of your kind, believe. I’d like some peace and quiet. You can take your riddles with you, and leave this place.”

“Certainly. I will leave you in peace.” Uriel replied reluctantly, accepting Ryo’s will “Just, please, consider this piece of advice: be aware of everyone that surrounds you. Know your enemy before you strike... before you do something that you will lament in the future.”

“Lament!? Tell me, what can I possibly do that I’ll *lament*?” Ryo lost his patience. The archangel’s words had sounded as ironic as they possibly could, in Ryo’s mind “Virtually everyone that I ever cared for is long gone!” He cried out in anger “There is no chance at all that I would face someone in battle who, without knowing it, I did not wish to kill! All I need to be aware of, is if my opponents are human or not!”

“Perhaps you will yet be surprised...” Uriel insisted “Unfortunately, all I can do is offer you my advice... the rest, you will have to learn on your own, and the will to continue on, has to come from within yourself.”

“The only thing I desire is the demons’ blood on my sword!” Ryo exclaimed, disregarding the archangel’s words “And when I’m done with *their* kind, I’ll be coming for all of *your* heads! My thirst for revenge will only be satisfied when mankind is free of all of you! And nothing but death itself will stop me!” The angel remained silent, regarding Ryo’s face as he spoke with tremendous resolve and determination “I advise you, archangel: if you value your existence, pray for it.”

“You have grown cold and heartless, Ryo...” Uriel stated, in a saddened voice “... perhaps that was the only way for you to survive all you have been through...” He added in a low voice, as if declaring his thoughts, before maintaining silence, seemingly immersed in his own mind “*Is death what we should all welcome? ... maybe you really are destined to bring all of us eternal slumber...*”

Ryo looked Uriel coldly in the eyes. He stared silently at the archangel for a few seconds before averting his eyes “Goodbye, creature.”

“Until we meet again, child.” Slowly, the strangely sympathetic angel turned around, opened his massive golden wings, and flew into the distance, over the high walls surrounding the training grounds.

“I’m sure that won’t be such a pleasant meeting.” Ryo thought as he watched the angelic figure’s shadow until it vanished from sight. This one seemed different... whoever he was, Ryo felt he had not yet seen the last of him.

Chapter 24:

«Live or Let Live»

“What... are you saying, Amano?” Michael’s face transpired confusion and disbelief. Amano’s figure stood before him, his single huge dark wing overshadowing the right half of his body as the moonlight encased him in a dream-like haze.

“You will die here, tonight, unless you unsheathe your weapon, and strike at me, warrior.” Amano spoke with stone-cold seriousness.

“But... what’s gotten into you?” Michael asked in reluctance “Why would I attack you?!”

“*Why* is not important right now. Do you stop to consider *why* if an enemy’s blade is upon your neck?” Amano questioned, rhetorically.

“Well... no... but-”

“Do you think about *why* if the life of someone you care for is at stake?” Amano interrupted Michael’s dumbfounded speech.

“... But, that’s not-”

“Your life is on the line, Michael!” The ancient demon spoke firmly “You either act, and protect yourself, or give up and die!”

“No! I will **not** attack you after all you’ve done for me!” Michael exclaimed, in denial.

Amano slowly lifted his right arm, his index and middle finger pointing straightforward at Michael. With a fast movement, the ancient demon retracted his arm and outstretched it once again in a fast wave, causing a high pitched whisper to be heard. Sharp pain hit Michael in the left shoulder; an intense cold feeling ran through his body before he felt the warmth of his own blood splattering on his left cheek. The young warrior staggered back, grabbing his aching shoulder with his right hand.

“*Argh... what...*” His eyes were wide open in confusion “*Why... are you doing this...?*”

“Draw your rapier, boy. Fight back! Defend yourself, unless you wish to abandon this world.” Amano insisted, with no sign of falter.

“*I... can’t...*” Michael struggled to overcome the sharp pain cutting through his senses “*I owe you... so much...*” Amano watched silently as he spoke in between short breaths “*I would’ve killed myself off a long time ago if it weren’t for you... you’ve... made me what I am today.*”

Amano gave no reply. He raised his right hand over his left shoulder, this time with his fist closed. Slowly, he opened his hand, his palm facing the sky. He suddenly lowered his arm and lifted it again, unleashing a powerful gust of wind that hit Michael in the stomach with an incredibly strong blunt force.

“*Ach!*” Breathless, Michael fell to his knees “*Ach... ach... argh...*” He tried his hardest to take a deep breath but his lungs seemed resolute on not allowing any air in “*Ach... kill me... if... you want...*” He said, with the little air he could gather “*I’d... rather die... at your hands than... ach... fight you!*”

“Is that how you intend to face your enemies?” Amano spoke slowly, watching as Michael, on his knees, managed to catch his breath “Offering them your head on a silver platter?”

“You’re not my enemy!” Michael screamed out to Amano, who stood tall above him.

“Anyone can be your enemy! I’m attacking you! If you do not fight back, you *will* die!”

“No...” Michael refused to accept the words leaving his mentor’s lips.

“Yes!” Amano contradicted him “If you have any remaining will to live; to face Ryo once again; to protect the people you love... to fight by

Rachel's side..." He let his words linger "Get up; draw your sword; and fight back!"

Michael looked up at his mentor. His eyes were filled with pure black tears of pain and anguish, which streamed down his bloodstained face... tears of despair... tears of memories yet to be buried...

"Very well." Amano appeared to give up "If you have no more will left in you, then you are already dead." He stated coldly, as he slowly raised both his arms in front of his torso, in a cross-like shape. He opened his wing in a sudden movement, releasing black feathers that stopped mid-air, floating around him. These feathers started being pulled near his hands as if by invisible vortexes, and remained there, hovering in circles around the demon's open fists "Goodbye, Michael..."

"AaaaaAAAARRRGHHH!!!" Regaining his breath, Michael suddenly arose and jumped back. His wings were wide open to the sides, nervously shivering in place... blood streamed down his left arm from the wounded shoulder as he stood watching his mentor's movements.

The ancient demon lowered his arms and folded his dark wing. He extended his left arm to the side, and with a sudden bolt of lightning, a long katana appeared in his hand "Well then..." Amano had a faint smile on his face as he regarded Michael, now standing strong "Are you ready, warrior?"

Michael held his ground. Trying to regain control over his mind, he slowly folded his wings and unsheathed the rapier with his right hand. He took a deep breath, his eyes closing for an instant in concentration.

A bright flash emanated from the slightly curved sword's glimmering blade as Amano unsheathed the long weapon. The scabbard, now in his left hand, became enveloped in lightning and disappeared into thin air. A faint, sparkling glow seemed to radiate from inside the weapon's pommel, beneath the handle firmly gripped by the demon's clawed fingers.

Both warriors stood in place looking into each other's dark eyes. Michael heard his heart pounding... each beat marked the passage of another chance to strike... his mind still refused to command an attack against his mentor. What was it? Respect? Admiration? ... Fear? Or maybe all of those together... whatever it was, Michael needed to overcome it. He had to defend himself. The young warrior would not allow himself to give up before he managed to confront Ryo *"Atone for all I've done... no matter the cost... I have to face my burden. I won't give up!"*

As if a switch had suddenly been activated, Michael's expression changed from one full of doubt and uncertainty to the face of resolve itself. With a sudden impulse, the inexperienced demon dashed forward, aiming the rapier at his mentor's torso, and delivered a quick thrust. His opponent responded with a swift parry, easily avoiding the attack. Regaining his momentum, Michael allowed his weight to flow forward, following the sideways movement of his parried thrust, and hastily turned one hundred and eighty degrees around his own axis. Facing his adversary's unprotected back he delivered a swift downwards slash, aimed at the lower back, but the ancient demon easily managed to step forward and evade the attack altogether.

A fraction of a second was all it took for Amano to turn around, dash forward and suddenly stand right on the young warrior's face. He moved his left leg to the right of his stance and rotated in place with inhuman speed, while opening his wing widely. Amano hit Michael all across the upper body with his heavy, feathered limb, projecting the boy through the air with sheer blunt force.

Michael stumbled to the ground, rolling to ease his fall and focusing on keeping a steady grip on his weapon. Stunned, he struggled to regain his footing and looked forward to avoid any surprise attacks. His mentor stood in place, flapping his black wing before folding it behind his back *"Such strength from an attack... with his wing?! Shit..."*

But there was no time to ponder. Again the adversary was dashing forward for an attack, this time with his katana in a position which indicated a two handed thrusting attack. Michael stood still, waiting for the exact moment to take action. His senses were sharpened. The training he had endured over the previous long months was showing results. Even under such great stress, his mind felt clear and lucid. The ancient demon was upon him. The tip of his long Japanese sword advanced forward, and was now but an inch away from Michael's lower left torso... a swift shift in weight to his right allowed safe passage for the weapon's blade and a rapid twist left Michael behind his foe's back, the rapier readied above his left shoulder. The command for a precisely timed slash instinctively released from the young warrior's brain, making it through his motor neurons, and activating his muscles in an immediate response... crimson fluid was released through the air, into the night sky.

Amano stumbled forward releasing his weapon. He fell with one knee to the ground, his back scarred by a clear diagonal cut, shoulder to hip. Dark blood streamed down his body, staining the moonlit grass beneath him.

Michael's mind was blank... he maintained his stance, the rapier aimed at the ground, dripping blood, as he looked at the figure of his mentor, fallen to his knees "*!... Amano...*" "*Amano!*" Realizing what he had done, he rushed over to Amano's side, reaching with his hands to help him up "*A... Amano... are you okay? I'm... sorry...*"

"*Ach... Hahah...*" Amano laughed joyfully, even though his face showed pain "*Very well done, my boy. That was a perfectly timed reversal. Congratulations.*"

"*But... your back...*" Michael spoke between harsh breaths, still unable to release the tension in his body and baffled by what he had done "*I... didn't mean to...*"

"*Enough of that, child.*" Amano looked up at Michael's distressed face, and placed a firm hand on his shoulder "*I am proud of what you have*

become. What you have shown me today is everything I had expected from you.” Slowly, Amano got to his feet and flexed his back. He looked at Michael with reassuring eyes “You have a great heart. You are capable of sacrificing yourself for the ones you love.” Michael’s black eyes became immersed in tears that reflected the moon’s glow as he heard Amano’s words “You have retained your humanity, even after all that you have been through... that is of the utmost importance in the war we are fighting, Michael. But you must never forget, you have to be ready for anything, or anyone that you may be faced with. If and when the time comes, you must do whatever it takes to ensure your survival and that of the ones you love.”

Michael focused on steadying his heartbeat, and regaining his composure. His mentor’s wise words made perfect sense. He had to be ready to react, whatever the circumstances, and the adversary, might be “I understand. I won’t forget that.” He said, in a more controlled tone of voice.

Amano looked pleased with the results he had obtained “Let’s go, then. Let’s leave this place in peace.”

As they abandoned the training grounds, Michael started heading for the infirmary, worried about Amano’s wounded back, but his mentor stopped him “I will heal this myself, Michael. No need to disturb someone else at these hours, and besides, I would prefer allowing the pain to linger for a while, before healing. Physical pain helps remind us that we are not ethereal, and not as immortal as some of our kind tend to consider themselves. But I can heal your wound right now, if you so wish it.”

“No, don’t worry about it. It’s nothing serious; after the initial pain washed away, the wound is actually quite harmless.” Michael said, his face marked with surprise.

Amano did not look the least surprised as he regarded Michael with an expression of deep serenity. With a simple nod of his head, the ancient demon turned away and headed up the stairs to his private quarters.

Michael stood in place, taking in everything that he had learned and become aware of, during the last hour. He felt like so much had happened during the little time since he had left Rachel in his bedroom. He remembered those last minutes in Rachel's company, and how close they had been. The thought of her sweet, beautiful face remained in his mind through the entire, slow walk to his bedroom.

When Michael reached his quarters, he opened the door and was surprised to find light within... had Rachel forgotten to blow out the candles before leaving? But as he looked around the room, he saw that lying on his bed was the peaceful figure of a sleeping angel of darkness. Michael remained still, only a step through the doorway, admiring the aura of peacefulness and tranquility that encircled Rachel as she lay on her side, over her fair, dark-feathered limb. Her slender legs were in what appeared to be an uncomfortable angle, still somewhat hanging over the edge of the bed, as if she had simply slid to her side from a sitting position, and fallen asleep using her delicate hands as a pillow. Michael was mesmerized, unable and unwilling to disturb such a beautiful view.

Rachel's eyes opened slightly as she sensed a presence had entered the room "Oh, you're back!" She said, sitting up, with a joyful smile on her face.

Michael was tongue-tied for a moment "Yeah... hi!" He replied, with no other words coming to mind. He stepped closer, admiring the cute, sleepy look on Rachel's face.

As soon as the blurriness cleared from Rachel's eyes, she noticed the blood staining Michael's vests. Her eyes and mouth opened slightly in surprise, and immediately she stood up "What happened?!"

"Oh... It's nothing serious, don't worry." Michael had nearly forgotten the wound on his shoulder.

“But, where did this wound come from?” Rachel questioned in confusion as she stepped near Michael and cautiously placed a hand over his left shoulder.

“Well... I was sparring with Amano for a while...” Michael replied, unsure of what else he should say.

Rachel’s face was perplexed for an instant “At these hours?!” But within instants she had put any doubts or questions aside “Never mind that, let me see that wound.” She said, and then, without waiting for Michael’s permission, she started undoing the buttons on his shirt, the ones that were placed on either side of the wide collar of every one of their vests, to allow the fabric to slide over their wings.

Michael was embarrassed at first, as he raised his arms and allowed Rachel to help him take off his shirt. His cheeks were burning as she motioned him to sit on the bed, and lowered herself to one knee beside him, to take a closer look at the wound. There was no pain that could earn the attention of his mind, as he felt the soft, caring touch of Rachel’s hand, sliding over his chest, near his wounded shoulder.

Michael noticed how Rachel’s eyes twitched slightly as she moved her fingers over the wound, afraid of inflicting him pain “It doesn’t hurt, Rach. Don’t worry...” He said, putting her mind at ease, and then voiced his next thoughts as he realized why Amano had not seemed surprised at his lack of pain “I think Amano was meticulously certain of where he was hitting me.”

“Don’t act tough, silly. I’m sure it hurts, even if not too much...” Rachel closed her eyes lightly, and spread her slim fingers loosely over Michael’s wound. She was silent for a few seconds as she focused her vital energy on her palm, to heal the hurt tissue.

Michael felt the warmth originating from Rachel’s palm, easing whatever pain he had been experiencing. He was enchanted by the impassive, graceful look that marked her delicate facial features. The enticing contours of her voluptuous, slightly colorless, closed lips was

hypnotizing his every sense as the warmth of her vital energy coursed through his whole body in a soothing sensation. He felt compelled to touch her sweet mouth, to caress her slightly rounded cheeks, to fondle the perfect, alluring waves of pure snow-white hair that encircled her face and showered her enticingly uncovered lean shoulders.

Rachel opened her eyes in surprise as she felt the gentle touch of Michael's hand on her face. She was caught off-guard as she had been focusing entirely on healing his wound. A rush of blood rose to her face, and she felt a sudden, fastened beat on her chest. She parted her lips, but no words came out as Michael's fingers extended their touch over her cheeks and travelled to her temple, slowly fixing a few locks of hair behind her left ear. Without her noticing it, Rachel's hand had slid from over the wound, and was now tenderly placed over Michael's chest... the feeling of his heartbeat permeated strongly through his muscles, causing his skin to tremble rhythmically beneath her fingers. Rachel felt her senses being shaken; the strong urge to kiss Michael, to allow her lips to smoothly slither over the eyelids of his caring eyes, around the perfect outline of his short hair, over his cute blushing cheeks; the desire to wrap her lips around his in a marvelous, long-awaited embrace of her passion and care for him... lust was intoxicating her mind.

Michael's mind felt momentarily dazzled by the surge of adrenaline that hit his senses as Rachel stood up, closer to him, and gently, but suddenly, pushed him over the bed. He watched, perplexed, enthralled, breathless, as she put her weight on the edge of the bed and swiftly climbed on top of him, placing her legs around his waist, holding him locked in place. He lay there, admiring her bewitchingly beautiful figure, leaning over him; he felt the weight of her body pressed against his own, the strong, lustful choke of her legs around him. Very slowly, her ravishingly sensual smile slowly came closer as she lowered her face near his own, the fascinating gesture with which her fangs carefully bit her lower lip exalting his craving for the

touch of her mouth. He felt very much like a prey beneath the unavoidable allure of the hunter's perfect guise, completely under control, subdued to his limits by the dark, divine beauty and grace of Rachel's presence. His heart was beating stronger and stronger, his mind unable to command any part of his body, as if spellbound by a mermaid's enchanting melody. But then a long, warm kiss soothed his soul, calming his mind. The feeling of Rachel's tender lips gently pressing against his own quieted his anxiousness.

Slowly, Michael's hands explored the touch of Rachel's sensuous legs as the slow, tender caress of their mouths against each other gave way to a more frantic and passionate stream of kisses. His lips embraced Rachel's in a sensually rhythmic flow as her soft, warm tongue gently invaded his mouth and intertwined with his own in an exciting dance that lavishly provoked all of his senses. The feel of his hands sliding over her legs, grabbing her waist, traveling over her back and bent shoulders, coursing along her stretching wings, his fingers slowly burying themselves amid their soft feathers; the sensations derived from the infatuated touch of her hands over his face and chest, originated by her lascivious grasp on his short hair and by the increasingly strong and desirous hold of her legs around him... her deep, uncontrolled breathing right next to his ears, reverberating to the very core of his being... Michael's mind was completely shut out from the rest of the world. On that moment, nothing other than him and Rachel existed in his perception of the universe.

Rachel's mind was filled with desire. After so many months yearning for Michael's touch and for the chance to be with him fully, with no mental, or physical, barrier standing between them, she felt it was impossible to hold herself under control. Her mind was inebriated by the taste of his lips, by the fondling of his hands over her body, by the very smell and heat of his skin touching hers. She felt Michael's fingers carefully unbuttoning the collar of her shirt. She placed both her hands over

his chest and pushed herself away from his embrace, abruptly breaking the seemingly unbreakable bond of their mouths, as if she would never have let go if not so. In a smooth, seducing motion, Rachel slid her shirt over her head and around one of her folded wings, and swung it away through the air with her other wing. She stood there, on top of him, for a few instants, simply regarding the sensual smile on his flushed face and the look of desire in his pitch-black eyes, feeling the strong grip of his hands around her waist as his wings slowly trembled anxiously at his sides.

Rachel's stunning figure, standing on top of him, invaded Michael's mind; the pale flawless skin of her small round breasts highlighted the light pink color of her perfect nipples, covered only partially beneath long wavy locks of her gorgeous, pure white hair. He wanted to embrace her tightly, to feel her body heat, to kiss her very soul. But she pulled away, and swiftly opening her wings she jumped off the bed, out of his reach, to land only one foot away, facing him with a provoking smile across her lips. He watched as she slowly walked backwards away from him, one small step at a time, never allowing her alluring gaze to release their hold over his eyes.

Reaching behind her back with one hand, Rachel closed the lock on the door. She slowly undid the lace around her waist, and allowed her training pants to fall loosely on the ground, around her naked feet. Michael stood mystified, marveling at the mesmerizing beauty of Rachel's undressed, perfect body as she unfolded her right wing and, with one single smooth beat, blew out both candles near the room's entrance.

Slowly stepping out of the shadows, she approached Michael... with a flap of her left wing this time, she extinguished the flame of another candle, and became once more encircled in shadows... with a few more steps she emerged into the light of the last lit candle, on the bed stand near Michael. She carefully bent over, holding back her long, flowing hair with both hands and, with a short puff, she drowned the room in total darkness, before joining Michael on the bed.

Chapter 25:

«Demonic Legacy»

Over the previous two weeks, Nina had been living among the demons that had given her shelter, learning their customs, getting to know their way of life. Her inquisitive nature fed her mind with a deep craving for knowledge. Humanity's past would probably be intricately connected to the demons', especially as far as religion went; the insight she could obtain would be priceless. Besides, she didn't really have anywhere else to go, so the former detective had decided she should just try and make the best of such an unexpected situation.

Truth, as Men knew it, seemed to be completely wrong. The creatures depicted in almost every widely spread religion as monsters, as the bringers of death and evil to the world, had been revealing themselves as having much more in common with humans than Nina could have ever believed, or even imagined. A lot of her time she had initially spent reading some of the few books on Amano's personal collection that were written in recent human language. One was particularly interesting: "*Legacy*"; it appeared to be an English translation of a history book, encompassing the time between the creation of the first demon, to events that had taken place only a few hundred years before the present time.

Nina learned how the first demon, Kohryu, had been God's firstborn, the first angel to be created, who had been cast down from the Holy Realm for creating a rebellion against God's will. But, most surprisingly, she read that the reason why the creature had rebelled against its maker had been its belief that mankind should be granted access to immortality. There were quotes on the book, where the ancient demon stated that mortality was an abomination, that the cycle of life and death was humanity's prison, "*damnation in exchange for the freedom of the heart*".

For pursuing his beliefs and going against what he had been commanded to do, Kohryu had been cursed; marked with colorless hair to signify lifelessness, with pure black eyes and wings to show his tainted soul, and then banished from the Holy Realm, down to Earth. Each and every angel that had stood against Kohryu's banishment, had followed this path, expelled from his or her realm. A millennia had gone by before the fallen firstborn had later reawakened, to find himself in the humans' world.

Afterwards, numerous tales of events that had taken place were told. During Kohryu's centuries-long slumber, all over the world humans had come into contact with angelic warriors, who had commanded and inspired them to write scriptures, revealing God's divine creation of the universe, and where an entity was named as the general representation of their Holy Father's enemy: the son who betrayed his father for power, and became the source of evil itself. Several names, ranging from Satanael, Lucifer and Mara, to Iblis or Angra Mainyu, were given to this entity, but it was always associated with lust, temptation, destruction and, ultimately, death. His Father's soldiers had given his own face to evil.

The other banished angels had been persecuted, and most had eventually gone into hiding centuries before Kohryu's awakening, just as others had taken onto themselves the roles of Gods among men. Kohryu had been reborn into a world in which his new kin had long before lost its way.

He had found and united those who would follow him, to create the first clan, having named it *Alpha and Omega* in a statement to God. As his banishment had marked the beginning of a new era, so too would he bring an end to the old one himself. Over the ensuing centuries, the demonic population had grown. Kohryu had learned how to "*liberate*" humans, in a similar way as angels were able to "*transcend*" them into a holy existence, by granting them contact with the life stream; but in doing so, their human souls would immediately become afflicted by the same demonic curse every fallen angel shared. Soon, this knowledge had spread like a virus.

After a few hundred years, several clans had emerged and existed, among the humans whilst unknown to them, with their respective leaders being the eldest demon among each of the groups, or a named successor. An entire underworld had come into existence, with strict rules that would allow the several clans to coexist and thrive, away from the Human's prying eye. While very few demons had remained apart from this system, refusing to live by any rules other than their own, in time, the majority of the clans had strayed from Kohryu's intent, many fighting only for their share of power, or simply going against the Father who had banished their kind.

Two whole days' time had passed without a single hour of sleep, until Nina had finished reading that book. In the end, her mind had felt dazzled by all the information. The idea – which Nina had not really ever believed or followed, but which she was aware mostly everyone secretly or even unconsciously wished for – of some sort of life after death, of a Heaven to which a soul would ascend after being released from its bodily prison, was clearly out of the picture. The Holy Realm was the Angel's home, just as much as the Earth was Man's. And could it really be true that the Devil had actually sacrificed his place in Heaven for humanity's sake? And if death had not been originated by the Devil's influence, why would God Himself have made of Humanity a mortal species?

What Nina had read... was it really all of the truth, or could there be another side to the coin? And how could she dig deeper, to find that other side, when she had no way of flipping said coin? Nina had decided that the best she could do, for the time being, was to try and learn everything she could about Amano and his clan. Amano had apparently been the first pupil that Kohryu had taken under his wing, the first human he had turned, and was now the successor to clan Alpha and Omega.

The last few days, Nina had spent them mainly in the company of Michael; she had found that the boy had retained his humanity, and that

underneath his devilish appearance lay the heart and soul of a caring young man. Rachel, who spent most of her time with Michael, as they appeared to be a couple, had also shown to be very kind-hearted. Despite the initial negative feelings she had grown towards Nina, caused by her fiery resolve to protect Amano, she had later easily accepted the human detective into the bosom of her family's village.

Day by day, Nina had been observing and watching the demons as they lived peacefully in a form of self-sustained society very similar to what she was used to, amongst her own kind. The warrior's daily routine revolved around bettering their skills and preparing for missions that Amano sent them on, but not all were warriors. A lot of the demons just peacefully passed their days living with their families, charged with maintaining the village's resources... men, women, and children, who would be seen as any other human, had they not devil traits. The whole foundation of clan Alpha and Omega was very similar to that of a human city or town, but cut from the outside world, as only the warriors ever left the boundaries of the village's protective barriers. The other villagers were responsible for tasks such as caring for the water wells and the electric generators, which needed to be charged regularly and maintained, keeping the optical barriers and force fields protecting the village active, as well as with all the agricultural processes necessary.

Nina felt amazed at how every single one of the clan members respected and admired Amano. The ancient demon seemed to be a truly loving leader, like few she had ever seen among human hierarchy. The type of loyalty that he seemed to attract and obtain was one that would not be broken or betrayed by any of his followers. In truth, the whole clan's way of life was clearly peaceful, the exact opposite of what Nina had expected, after what she had seen in Nevelyn on that fateful day.

Nina and Michael were walking through the training fields, observing the warriors practicing their fighting skills "So, Ms. Sutherland, how do

you feel? It's been two weeks now, since you've been here, with us... admit it, even if strangely, this place feels right, doesn't it?" Michael asked her, with a gentle smile on his face.

"Well... yes, this place is really nothing like I would've expected." Nina admitted "The harmony and peace I've felt here are extraordinary. I can see how, especially after all you've been through, you would find a new home here, Michael." She put a hand over Michael's shoulder as they stopped, back near the entrance to the training grounds.

"Yes, Amano and this new family..." Michael waved his hand over the view of tens of warriors in training "They gave new meaning to my life." He was still for a few seconds, his eyes gazing forward "But enough about me. So, you're enjoying your time here? I understand that all of this is probably really weird for you..."

"Well, I'm very curious by nature... even though it may be an unexpected situation, I can't say I'm not taking some pleasure in everything I've been learning. My eyes have been really tired though... too many hours spent reading by candlelight!" Nina laughed candidly.

"Well, we all have to save... those electric generators aren't easy to charge! And their capacity is a little limited." Michael answered, after laughing in understanding of Nina's complaint.

"I know, just kidding." As they left the training grounds and headed for the Old Garden, Nina decided she would ask the boy a question that had been going through her head for days "Tell me, Michael..."

"Yes, Ms. Sutherland?" Michael answered promptly.

"Please, call me Nina. You and Rachel have been true friends to me, so I believe it's time we broke the ice. Okay?"

After a short reticent pause, Michael agreed "Okay, Nina."

"Great!" Nina said, joyfully "Tell me, then. There's something that's been bugging me..."

“What is it?”

“Amano, he seems to have complete and utter respect and loyalty from each and every one of you...” Nina left her words hanging for an instant.

“Yes...” Michael nodded her to carry on.

“So, being the most ancient demon in the clan, is he the most powerful warrior as well?”

“Well...” Michael appeared to be surprised by the question.

“There’re two reasons why I’m asking you this.” Nina proceeded to explain, on noticing Michael’s surprise “For one, I’m trying to understand the most I possibly can about how your clan works.”

“Well, I don’t think I can help too much with that. It’s true that a lot has happened...” Michael was silent for an instant, as if considering his thoughts “Damn... really too much stuff actually...” He said, as he arched his eyebrows and took a deep breath “But yet, it’s still been relatively little time since I came here...”

“I understand, Michael, don’t worry.” Nina reassured him.

“But, I can tell you one thing for sure: Amano is by far the most powerful warrior *I* have ever seen. He’s in a completely different league. His strength is overwhelming, even.”

“I see. Well, and that brings me to the second reason why I was asking you about this...” Nina seemed reticent “Amano... he’s... missing a wing...”

Michael laughed mildly at Nina’s embarrassed look “I see what you’re getting at.”

“Who, or what, could be powerful enough to leave him scarred for life, like that?” She asked in disbelief.

“From what Rachel told me, Uriel did that to him, during battle.”

“Uriel?” Nina repeated the name curiously.

“Yes, the archangel Uriel. He’s the eldest angel still in existence.” Michael explained “One of the Firstborn.”

Nina stared at Michael expecting an explanation “The first born? You mean...” She didn’t finish her sentence, unsure if her idea would sound ignorant.

“Yes. The first five angels God created. Lucifer was the first, the eldest. He later changed his own name, wishing thereafter to be known as Kohryu. After him came Uriel, followed by Azrael, Raphael and lastly Lailah.”

“Oh...” Nina’s face beamed with keen interest. Kohryu, the first demon had in fact been called Lucifer at his birth. She wondered why an angel would make a point of changing his name, but more important questions begged to be answered “And... where are these angels now?” She inquired further.

“Lailah has been dead for about four centuries, killed in battle, at the hands of Kohryu.” Michael recounted “After God disappeared, Uriel-”

“Wait... what?” Nina interrupted him “God... disappeared...?” She raised an eyebrow in disbelief and skepticism.

“Yes... it has been over four hundred years since the last time an angel has had contact with God.” Nina was silently staring at Michael, awed at what she was hearing “They have no idea why... one day, He simply wasn’t there anymore.”

“But... how can that-” Nina felt speechless “My god... you’re telling me that... God is... dead?!”

“Well... that I don’t know. And neither do the angels.” Michael looked at Nina’s bewildered face for a moment. There were no words spoken, so he continued “When *He* disappeared, Uriel, as the eldest one, had the rightful place as the leader of Heaven’s armies; he was the heir to the Holy Throne.” Michael could sense Nina’s urge to know more. She intently listened to every word he spoke, making him feel somewhat nervous and

tongue-tied for an instant “Err... well, Uriel had no desire for power. He relinquished his right to the throne, passing it on to Archangel Raphael.” Michael noticed Nina’s face acquired a strange look, but that she did not speak, as if unwilling to interrupt him “Something on your mind, Nina?”

“Oh... well, it’s just that you’d said another angel’s name, before Raphael’s. Azrael, I think?” Nina recalled with uncertainty. As Michael nodded that she was correct, she questioned “Shouldn’t that one be first in line?”

“You’re really paying attention to this stuff!” Michael said, amusingly surprised “Azrael... shortly before God’s untimely disappearance, her whereabouts became unknown. God might’ve known where she was, but as for the angels, they never saw her again.”

“So, she just disappeared too...” Nina wondered “Well, go on, please!”

Michael noticed how deeply engrossed Nina was, in the story he was retelling “Not long after assuming the throne, Raphael started an all-out war against the demons, and eventually even Lailah perished while going after Kohryu’s head. He proved too strong for all of them, and Raphael had to resign himself to hold off his forces.”

“I see...” Nina spoke slowly, as if she was still internalizing all of the facts.

“It was only years ago that Kohryu was somehow killed... and no one ever found out who had done it.” Michael concluded.

“But, how could the most ancient and revered demon just be killed without any one of the others knowing it?” Nina questioned, genuinely intrigued “I mean... I don’t see how anything could make it into your clan’s boundaries without being noticed...”

“Kohryu had left the clan under Amano’s command. About five years before he was killed, he had fallen in love with a woman, and had gone to live with her, among the humans.” Michael explained, somehow reticently.

“Oh...” Nina was clearly surprised

“Anything more, you should really ask Amano...” Michael appeared to be unsure if he should explain anything further.

“No, that’s quite enough. Thanks, Michael.” Nina said, with a pleasant smile “And what a tale... how did you learn all of this?” She asked “You don’t strike me as the studious type...” She had a joking tone to her voice, as she made a faint laughter.

Michael laughed openly, for a moment reminded of his old self, never one to pay attention to his studies “Well, you got me there! The little I know about our clan’s history, Rachel and Amano taught me. They made it a point that I learn about this stuff.” He made a face of resignation, demonstrating he had no way around it “But for the most part, what I told you about the angels’ history, I learned when I was transcended.”

Nina’s eyes bulged with confused astonishment “You... I... don’t think I understand...”

“Like I told you, Nina, a lot has happened.” Michael replied, implying there was a lot of history behind these facts “It feels like years have gone by since I left humanity behind.”

Nina’s smile was one of understanding “I have time... if you’re in the mood to talk, I’d love for you to tell me all about what happened.”

For the next hours, Nina and Michael wandered amidst the immense diversity of trees and plants at the Old Garden. With only the flora as their company, Michael told the former detective about all that he’d been through. He told her how he had become an angel to try and save his friend, only to discover that it was far from what he was supposed to do. He described how it had felt to be an angel, how at the time everything had seemed so clear to him. He told Nina about all the horrible things he had done; how he had been ordered to dispose of his old best friend’s only family, his adoptive parents, and how he was to blame for getting Ryo tricked into working with the angels; he described how his feelings had

eventually outgrown his angelic predetermination, and had taken the better of him... and then he recounted how it had felt to become a demon.

The whole story was unbelievably tragic. What could Nina possibly say to bring comfort to the young man? She had no idea how he had managed to remain sane through all of those ordeals, what must've gone through his head... and Ryo... everything had been brutally taken from him. And he continued to be deceived by Raphael into doing his dirty work. Everything she had seen in Ryo, back in Nevelyn, suddenly made sense... how empty his look was, and how hatred had transpired from him when fighting the demon. Nina's mind was transported, for moments, a few weeks back to Nevelyn, and she remembered how Ryo had seemed strangely undisturbed by the gruesome death one of the angels had suffered right before his eyes *"Does he know they're lying to him?"*

The sun was starting to set when Nina and Michael realized how much time they had spent in the garden "Michael... I really have no idea what to say..." Nina admitted, as they headed back to the central building.

"Don't say anything." Michael answered in understanding "There's no need. I've come to terms with everything I've done. I have to see Ryo again, to confess everything I did..." He was quiet for an instant, before carrying on with a hint of both hope and resignation in his facial expression "Maybe he'll be able to forgive me... probably not... but no matter the outcome, I must see him again."

Nina stood speechless. She could not help her mind from lingering on the thought of how strong the boy's spirit was; how much he had endured and how he had actually been able to overcome all of it. And what drove Michael was the wish to see his best friend once again, in order to confess to Ryo how he had been involved in taking everything away from him... how could this be motivation enough to make him fight in a war between Heaven and Hell? "And this war?" She questioned, intrigued "Why do you follow Amano?"

“I owe Amano much more than just my loyalty. He not only saved me, but helped me a great deal with handling everything that went through my head. The debt I owe him can never be repaid. I’ll follow him until my life eventually comes to an end.” Michael spoke with no hint of sadness or finality, simply honest loyalty.

Nina could but smile back at the young man, speechless.

“And besides, following him, I’m sure to confront Ryo. Inevitably, sooner or later, it will happen...”

Chapter 26:

«A Child's Innocence»

"Mommy! Mommy, what's going on? Who was that person?!"

"Don't worry my dear; your dad won't let anything bad happen to us."

"But... what if the bad man hurts daddy?"

"Your daddy's very strong. Nothing can hurt him, baby. Everything will be alright. Don't worry okay, my love?"

"... Okay..."

"Mommy's going to lock the door and turn off the lights now... just stay here in your room, no matter what, okay?"

"... hum-hum."

"No matter what, honey! Mommy will be just outside."

A soft kiss on the cheek... A blurry female silhouette walks away, and the lights are turned off. The floor shows an outstretched shadow of the woman's figure until the door closes and darkness engulfs the ambience. The moon shines bright outside the window tinting the chamber, and everything in it, with a ghostly, blue hue. Silence... not a sound is heard from the whole house. From outside though, strange noises reverberate... frightening noises. They go on, lasting for what seems like an eternity... until suddenly, they come to a stop. Unwavering quiet and stillness settle in the air, giving the shadowy room an austere and heavy, bone-chilling, atmosphere... footsteps... a loud clank emanates just from outside the door as moving shadows are visible through the crack underneath the threshold...

"... Please... don't hurt my baby... plea-"

The woman's desperate voice becomes silent, stopped by a muffled thump... a moving shadow is visible on the floor... the door breaks open and a stream of light suddenly fills the room...

Ryo woke up, startled by a loud noise. Was it in his dream? No, there was light. He struggled to focus his eyes and directed his gaze at the light source... the door to his quarters was wide open “*Urgh...* what do you want, creature?” He questioned in an unnerved tone of voice.

An angelic soldier, dressed in its golden battle armor, stood sternly at the doorway “Lord Raphael calls for you.”

“*Humph...* tell him to come meet me himself, if he wants to see me.” Ryo answered as he turned his back away from the door, ready to return to sleep.

“I understand it is of your interest to join us. An important meeting has been called. Preparation to invade a demonic clan.” The warrior spoke impassively.

“... Where are you meeting?” Ryo replied without facing the angel.

“Outside, on the training fields.”

“Very well. I’ll be there.” As the warrior turned to leave, Ryo raised his tone of voice “Close the door behind you, angel.” Back in the comfort of total darkness, Ryo lay on his bed, staring at the indiscernible ceiling. He thought of the dream he had just woken up from “*That woman... could she be... my birth mother? That nightmarish room again, what the hell is that place? And the demon that comes in... it has no wings?*”

The days had crept by laboriously after Nevelyn. The human world had become both a battlefield and a hunting ground for Ryo. He had accompanied the angels on scouting missions, where they had captured and executed any demon they encountered; invasion missions had followed: information from tortured prisoners had led them to hideouts of small groups of demons. The few missions which would actually feel righteous, were those of defending human towns or villages under attack. Each day had, regardless of the angels’ mission, allowed Ryo to unchain his hatred and anger and let them loose upon deserving foes, and this was enough.

After leaving his quarters, Ryo proceeded throughout the hollow corridors, towards the training grounds. Sunlight peered in through the

stained glass windows, projecting multicolored forms and patterns on the stone ground, as each of Ryo's footsteps echoed along the silent hallways, which were devoid of life *"All of those creatures must be gathered around Raphael like his nice little flock... probably a pretty big announcement for such a meeting..."*

The archangel's strong voice gradually became audible as Ryo approached the great doors leading outside. The creature was speaking in English. Ryo was surprised, but deduced that Raphael was probably already expecting his presence, and wanted him to understand what he was saying.

"... a turning point in our historic war against the demon hordes! One of our warriors managed to follow a fleeing demon from Nevelyn back to where it found shelter. After days of careful observation, we have confirmed the location is in fact the hideout for clan Alpha and Omega! We can finally reach Amano and his wretched warriors, and put an end to their unholy existences!"

"Amano, huh? Wonder who that is..."

Slowly, Ryo opened the double doors allowing fresh air into the austere ambience of the hollow corridors. Chatter and low voices gasping in surprise were heard all across the vast crowd of winged beings.

"Silence, please." Raphael had both his hands in the air, demanding silence. He was two or three steps into the training fields, floating a few feet from the ground, with all of his four golden wings slowly flapping, so that his voice would be heard throughout the entirety of that vast open space "Their base is located in the continent of South America, hidden in plain sight, in a vast expanse of desert, using an optical illusion to render it invisible. As you all know, Amano's clan is one of the few that still maintains distance from the war with the humans. This is a unique opportunity to invade their clan, and eliminate them once and for all!" He raised his right fist, closed tightly, as he spoke these last words. One single, ancient word resounded in unison all over the training fields, signaling understanding and acceptance of the archangel's instructions.

“Humph... this fight between humanity and the demons seems to serve your interests really well, Archangel...”

“Tomorrow, two hundred of you will be chosen to bring our Father’s will upon those demons. Failure cannot be an option. Hundreds of years may elapse before we are presented with such another opportunity.” Raphael was clearly making an effort to stress how important this mission would be “Gabriel!” He called out.

A blue-haired warrior stepped forward, standing apart from the crowd “Yes, my lord?”

“You will lead this mission. You have never failed our cause. As our strongest soldier, for centuries you have been God’s sword.” Ryo’s attention was caught by the archangel’s boasting words, regarding this warrior “And tomorrow, you will do what you do best: you will lead at the front of the assault, and decimate every single demon that steps in your way. Not one can escape.” Raphael emphasized his last sentence.

“Very well, my lord.” The angel with bright blue hair bowed in agreement.

Ryo took a few steps out into the grass field intrigued to see who the archangel referred to as their strongest soldier.

“Ah, Ryo! Glad you could join us.” Dozens of angels followed the direction of Raphael’s eyes to Ryo’s approaching figure, as the archangel spoke “Come closer.”

“*Urgh...*” Ryo disliked having so much attention centered on him, especially from the angels. He was annoyed as he stepped nearer.

“You will go with our warriors. In this mission you will surely satisfy some of your thirst for revenge.” Raphael pointed out, as he stopped beating his wings and folded them, dropping to the ground “Dozens of demons will be at your feet, waiting for your sword’s strike to end their loathsome lives.”

Ryo slowly approached Raphael, while taking a clear look at the warrior beside him, making sure to memorize his features. Long, wavy, light-blue

hair hung over a slim, effeminate face marked with the usual white, expressionless eyes that all the angels had, but his encompassed a cold and ruthless look, beneath a slim veil of apparent fragility “*”Strongest warrior”... We’ll see how you do in combat...*”

“What is wrong, Ryo?” Raphael inquired, as a means to further mark his point “I am sure this is exactly what I promised in our arrangement!”

“Sure.” Ryo answered coldly, after a moment’s pause “When do we leave?”

“Great! That is exactly what I wanted to hear.” Raphael sounded pleased with Ryo’s promptness “You can be ready to leave first thing in the morning. Gabriel will lead an army of two hundred warriors, and you will accompany them.”

Ryo had heard all he needed to. He turned his back on the archangel and walked back out of the training grounds “*Two hundred angels... shit... an army. Well, as long as they don’t get in my way... humph... already getting sick just looking at so many of them...*” The coming day should prove to be a great ordeal. Assaulting an ancient demonic clan... Ryo would not allow another fight to get out of hand, as it had happened in Nevelyn. Death was not an option. Not until he had completed his mission and exacted his revenge. He returned to his room, intent on getting some much-needed rest.

“Ryo... I’ve missed you so much...”

“... I miss you too, Karin...”

“Well... what are you waiting for? When will you be with me?”

“I... can’t... not yet... not before I avenge everyone... not before I avenge you.”

“Let it go...”

“No! The creatures, they have to pay for what they did to all of you!”

“... Humanity killed me... not demons...”

“I don’t know what that means, Karin...”

“Yes, Ryo... you do... just forget all of it... or do you want to let time make you forget about me?”

“I’ll never forget you... but I can’t let it go either... soon, my love... soon I’ll be with you... but not yet...”

Ryo embraces Karin’s naked body... tears roll down his eyes as her presence starts to weaken... his arms soon loosen as her body becomes an ethereal shadow, and eventually fades into the air... Ryo is left alone in total emptiness and darkness...

Ryo opened his eyes. He woke up to the sound of someone knocking on his door “We are ready to leave. Gabriel calls for you.” A muffled voice was heard on the other side.

“I understand.” Ryo replied. He wanted the knocking to go away “Karin... I’ll be with you soon...” He sat up on his bed. To his right was the angelic uniform he had been given when he finished his training. Not the same one he had used on his journey to Nevelyn; that one had been destroyed as it had, almost entirely, turned dark-red from all the demonic blood it had soaked in. But one just like it... a uniform Ryo was growing to hate more and more with each passing day. The thought of being seen as one of those creatures sickened him, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

After getting dressed, Ryo picked up his faithful katana and headed out, to meet the angelic army. On the way, he placed the ring the archangel had given him around his finger once again. The trinket still intrigued him. He was yet to learn how to imbue an object with spiritual energy, or with a link to one’s life stream, but it was a concept that could prove really useful if applied in battle. Unfortunately there was no time to consider that.

At the training grounds, the angels were all prepared to leave for battle. As soon as Ryo arrived, Gabriel, following Archangel Raphael’s order, gave the command and the creatures all unfolded their wings and took to the sky. Ryo drew from the ring’s energy and quickly rose off the ground to follow the army to their destination. Flying through the Earth’s clouds,

after having passed through the portal that opened the way into the Human Realm, Ryo's mind was distracted from his surroundings. The dream he had experienced... Karin... what was his subconscious telling him? He had to get revenge for what the inhuman creatures had done... but why was his own mind telling him to let it go?

It seemed like so much time had gone by since this nightmare had started. Ryo wasn't even sure how long ago Karin had died anymore... time seemed to have lost all of its meaning. But he would never forget Karin's beautiful face. Her smile. Her peaceful and joyful eyes, and how empty they had become in the last instants before her untimely death. The visage of her tears streaming down her face would forever be recorded into his memory, and each and every time he remembered it, hatred would fill his soul and bring focus to his mind, reminding him of what he had to do.

As the angels started their descent, Ryo's mind expelled him from its deepest recesses. He noticed he was falling behind. As he approached the ground, Ryo looked around him. His eyes saw only desert in every direction. Nothing other than small vegetation here and there and the occasional snake, scorpion or beetle's presence, crawling beneath and amidst the countless grains of sand in the seemingly infinite earthly, yellow ocean, underneath the two hundred and one winged shadows, and his own, growing larger with each passing moment. How could a base of operations for a demonic clan really be there, in the middle of nothing?

The warrior, Gabriel, was the first to land on the ground, folding his white wings as sand flowed away with strong gusts of wind. All the other warriors dropped down behind their leader, in an orderly line. Ryo landed behind them, releasing his pull on the ring's energy; the gravity around him returned to normal and his body immediately became drawn to the Earth once again. Ryo stood in place, watching as the creatures began some sort of ritual. Following Gabriel's lead, they all raised and stretched their arms forward with their palms open, fingers pointing to the sky.

Ryo heard Gabriel give a short speech in their indecipherable language, and then watched as all the other warriors screamed in a chorus, reacting to their leader's speech.

"For our Holy Father!" At Gabriel's command, all the angelic warriors opened their wings widely. Energy concentrated on the center of their palms, and all of their muscles twitched as they released a strong impulse, aimed at a single point in front of Gabriel.

At that moment, Ryo witnessed something he could only describe as reality being twisted in front of his own eyes. He watched in bewilderment as a vast expanse of desert in front of him rippled and undulated like a thin veil of water as each of the angelic warriors' impulses hit its surface. And then, with a unanimous war cry, a final energy surge from all of the creatures caused the seemingly liquid surface to solidify and shatter into a million pieces that rapidly disappeared into thin air, revealing a new, unbelievably different visage behind it. A totally unique environment flourished out of nowhere; small rustic houses surrounded by beautiful trees and vegetation surfaced from behind the shattered illusion, encompassing an amazingly peaceful scenario.

It took but a few moments for an alarm to start blaring in the background as the warrior Gabriel took a step from the sandy ground to the grey marble steps that rose into the village. A colorful ball rolled to a stop at the angel's feet... two small, pale, dark-eyed children stood frozen in place, next to each other, looking at the mortal threat in front of them.

"Ach... what... is this?!" Ryo stood perplexed. He had been caught off guard. Having come expecting to invade the headquarters of an ancient demon clan, instead he encountered what appeared to be a peaceful village, with children playing on the streets.

The alarm stopped, and silence settled throughout the village. A burst of flames erupted at Gabriel's side and a great sword appeared in his left hand. The long, straight weapon ranged from his shoulders almost to the ground. It perfectly resembled a human, fourteenth century Zweihänder, with its

typical features as the Fehlschärfe – a blunted portion of the blade near the lower guard – and the Parierhaken – “parrying hooks” situated along the blade, a bit below the Fehlschärfe. A continuous metallic sound echoed throughout the silent village as Gabriel unsheathed the sword, and with another burst of flames the sheath disappeared.

The two demonic children sobbed. They cried, silently in place, holding each other, their fragile black wings trembling, as the angel raised his sword, gleaming brightly under the sunlight...

Chapter 27: «The Beginning of The End»

“Rachel! Yushiro! Where are the rest?”

“Huh? What’s wrong, Amano?”

“Do you not feel it? An army is at our doorstep!”

“Wha- shit! How?!”

“Rachel! Our walls have been breached! Do not ask questions, we have no time!”

“You’re right, I’ll go find the others!”

“Yes, and get Michael as well, then head to the west limits of the village, near the school. Yushiro, you sound the alarm and warn our warriors. Everyone is to meet me at the school. I can feel numerous presences, be ready for battle!”

“Yes, Amano, right away!”

On the west outskirts of the demonic village a very loud, metallic clashing sound was heard. The two small winged children stumbled back; before them stood Ryo, crouched, with his katana above his head, having blocked an attack from Gabriel’s sword.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” Gabriel questioned. Outraged eyes emphasized his bewildered tone of voice.

“What am *I* doing?! What the fuck are *you* doing, creature??” Ryo replied loudly “You were gonna kill these children?!”

“Children?” The blue-haired leader was perplexed “You imbecile! These are NOT human children! Do you not see their black eyes? The dark wings on their backs?! The colorless hair on their heads?” His tone of voice grew louder with each rhetorical question he made “They are demons!”

“Hey!” Ryo cried out loud, interrupting Gabriel’s speech “I did not come here to watch you murder kids!” He spoke still from a crouching position, supporting the weight of Gabriel’s sword with his katana “No matter the color of their eyes and hair! They’re like seven years old or something!”

“It does not matter how old they are!” Gabriel exclaimed with no second thoughts “We have our orders! Not one of them leaves here alive.” He made it perfectly clear “Now, are you going to stand in my way halfling? Do you wish to die as well?” He put some weight into his sword as he talked, forcing Ryo’s hold on his sword.

Ryo’s eyes started glowing with a blood-red shine around them and the fangs on his mouth glinted from behind an angry grin. With a sudden movement, Ryo pushed Gabriel back and stood up, keeping the two demonic children behind him. He sheathed his sword back into its scabbard, maintaining it at hand.

“Who the hell do you think you are?! Do you really believe I’d think twice about standing against you, puppet?” Ryo inquired angrily “I’ll sooner rip your head off your shoulders than watch you murder children in front of me!” He exclaimed, with a growling sound in his voice.

“*Ugh...* you useless little runt... we don’t have time for this!” Gabriel opened his powerful wings and flapped with enough strength to push Ryo back and force him to lower his position to gain a steadier footing.

On that moment another presence arrived at the location. Ryo’s attention was caught by an immense power approaching. Looking back over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of a one-winged figure closing in at an unbelievable speed. An instant later, the creature had landed a few feet away with a strong pound on the ground. The marble cracked open and, with the impact, numerous shards flew away in a cloud of smut particles.

As the dust settled, Ryo was able to take a look at the source of such an intense aura; a single dark wing folded over the figure’s right shoulder. Long black vests covered the creature’s body; dark-blue patterns were highlighted all over the cloth by a sudden burst of lightning that appeared around the warrior’s right hand, and quickly disappeared in a bright flash of light, leaving behind a long oversized katana in its place. The long white hair strapped in a knot behind the figure’s head allowed for a clear look at its stern facial features: a calm and steady, yet menacing look was scanning

the surroundings. A long thin scar marked the demon's face, running from the top of his eyebrow all the way down to the right corner of his mouth. Ryo was surprised that this warrior had none of the grotesque features he had seen on the demon leader back in Nevelyn. Judging from the intensity of his aura, Ryo's first expectation was that he would be looking at a monster, but the warrior looked no different from the other demons.

While unsheathing the long katana from its black scabbard, the warrior took on a lower stance. Ryo, still unwilling to turn his back on Gabriel, noticed the demon's gaze was locked steadily on him "*Shit...*"

"I will give you one chance to make a wise decision. Will you take it?" The one-winged demon's deep voice sounded with intensity.

"Amano... have you grown senile over the last centuries?" Gabriel replied with sarcasm "Do you honestly believe we would leave, now that we have finally found your little hiding place?"

"*So, this is Amano...*" Ryo recognized the name from Raphael's speech the day before. The leader of the clan they were invading.

"Gabriel, I *am* sorry, did I give you the impression I was talking to you?" Amano responded in a similar tone of voice "My proposal is directed at Ryo, here. You, I have no intention of allowing to live any longer than this day."

"*Ach! ... How would he know me?!"*

"Ryo, would you please step away from the children, so that we can continue this conversation more freely?" Amano's voice sounded calm and strangely friendly to Ryo.

"How do you know me?" Ryo inquired in confusion, turning to face the clan leader.

"Enough of this! We did not come here to talk!" Gabriel's patience was wearing thin "We have a mission to fulfill, and with no more delays. Warriors, proceed into-"

"You'll regret this Gabriel!" Amano interrupted the angelic leader's speech "Leave the innocent alone!"

“Innocent?!” Gabriel questioned in bewilderment before he burst out laughing “There are no innocents here! All of your damned souls will bow down before God’s might!” He exclaimed, pointing his long sword at Amano.

“What God?! You are doing Raphael’s dirty work!” Amano stated with resolve “Your Father would never have allowed this war to head in the direction it is headed!”

“Stop your blasphemy! You have not the right to make conjectures!” Gabriel’s voice was stained with anger and pride. Amano’s words had clearly gotten to him.

“What is this...? A demon trying to avoid war?!” Ryo was confused at what he was witnessing *“Is he for real, or is he just trying to buy time? And how the hell does he know me!?”*

An angel warrior approached Gabriel and talked to him in a low voice pitch. Ryo was barely able to discern their words:

“Gabriel, I just finished scanning the village. There are five really strong presences headed our way right now, they must be Amano’s generals. Most of the weaker presences have taken refuge inside the smaller buildings. I’ve also confirmed the presence of a human.”

“You know what to do. Leave immediately.”

“A human?! ... ! Can it be her?” “Gabriel! What human are you talking about?” Ryo questioned, anxiously.

“Don’t bother me with stupid questions. Now is the time for you to decide.” While Gabriel was talking, the other angel started sneaking away, trying to go unnoticed “Will you make good on your word, Ryo, and keep your end of the bargain you made with Lord Raphael? Or will you abandon your honor?”

Ryo was unnerved by the thought of being given an ultimatum “For all I know, your *lord* has been lying to me all along!” He replied, angrily “I don’t know what game your kind is playing, but I assure you that if you don’t show your cards, I will forget any kind of truce I had with you!” Ryo then turned to the angel who was about to take flight, for whatever errand

Gabriel had prepared for him “And you! Stop right there, or you won’t breathe for long!”

“Who do you think you are to threaten my soldiers?!” Gabriel demanded Ryo to stand down “I knew you should never have come on this mission! You are a weapon out of control! Lord Raphael has only been aiming you in the right direction. You can show your gratitude by honoring your word, halfling!”

Suddenly, Amano leaped forward with inhuman speed, and went for a direct attack at Gabriel’s chest. The angel jumped backwards, avoiding the slice by only a few nanoseconds. Ryo evaded back as well, getting out of the way, and in an instant Amano grabbed the two frightened children, and jumped, opening his only wing to soften his landing a few steps behind. Anxiety and hostility rose to new levels as all the angels unsheathed their weapons and readied themselves for battle.

At that moment six other presences arrived on the scene, and landed side-by-side with Amano, dozens of soldiers slowly gathering behind them. Now unsure of which side he should even be on, Ryo observed the newly arrived threats. Six seasoned-looking warriors, each brandishing a unique weapon, stood in place, but one of them seemed to be in distress. Upon looking at Ryo, the demon dropped his rapier to the ground and his face took on a surprised and overwhelmed look... “*Do I know him from somewhere?*” The warrior seemed to be just about to talk, when Gabriel’s voice, coming from behind Ryo, stopped him.

“Amano! Thanks to this little nuisance over here, you have had more than enough time to gather your measly troops.” Gabriel pointed at Ryo with a spiteful look on his face as he spoke “Now! Enjoy the beginning of the end of your kind!”

The demonic warriors prepared for battle, and the one Ryo seemed to have recognized picked up his rapier and unsheathed it, while still keeping a strange look on his face... but Ryo’s attention was already elsewhere... the battle was on the brink of starting, yet he had noticed the presence of a

specific angel flying away. He had no more certainties left, except that he needed to get to that woman before anyone else *“You’re going for her, and I’m coming for you, creature!”*

Gabriel’s stern voice sounded loudly as he commanded his troops forward in the angel’s ancient language, and war broke out.

Chapter 28:

«Bloodline»

The ground trembled. The frontline of assault had taken a simultaneous step forward, to begin dashing towards Amano and his warriors. White feathers flew chaotically in the air as the remaining angelic soldiers opened their wings and took flight, aiming to assault the rest of the village. Gabriel stood in place, his long sword, shimmering with a fiery color, aimed directly at Amano's figure, while his faithful brothers in arms rushed to do battle. The two leaders looked each other in the eyes, with stone cold concentration, as if there were nothing else around them.

Ryo's mind remained focused on the fleeing angel. He could not let the creature get to the woman before him. Disregarding the intense battle igniting around him, Ryo advanced to pursue his target. Two steps forward and he was forced to take evasive maneuvers as a large weight flew by him, passing within inches of his face. A chain followed behind, and at its other end, a shadowy figure jumped high into the air. Ryo looked to the other side, and caught a glimpse of a stunned angel, after having been struck with the weight, kneeling. An instant later, a female demon gracefully landed on one foot at the angel's side; nimbly folding her wings, and placing her other foot on the creature's dumbfounded face, she quickly pulled on the small scythe attached to the chain, severing her opponent's head right off his shoulders. The demon did not pause for a second; she immediately looked around, and dashed towards her next opponent, leaving the angel's corpse to fall headless to the ground in a pool of blood.

Ryo's focus returned to the now farther away presence of the angel he had to pursue. Flying away in the distance, the creature was leaving his field of vision... he could not allow it. With a few swift dashes Ryo evaded through the chaotic battlefield, and jumped on top of a near house. The

creature seemed to be headed into a tall building on the horizon; it shouldn't be too hard to follow unnoticed, without expending much energy.

Quietly leaping from rooftop to rooftop, Ryo remained steady on the trail of his prey. Below his feet, screams echoed as angelic warriors broke through the doors, intent on fulfilling their mission of executing every last demon. Female demons rushed out of their houses through the backdoor, carrying crying infants. Plainly dressed male creatures tried their best to fend off the assaulting warriors. The use of farming tools in their feeble attempts at defense caught Ryo's eye... they were no warriors. Helpless farmers and working men were slaughtered as their wives stood back, screaming, using their arms and dark feathered wings to try and shield their children. But the angels were merciless in their quest for cleansing. Trying his best to mute the terrible sounds of death and war all around him, Ryo returned his attention to his target.

Upon reaching his destination, the angel stopped, hovering in place in front of a window, on the third floor of a tall building at the center of the village. Ryo stood back, watching in silence, as his target unsheathed his sword, and with a quick slash broke the glass into little pieces. As the creature took a step into the window, a demon came flying out and tackled the invader. Both warriors struggled in the air. Dark and white feathers floated aimlessly around them. Ryo seized this opportunity to jump up, and enter the building through the broken window, unnoticed by the battling creatures.

Following his senses towards the unique and faint source of energy that could only emanate from a human being, Ryo proceeded through a large room. The long, straight, perfectly waxed wooden boards on the floor reflected the ceiling and walls' brown and yellow colors, leading one's eyes along the lines, to the farthest wall, where several training katanas were displayed on two different stands, and in their midst an ancient, silver and dark-red samurai armor was highlighted by a huge painted depiction above it, of a winged being falling from the heavens.

The room's austere ambience instilled calm and tranquility on its occupants. Ryo was reminded of the kind of stillness he had felt in a church he had once visited as a little boy. Despite the ravaging battle he knew was being fought just outside the broken window, there was a strange sense of belonging and serenity filling his soul... the room was a shrine to the art of meditation and self-contemplation; it seemed to exalt and deify the need for peace in one's self, in order to do battle in destiny's sake. He wondered about the centuries of history that room had, in silent acceptance, surely absorbed and contained.

But Ryo could not be distracted any longer; he forced his mind back to reality, and focused his attention on locating the human presence. It was just a few steps away... the answers Ryo sought so hardly to obtain were waiting just behind a few closed doors. Outside, the angel, intent on getting to its target, fought with all its strength against the warrior protecting the building. Soon, the battle would surely be over; haste was necessary. Rushing his steps, Ryo exited the unique room through the only door available, on the opposite wall of his entry point, and walked into a long corridor, lined with doors on each side. He could feel the human presence growing stronger as he got closer to its location, and just as well, Ryo could sense the quickening of the woman's heartbeat, as her mind got inevitably more nervous and unsettled by the approaching footsteps.

Two doors down the hallway, Ryo turned the doorknob to his right, and instantly heard the sound of a gunshot being fired. Instinctively, the regular flow of time was disrupted, and right in front of his eyes, Ryo could now see a small hole appearing on the door, as a bullet very slowly became visible protruding through it, amidst small wooden chips that scattered in slow motion throughout the air. A slight movement to his left allowed Ryo safe distance from the projectile's trajectory, and he proceeded into the room in a hastened pace. The figure of a blond woman stood half-hidden behind the cover of a tall bookshelf. Ryo quickly dashed past the handgun-wielding female agent and stopped behind her position. For a few instants,

he studied her figure... long straight hair obscured the view of her face, but Ryo became aware of the undeniable physical similarities. Whoever the woman was, there was definitely a connection between her and Karin.

Feeling his body being drained of its resources, Ryo released his pull on the flow of time, and stood silently in place, observing the woman's behavior as her bullets hit nothing but wood and concrete. For a few seconds, she was still, keeping her attention on the now open door. Slowly, she exited her cover, and took a step forward, with her 9mm handgun steadily aimed, ready to fire at any sign of threat, and judging from the previous shot, with deadly accuracy.

"You won't hit me with any shot from that gun." Ryo spoke calmly, from behind the woman. At the sound of Ryo's voice, the female figure froze "If you'd please just turn around and lower your weapon, it would be easier... I'm not here to hurt you."

Slowly, the blond woman turned around with her head inclined downwards, lowering her gun. Bit by bit, her facial features revealed themselves from behind long locks of blond hair, as she raised her head to look Ryo straight in the eyes. The similarities once again took Ryo by surprise... his dark eyes shone in bewilderment as he scanned the woman's delicate guise... a ghost from his past...

"Tell me... who are you?" Ryo asked. He could hear his heart beating in anticipation "And what is your connection to Karin Sutherland?"

A sense of relief exhaled from the woman's bright eyes as she looked at Ryo face to face... a faint smile painted itself across her lips "Ryo... nice to see you again..."

Ryo was dumbstruck "How... do you know my name?"

"My name is Nina." The woman extended her hand in silence. She waited for Ryo to give her a proper handshake, which took, to Ryo's surprise, much longer than it would have a year before "I am... I was... Karin's mother..."

“Her mother! Of course!” It made perfect sense. Instantly the awkwardness of realizing he had lost the spontaneity of a gesture as human as a handshake evaporated from Ryo’s mind, and he wondered in disbelief at how he could have not remembered Karin’s mom “I see... that’s right, you weren’t home that night...”

“Yes. For better or for worse... I survived.” Nina replied in resignation.

“It makes sense that your presence is so similar to... Karin’s...” Ryo said, voicing his thoughts *“How did I not see this before?!”* “But... how do you recognize me? And what are you doing here?! What is your connection to these demons?!” His mind was overrun by questions.

“There’s much that you should know, Ryo.” Nina’s words were a mystery in Ryo’s mind “And I promise, I will love to tell you all about it, but right now is not the time. There’s a war going on outside...” Nina made a slight pause “Your own kin needs your help! After this is over, I’ll tell you everything you want to know.” She promised

“My... kin...?” Ryo was confused. Nothing made sense.

“Oh... right... you don’t know...”

“What don’t I know?” Ryo questioned, interrupting Nina’s sentence.

“Ryo... your father...” Nina was clearly reticent to speak her next words “Your birth father, he was an ancient demon.”

Ryo was silent. He stood in place, bewildered “... Wha-“

“He lived with your human mother for a few years before they were both killed... and that’s when you were adopted by your human parents.”

Ryo’s facial expression quickly changed from an intrigued look to a confused one. For an instant, he looked directly into Nina’s eyes. She felt his cold black gaze reaching deep into her soul “Why... would you say that?” He inquired, in honest confusion.

Nina’s face was calm. She’d already expected resistance from Ryo, in accepting what she had to say “Why would I lie to you, Ryo?” She questioned “I know how hard it must be to believe what I’m saying... but

I'm sure that deep inside of you, there's something right now telling you that it's true."

Ryo's eyes slowly crept down, to stare at his hands "How... what... would that mean?" His voice was grave "Have they... did Raphael really deceive me to this extent?" Confusion gave way to despair as his mind wrapped itself around such an idea; around the possibility that what Karin's mother had just told him was, in fact, the truth.

But his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a third presence that stepped through the door quickly. Surprised, Ryo directed his gaze at the angel warrior standing at the doorway, behind Nina. With all the questions swirling around in his mind, Ryo had let his guard down... fortunately, the assailant appeared to be exhausted, and did not take advantage of the element of surprise.

As Nina turned around, Ryo quickly stepped forward and pushed the woman behind him. He unsheathed his sword and aimed it directly at the angel's throat "Take another step forward, and say goodbye to your life, soldier." Ryo's voice was stone-cold. With the urge to protect Nina, he had put everything else aside, and had regained his sharpness.

The warrior stopped in place, with his neck at an inch's distance from the long gleaming blade, frowning in surprise at Ryo's presence in the room "Are you really going to turn against us after all that Lord Raphael has given you?" The angel was nodding his head in apparent disappointment as he spoke.

"*Humph*... Your lord did what he could to get to his objective." Ryo stated bluntly "I am doing the same. Turn back and I won't kill you. But don't think you'll lay a finger on this woman."

"Do you think I fear death, halfling?!"

Ryo's eyes started releasing a blood-red stream of glowing energy and a deep growling sound whispered into the air as Ryo lowered his weapon and took a step towards the angel. "*Halfling*" The spiteful tone with which the soldier had called him that name hit a switch inside Ryo's mind: he had had

enough of the angels' mockery and deceptions. Ryo's fangs became visible, protruding from behind a hatred-filled expression "Tell me... what exactly do you mean by... *halfing*?" His voice resonated harshly.

"Don't you understand? You will not get anything from me!" The soldier exclaimed "I do not fear you, or anything you can do to me!"

"But you should, pigeon, otherwise you will not be returning to your master..."

"Do your worst, traitor!"

Memories from the previous months overtook Ryo's head... the strange and nonsensical behavior the angels had been displaying towards him and the hateful names they had called him; his own powers and the inexplicable prowess he had learned to achieve; the changes his body had gradually experienced... it was all starting to make sense. Even though what Nina had just told him sounded utterly ridiculous, somehow it seemed to fit everything else into place. Countless thoughts ran through Ryo's mind... *"They've been deceiving me all along..." "Raphael used me as a weapon against my own kind!"* but above all *"If demons didn't kill Karin, Michael and my parents... then..."*

For a few moments Ryo stood still, facing the angel. With each thought he had, his mind became increasingly more consumed with feelings of hatred, anger and disgust towards everything around him.

A dark aura began to envelop Ryo's figure. Nina stumbled to the floor as seemingly out of nowhere a pure black mist-like essence surrounded Ryo, taking the shape of a pair of huge, semi-translucent wings that spread out through the entire room. The intensity with which Ryo's presence expanded from his body was overwhelming. Nina's eyesight became blurry; the room seemed to distort itself, pulsating and swaying around her as she got up on her feet to try and get a clear look at what was happening. Her mind was in turmoil. The angel soldier raised his blood-covered sword to attack Ryo, but in the blink of an eye the weapon was stuck on the opposite wall.

Before Nina could realize what had happened, the angel was already struggling, his feet suspended in the air, his hands clawing at Ryo's outstretched arm, as five stone rigid fingers crushed his throat. The soldier's white wings flapped violently against the room's ceiling and the surrounding furniture. Feathers floated wildly in the air and blood splashed against the room's fillings and boundaries in a blur of white and crimson, as the creature's members mangled themselves against anything around them, until, with the release of an impulse from Ryo's hand, a loud crackling sound reverberated through Nina's ears and she fell back, hitting her head on a shelf. Silence gradually settled on the room. The angel's lifeless body hung from the neck with its bloody wings stretching, limp, to the ground... Nina felt her consciousness wavering... until it eventually abandoned her.

Ryo stood there for a few moments observing the angel's inanimate figure, suspended by his hand's grip. He felt no hint of regret or remorse. A gruesome expression of agony and despair was imprinted into the soldier's lifeless face, his white, empty eyes wide open; yet that only served to grant Ryo the certainty that his enemy had suffered only a little, in return for all the pain that had already been done to him and the ones he loved.

A distant explosion awakened Ryo from his reverie, and he let go of the angelic soldier's neck, releasing the body to fall lifeless to the ground. "*Karin's mom!*" Immediately, Ryo turned around to check on Nina's welfare. She was lying on the ground with her back against a bookshelf, seemingly unconscious. Ryo rushed near her to make sure she wasn't hurt, but another couple of explosions, not as distant as the last one, caught his attention.

Before Ryo had time to consider his thoughts, about a dozen faint presences seemed to appear, out of nowhere, above him. Surprised that he hadn't noticed them approaching the building, Ryo tried harder to discern their exact position. In doing so, he realized these were human presences, and that they were descending the building's staircase at a harried pace.

Who could they be, and what would humans be doing in this place? Ryo's concern for Nina's safety, and the fact that he needed to get her somewhere safe, made him decide to stay put until the unknown humans went on their way, wherever they were headed. An urge to go and confront Amano with all the questions he could probably answer corroded at Ryo's mind just as much as the hunger for revenge against the angels for their lies... but before he could do any of that, he had to make sure Karin's mom would be safe. Ryo's thoughts were quickly interrupted as he felt the presences nearing on his position "*They stopped going down?!*" As the humans converged on his location, Ryo became increasingly preoccupied... Did they know of his presence there? And if so, what were their intentions?

Chapter 29:

«Powerless»

The presences approached rapidly until they came to a sudden stop a few steps away from the open door leading to the room Ryo and Nina were in. Ryo stood perfectly still, concentrating on each and every movement the invaders made... short, brusque gestures were audible just outside the door, but no speech *“They’re using signs... soldiers? But why are they here?”*

But there was no more time to consider any of that. As Ryo’s mind registered a longer and softer movement just outside the door, a small grenade rolled into the center of the room. Ryo prepared for an explosion, and with a quick movement he generated an impulse from his hand, pushing the grenade away from him and Nina. He quickly realized it wasn’t a regular grenade, as smoke released into the ambience, rapidly clouding the whole room. Shortly thereafter a unit of six heavily armed soldiers entered, two-by-two, each turning to opposing sides of the room, covering the whole area in an instant, leaving Ryo a sitting duck right in their midst, with Nina just behind him.

Through the thickening smoke, it was becoming impossible for Ryo to use his sight. The soldiers, on the other hand, were surely using thermal goggles or some other sort of technology that enabled them to overcome this disadvantage. Ryo could feel their presences surrounding him... his eyes and lungs ached as the smoke seemed to bite at them, forcing him to shut his eyelids and making it hard to take clear breaths. Suddenly a faint, muted sound originated from Ryo’s right, and a small projectile cleared its way through the smoke. Ryo unsheathed his sword and with a precise swipe he parried a bullet headed straight to his forehead before two more shots came from the opposite side. Ryo strained to intercept them both with his katana. Evading would have been easier... but Nina was just behind him...

From his left now, Ryo felt one of the soldiers approaching, preparing for a close up assault. Muscles tensed up and the sound of hard tissue stretching reverberated through Ryo's eardrums as the soldier raised his arms and quickly dropped them down, driving some sort of blunt weapon upon Ryo, forcing him to raise his katana to protect himself. The impact was much stronger than anticipated, as some sort of electrical blast increased it tenfold, pushing Ryo back, stunned. As the soldier went in for a second attack, Ryo knew he had to retaliate somehow... he wouldn't be able to simply keep evading their attacks, if he wanted to keep Nina safe.

This time his opponent went for a sideways attack: the weapon was coming from Ryo's right side, at chest height. Ryo easily evaded the blow by dropping to a crouched position and then, using his free hand, as he regained his footing he pushed the soldier away with enough force to send him flying away, but just so the man wouldn't be seriously hurt or mangled in any way. Right at that moment, another pair of muffled gunshots were fired from his right side, which Ryo parried again, both with the arc of the same precisely timed swipe of his katana... but behind these two bullets, a third one came, that Ryo had not heard. A slight movement of his head to the side, and the bullet rushed past his temple, drilling a hole in the wall behind him. For a few moments, the soldiers stopped attacking; they seemed to be reconsidering their strategy. Ryo welcomed the pause; he needed time to find a way out of this room, saving Nina and not killing the soldiers in the process...

Whoever these soldiers were, they meant business. The way they moved and executed their assault was disciplined, deadly and precise. Ryo's training had not prepared him to face opponents whom he had to struggle not to harm... humans, using firearms and mechanical gadgets... he would not be able to keep at it, avoiding all of their attacks without fighting back. And just a few instants before, if that bullet's trajectory had been directed at Nina, he would've just let her get shot. He could not let chance dictate so much; he had to keep control of the situation. But these soldiers were not

his enemy... there had to be a way out without having to kill them. Ryo's thoughts were interrupted by the first sound of speech he'd heard from the soldiers; really faint and low pitched, probably through earpieces mounted on their headgear. The soldiers were certainly not aware he could hear them.

"Sergeant, my sensors are picking up vital signs just behind the target."

"Recheck. There were only the two strong energy sources in the building, and one of them was definitely extinguished."

"From the energy readings, it's a human presence. A hostage maybe? There's no sign of movement..."

"Very well; secure the survivor, I will go in, to draw the target's attention; the rest of you, try and get a clear shot, and take it."

Ryo immediately realized he had found his escape route. The soldiers would not harm Nina; for now, he could use them to protect her, and focus on getting to Amano and Gabriel. Taking advantage of his opponents' fleeting moment of distraction, Ryo tensed up his entire musculature and, focusing on a wide arc in front of him, released a strong energy outburst. He could feel the soldiers' minds staggering with confusion and numbness as their intercom devices buzzed loudly with static interference from the energy wave, giving Ryo the opening he needed to slip right through their midst, out the open door behind them.

In a moment's time, Ryo was past the corridors he had used earlier to get to Nina's location, and he was jumping out the broken window he had come in through. His eyes immediately welcomed a clear, smoke-free view of his surroundings; the air felt fresh and clean, having a cleansing effect on his lungs with each breath he took. As he fell down to the streets below, he enjoyed the feeling of freedom brought by the gusts of air rushing through his hair, and against his face and clothes ... a feeling that lasted only for so long. As soon as he landed with a loud thump and a crackling sound on the stone floor below, his mind was overwhelmed with the view of sheer horror around him. The battle, in this part of the village seemed to have already ended... there were no signs of life.

A gruesome picture of mangled, dark-winged bodies was depicted all around Ryo. Gore splattered through the walls of houses in the vicinity; corpses hanging out of broken windows, dripping to accumulating pools of dark blood on the ground. The angels had followed Raphael's orders ruthlessly... be it male, female, old, young, armed or unarmed, all demons were to be decimated... and so it had been. More than a few small, inanimate demonic children lay on the ground, still enveloped by their deceased parents' protective bodies. The image of their small, pure black eyes, wide open, gazing into nothingness, struck Ryo's mind with blunt force as the smell of blood and death transpired through the air, leaving a repulsive metallic taste in his mouth.

A reverberating background noise Ryo had unconsciously become aware of grew dangerously louder. Over the distant houses, on the far outskirts of the village, Ryo could now see a fleet of black military helicopters approaching, their double rotors thundering through the skies as squads of soldiers slid down ropes to the ground and rooftops. A human army was invading the village *"How did they discover this place so quickly?!"*

Another event like the one he had witnessed in Nevelyn was something Ryo was not about to let be repeated. He would do everything in his power to prevent another slaughter of human lives.

As Ryo sped through the ravaged streets, between rows of small houses, sounds of the savage battle, still underway near the location where the angelic army had breached the village's defenses, became audible. With each approaching stride, the amount of white-winged corpses around Ryo gradually increased: Amano's forces, though outnumbered, seemed to have held their ground. A baneful feeling weighed on Ryo's chest, from the knowledge that not too far behind him, the human soldiers would arrive, and it would all escalate beyond his reach.

As he dashed through the small gap between two houses, the battlefield came into view and he stopped in place, momentarily assessing the

situation. Regardless of which direction Ryo looked in, angelic and demonic warriors fought each other for their lives. The sounds of clashing metal echoed wildly through the intense ambience; cries of agony from the dying enveloped the howling screams of those on the offense, joined by the rough voices of higher-ranked warriors, issuing commands of attack or defense, resulting in a chaotic symphony of war and death.

Amano and Gabriel's auras immediately screamed out to Ryo's senses, obscuring mostly everything around them; powerful waves of energy were released with each assault by either warrior, to the extent that, despite the immense chaos around them, Ryo distinctly felt each and all of their movements, as if they were on a plane of their own. Looking in their direction, he could see both commanders locked in conflict, sparks and flames erupting from their swords with each clash, as other warriors battled and tumbled all around them, in a muted black and white picture.

A droplet fell on Ryo's face, followed by a few more that wet his hands with a strange warm liquid "*Rain?*" He looked up to a shower of crimson blood streaming from the skies as a demon's body fell, hitting the roof to his right with a deafening smash. A bunch of tiles broke loose and accompanied the body, tumbling to the ground with a crashing sound. Ryo noticed that the demonic warrior appeared to have something nestled between his arms, having fallen purposefully on his unprotected back to avoid injuring it. Above his position, Ryo saw an angel rushing down as fast as he could, only to be intercepted mid-flight by another demon warrior. Both creatures, entangled in each other's grasp, lost control and hurtled to the ground a few houses away.

Ryo returned his focus to the injured demon. The creature lay on the ground, motionless, its wings in an unnatural position, clearly broken by the impact of the fall. But between the creature's clasped, unmoving arms, a small pair of trembling wings came into view. Ryo approached the body and realized there was a child, unharmed, with her head burrowed deep against the unconscious, possibly lifeless warrior. Slowly and with care,

Ryo loosened the arms rigidly clinging to each other, forming a protective shelter around the infant's back. He noticed the demon child tightening her embrace on the motionless body "... Daddy..." A low sob accompanied the frail voice, which struck Ryo's heart... as the little girl looked up in fear, her eyes overflowing with dark tears of sadness and grief, Ryo felt an insurmountable amount of anger building up inside him.

The girl's expression then changed as her eyes caught sight of Ryo's non-angelic figure, kneeling next to her "Please... help my daddy, mister..."

Ryo was speechless "I..." No more words left his mouth. The demonic warrior was definitely dead. His eyes were slightly open, having recorded his last moments of suffering, and blood had gathered at the corner of his mouth. If he had not died at his foe's hands, having survived long enough to protect the child from injury, the violently disastrous fall to the ground had undoubtedly achieved his opponent's final goal. What could Ryo say to a child who embraced her father's lifeless corpse? He could not help his mind from wandering into thoughts as to how this event would forever scar the little girl. How would she be able to handle the enormous weight of having witnessed her father's violent death from amidst his embrace? Having heard his last heartbeats, her head nestled strongly against his chest... having felt the life seeping from his body, leaving her all alone in a huge, frightening world, surrounded by the white-winged monsters that had taken everything from her... maybe she would be better off simply giving up on life altogether?

The girl appeared to have sensed Ryo's thoughts at that very moment. Her pure black eyes focused on his own as tears kept running down her fear-filled little face "Please, mister... I don't want to die..." Her voice trembled with each feeble word that drowned in her sad whimpers "Please... do something..."

Before Ryo had the chance to try and process any kind of comforting words, the girl's stare suddenly widened into one of sheer terror, and she

buried her face on her father's motionless chest once again. Ryo quickly looked behind him, sensing an unwelcome presence all too close to his position and feeling frustrated at the fact that he had not noticed its approach.

An angel stood behind him, his shadowy profile – arms raised high above his head with both hands holding a sword ready to strike down Ryo and the child – obscuring the view of the sun in the background. A metallic sliding sound echoed. The angel soldier stood frozen in place for an instant, before realizing what had happened. The bright glimmer of the sun's strong, fiery light reflecting off the smooth metal surface of the angel's sword swirled around in random circles as both of the creature's forearms flew through the air leaving a trail of blood behind them, until the weapon landed on the ground stuck between two cobblestones. The creature stumbled back and the utterly surprised look on its face quickly gave way to an expression of pain and agony.

Ryo stood up, but before he could approach the angel to finish it off, the creature opened its wings as it dragged itself away from Ryo in a desperate frenzy, and released an outburst of energy. Ryo turned around and hastily closed his arms around the fallen demon's corpse behind him, using his own body to shield the child from harm. When he faced his opponent again, the angel had already taken to the skies, and flown away. It was irrelevant; the creature posed no more of a threat.

The demonic girl's eyes were looking up at Ryo when he kneeled next to her "Little girl, give me your hand." He said, in the most pleasant voice he could manage, presenting his open hand. He put any thoughts about comforting the loss of her father behind him... first he needed to make sure she herself was safe "We need to leave your daddy to rest, for now..." He said, noting her hesitation in letting go "We'll... come back to see him later, okay?" He was reluctant about making empty promises, but the violent war being fought not more than a few feet away reminded him that at any time, another assailant could be upon them.

The girl took one last look at her father's figure before she reached for Ryo's hand and stepped away. Her tearful eyes lingered on the warrior's broken body, as if she was saying her goodbyes. Ryo realized she knew she would not see her daddy again; she was aware he was no longer with her and never would be thereafter... yet, her grip held fast to Ryo's hand. She wanted to live, to survive... and Ryo would not allow anyone or anything to go against that. He took the little girl in his embrace, holding her with his left arm, and kept his katana unsheathed and ready to fend off any threat that came at him. He looked around them... where would the girl remain safe until the battle came to an end? *"The empty houses back near the center of the village!"*

Ryo dashed back the way he had come, stepping between each house as fast as he could, keeping the girl safely in his arms. The child held on strongly with her arms around Ryo's neck as he turned abruptly to his left and entered through the wide open door of a small house. He gently put the girl down on the wooden floorboards and turned behind him to close the door in haste, afraid someone would see inside. He rushed to the nearby windows and closed them shut as well, engulfing the main room in shadows before he returned to the child. She had crept to a corner, and was sitting with her arms wrapped around her bent legs, her face nuzzled between her knees.

Softly, Ryo stepped near the little girl and lowered himself to one knee, next to her. He wanted to reach out to her, to gingerly stroke her snow-white hair, to cuddle her small, fragile body and tell her she was safe now, that nothing would hurt her. But she would not raise her head from in-between her legs. She shied away from Ryo's hand when he tried touching her shoulder.

"What's your name?" Ryo asked in a low voice tone as not to frighten the child any further. There was no answer but the sobbing sounds of silent crying. He was still for a few moments, unsure of what to do. He noticed the small, undeveloped, dark wings slowly unfolding to embrace the girl's

back and arms... trembling... shivering in nervousness and fear “*What should I do... could she be afraid of the dark?*” Ryo raised his open hand, with his palm facing to the ceiling, between him and the child. Sparks flashed and traveled from each of his clawed fingers to the others before concentrating on the center of his palm to form a small, contained ball of lightning. A faint white light was emitted from the circle of lightning hovering an inch away from Ryo’s hand, and steadily increased to brighten the whole room, though never shining enough to be visible outside the house.

The girl raised her head very slowly as she noticed the light in front of her. Her wide, flimsy eyes shone, reflecting the white light, as she looked up at Ryo’s face “Diana...” She said, meekly.

“Diana...” Ryo repeated her name with a soft smile across his lips. He reached out with his left hand and delicately wiped the tears from her rounded cheeks “You have to be strong now, Diana.” Ryo kept his eyes locked on the little girl’s with a comforting look “I’m going to lock the doors and windows, and you have to stay hidden here, until I come back, okay?” The girl nodded faintly with her head, in agreement “You can’t open the door, no matter wha-” Ryo’s speech was interrupted by his thoughts... he remembered the words he was speaking “*No matter what!*” He heard the voice of that woman from his dream, speaking to him. He brushed the memory away “No matter what, okay?”

Diana kept a scared, but also resolved, face, her eyes staring directly at Ryo’s “... Okay.”

“I’m going to extinguish the light now, Diana.” Ryo noticed the girl’s lips parting in nervousness, before closing again, with no words spoken. She nodded “Nothing will harm you in here. The darkness can’t hurt you.” He said, before placing his hand over her small head and letting it slide along her frightened face “I’ll come back for you, I promise.”

Ryo stood up and stepped away slowly, the first steps walking backwards, before he allowed the electricity over his palm to dissipate, and

turned around towards the exit. He opened the door slowly, just enough to first make sure there was no one near, and then to step outside, before stealthily closing it again. He tightened his grip on the handle, forcing it until it broke off. No one would enter the house without first having to break the door down.

Ryo stood in place for a few seconds with his eyes fixed on that door... his thoughts slowly wrapped around what had happened... that little girl was depending on his help to survive. He had to protect her. He had to face the angels, and make them pay... kill them all... for what they had done to him... for what they had done to Diana... for the murder of her father. But for the first time since he could remember, he felt he needed to protect the girl, above everything else *“Fight to protect... if anything is truly worth fighting for... this is it.”*

Ryo retraced his steps, this time with greater swiftness, not having to care for a child in his arms. In little under a minute, he was reaching the outskirts of the battle. He looked for Amano's presence. He needed to warn him of the human army entering the village. The ancient demon was still at the heart of battle, locked in a savage fight with Gabriel. The armies were more condensed now; as the numbers from both factions thinned, the focus of the angels became to reach Amano and take him down. All around the demonic leader, his generals fought side by side with his remaining warriors against hordes of angelic soldiers, clearly outnumbered. Ryo could feel numerous weaker presences nearing the battlefield... within minutes the human army would be upon them. He had to move.

Swiftly, Ryo evaded through the crowds of battling warriors, taking no time to look anywhere else than to Amano's location. His heightened senses dictated his movements; he dodged, ducked under and jumped over any kind of obstacle he felt approaching his position or intercepting his course, while his eyes stood locked on the fight between Gabriel and Amano, analyzing each of their movements. Gabriel was proving to be stronger than Ryo had expected. Each and every slash the blue-haired

warrior delivered with his great, long sword appeared as though it could cut through as many enemies as there were in its path. Amano was projected away with each impact he took head on with his katana's blade; sparks flew all around, the weapons threatening to break beneath such immense force. Gabriel not only displayed immense skill in his attacking patterns, but he was also extremely nimble and agile, evading basically anything Amano threw at him, when he could not move his large weapon quickly enough to block or parry.

Amano on the other hand, was on a different level altogether. Ryo was perplexed with the inhuman precision and accuracy with which he executed each and every one of his movements. Each time Gabriel slashed at him, the demonic leader appeared to have already seen it in advance, and always one step ahead, would enter his opponent's defense with an attack of his own. He would unsheathe his long katana and slash with such exactness that every one of his attacks seemed fatal if not avoided; when blocked, he would recover his stance with such readiness that it felt as if he had not wasted a single movement of any muscle on his body. Amidst Gabriel's powerful slashes, other angels would interfere on their fight, and try do aid their leader, attacking from Amano's sides and even from behind him. The elder demon's swift, precise movements made him appear almost incorporeal or ethereal, as if all of his opponents' attacks would simply go through him, never able to hit their target. With ease the demon evaded any threat, swinging his katana around him, parrying attacks with its dark-blue sheath, sheathing and unsheathing the weapon in split seconds. And each time he directed an attack at an opponent, the creature would fall lifeless to the ground.

Bodies piled around Amano as Gabriel struggled to fend off his attacks. Ryo felt the humans arriving. The demons and angels around him were becoming aware of the nearing presences as well. He felt the tide of battle being disturbed. Amano's senses caught on as he blocked a strong downwards slash from Gabriel's Zweihänder; Ryo sensed the demonic

leader's surprise as he pushed Gabriel far away with an impulse of energy and turned around to look over the horizon. The one-winged demon's face displayed a look of immense distress as the view of the dark helicopters revealed what was happening.

As Gabriel recovered a few feet away, an angel took advantage of the opening in Amano's defense and dashed at him with his sword ready to impale the demon. Ryo reached their position just in time; he managed to intercept the attack and parry it. He caught the angel off balance from the parry and with one single movement slashed his head clean off his shoulders.

Amano turned around abruptly to look Ryo directly in the eyes "I see you have decided to join us. Thank you, Ryo." His voice was restrained and precise, despite the circumstances.

"Never mind that! The humans!" Ryo exclaimed as he sheathed his sword "An army of them is coming!" He shouted out loud, to make his voice heard amidst the deafening sounds of battle.

Amano was silent for an instant. Ryo could tell he had already become aware of it, and he instead realized just how badly the demon leader was troubled by this development.

Gabriel dashed towards them. Ryo quickly turned his attention away from Amano, and faced the blue-haired angel. He could anticipate the slash readied by his opponent; the long sword was cutting through the air in a horizontal motion, coming from his right side, clearly readable. But before he could react, the sword's massive body was upon him. The speed and swiftness at which the angel deployed his attacks was overwhelming. With no time to evade, Ryo raised his sword, holding it with both hands at length, and readied himself to take on the impact. When the huge sword came into contact with his katana, his weapon's sheath was instantly rendered asunder, breaking into splinters that flew wildly throughout the air. Ryo was thrown back with the sheer force of the collision. He felt every muscle in his body reverberating with the energy absorbed, and he knew his

sword had succumbed under the pressure... he knew it even before he had a chance to look at its chipped edge.

Ryo struggled to regain his focus. His katana had been severely damaged by taking that blow head-on. There was a long crack along the edge on the point of impact; the blade would not endure another such hit without breaking into pieces. Ahead of him, Ryo saw Amano engaging in battle with Gabriel once again, having stopped the angel from maintaining pressure on him. The human army would arrive at any minute to join the war, but there was no time to consider how to handle the situation. From Ryo's right side came an angel flying directly at him, short sword and round shield ready to do battle. The white-winged creatures had realized he had switched to the demons' side. There was no way around it now... but he would not want to go around it either. He was going to have his revenge. Raphael had pulled the strings on Ryo's life over the previous year; he had deceived him and steered him against the demons, as a puppeteer would operate his dolls. Now Ryo would punish the archangel's troops for the deceptiveness and insolence their lord had shown.

Ryo waited for the angel to be upon him. As the tip of the creature's sword reached within inches of him, Ryo jumped in the air in a swift back flip, and as he was upside down, above his opponent's position, he delivered a wide slash to the creature's back, cutting off both its wings. He landed behind the angel as he stumbled to his knees releasing hold of his weapons. Ryo stepped closer and with an upwards thrust he impaled the creature through the torso, raising its feet off the ground before removing his sword from its body, and kicking it away. He looked around him in search for his next white-winged prey, before advancing.

One after the other, the angels fell by Ryo's sword; each one of his hatred-filled slashes meant one less soldier in the angelic army. Even with his sword damaged, and without its sheath to complete his fighting style, the angelic soldiers were no match for his strength, for his ruthlessness, or for his hunger for blood.

And then it came: the sound of gunshots echoing loudly throughout the battlefield. Ryo jumped back safely away from any opponent to study the situation. The human soldiers had arrived in full force. Demons all around the edge of battle struggled to evade the gunfire, whilst keeping their angelic enemies at bay. Many started falling, either to the edge of an angel's blade, or riddled with bullets from the humans' weapons. The battle was lost.

Not far from Ryo's position, he noticed the figure of that strangely familiar demon he had seen arrive with Amano's generals. The warrior moved effortlessly around an angelic opponent, evading all of the creature's attacks and delivering quick short slashes of his own with his long, thin rapier. Bit by bit, he crippled all of the angel's members, weakening his opponent before, in a final thrust, driving his weapon right through the warrior's face, piercing the back of his helmet from within.

On that moment, two human soldiers approached with their submachine guns aimed directly at the unnoticing demon. The warrior had not accounted for the humans' weak, hardly perceivable presences... completely unaware he was a target in their sights, he was going to get shot. Before Ryo could interfere, a female demon appeared from above the human soldiers; a long chain was outstretched in an arc below her, and one of the soldiers was suddenly jerked off the ground. The female warrior unfolded her wings and twisted in the air, swinging the soldier's body around her by the head, to smash it with immense force against the floor behind her position. The second human soldier was clearly dazzled as he stepped back, nervously aiming his weapon randomly in front of him. The demon landed, but before he had a chance to press the trigger, he was hit directly in the face by a round weight that knocked him hard through the air, stumbling to the ground unconscious.

Ryo noticed the human presences were diminishing in numbers. He watched that female demon remove her bloodied sickle from the soldier's inanimate skull... all around him the screams of dying human soldiers

pierced his thoughts, as the demonic warriors fought for their lives... everything had gotten out of his hands; there was no way he could stop any of it. An enormous outburst of energy overwhelmed Ryo's senses. He looked towards the source; Amano had cleared an area around himself, before his voice thundered through the air. Ryo sensed the ancient demon's despair overflowing.

"No!! Do not harm the humans!" Amano screamed at full lungs **"Retreat, warriors!!"** His words resounded for over a mile around him.

The clan leader had lost his control over the situation, desperate to prevent the loss of human lives from escalating. Ryo felt the anguish and sorrow creeping through the demon's words. He realized what was about to happen. He dashed forward as fast as he could towards Amano's position, but he would be too late. Before him, Gabriel would reach his target. The voices of every warrior on the battlefield, be it human, demon, or angel, slowed to an almost complete stop, becoming no more than a dull prolonged sound; their movements halted in place. Everything around Ryo stood almost still, his vision perceiving his environment in black and white, shadowy colors as he rushed towards Amano. But a flash of blue movement suddenly emerged to the left of his field of vision. Gabriel had broken through the flow of time as well.

"Nooooo!!!" Ryo screamed in desperation, his mind wrapping itself around the image of Gabriel's long Zweihänder slowly perforating Amano's chest. Blood flowed through the air in slow motion as the large blade extruded through the demonic leader's back, piercing through his dark wing.

Ryo released his pull on the flow of time. Black feathers scattered in the air. Gabriel stood still for a few seconds, silently staring at Amano's bewildered face *"Ach! No..."* Ryo saw the words forming around Amano's bloodied lips before Gabriel pushed his sword further in and twisted it in a sudden movement, closing his face on his opponent's

“Now you die, demon!!” The blue-haired angel had his white, unblinking eyes fully open in an expression of sheer contempt, a light-bluish haze of energy around them, as the demon leader coughed up blood, spraying the crimson fluid all over his face. He stepped back and violently pulled his sword free of his enemy’s torso. He remained in place for an instant, as Amano fell to his knees and dropped his weapon, before raising his large sword in preparation.

There appeared to be total silence all around the battlefield for an instant as the demons realized what had befallen them and the angels became aware of their impending victory. Ryo dashed the last few steps that had stood between him and Amano’s salvation, and tackled Gabriel to the ground, stopping him from finishing off the clan leader.

Michael’s mind was stopped in time, unwilling to accept what his eyes were witnessing... Amano’s kneeled figure, with one hand held around his wounded chest, his only wing mangled and broken, and a large pool of blood slowly forming on the ground all around him... Michael was stunned beyond comprehension with such an image. He stood perplexed, staring blankly, as if there was nothing around him. No enemies, no battle, no sound... nothing pierced through the veil of utter shock blinding his every sense... “Aaaamanoooooooo!!” Rachel’s voice suddenly crashed into his mind as if a glass wall that had been engraved with the image he was viewing was suddenly shattered into a thousand pieces, to reveal behind it her figure, desperately running towards her mentor.

Human soldiers started forming a circle around the injured Amano, through which Rachel broke frenziedly. She closed in on Amano and turned around to face the humans. Her wings were wide open to the sides, her clawed fingers menacingly outstretched on either side of her body, her fangs gleaming under the sunlight as she hissed and growled intensely, tears streaming down her face as dark-red energy surrounded her vexed gaze. She moved from one side to the other, with her back towards her

broken fatherly figure, every last inch of her body ready to immediately react against anything threatening to approach.

The circle slowly closed in on her, as all the soldiers kept their target in sight, ignoring Rachel's threatening displays of anxiety and rage. "Ready!" One of the soldiers screamed, raising one hand over his shoulder in a signal for preparation. Rachel's half-crazed eyes instantly focused on the soldier, and with an inhumanly fast motion she was in his face with her arm driven through his chest almost to her shoulder. The soldier's still-beating heart crumpled under the grasp of her fingers in a visceral burst of blood before his body was sent flying through the air. The soldier right next to that one took a single step backwards and then dropped his rifle, raising his hands to try and stop the blood from gushing through his shredded throat.

"Stooooop!!" Amano's voice caused Rachel to stop dead in her tracks as she held another soldier high above her height, her fingers clasped around his neck and her other hand ready to tear through his torso. She looked at Amano in bewilderment "Please, child..." The old demon's weakened voice made her release the soldier, and rush to his side.

Michael dashed over the fallen human bodies with one beat of his wings, and kneeled next to Rachel "Amano... no..." His throat constricted as tears welled around his eyelids.

Amano coughed deeply as blood slowly seeped into his lungs, threatening to drown him "Please... Rachel... *Ach...* the village is... *argh...* lost..." The human soldiers regrouped in a wider circle, and maintained their weapons aimed straight at Amano. The clan leader coughed spastically... his arms lost their strength, and fell limply beside him "Michael... the two of you... *ach...* run... escape, and reassemble our clan..." His vision became blurry as he pushed himself to the limit "Fight for our ideals... *argh...* do not harm... the humans..."

"Ready!" Another soldier shouted, to which Rachel instantly turned around growling in a deeply appalling roar.

“NO!” Amano screamed with his last ounce of strength, but to no avail, as Rachel would not allow herself to leave him behind. Her instincts had taken over, urging her to protect her only remaining family.

“Aim!!” The soldier continued. Rachel screamed and growled at the top of her lungs in a deafening, inhuman union between a woman’s tortured and frantic wail and a monstrous creature’s deep bellow of despair and anguish. Her tensely unfolded wings trembled uncontrollably at both her sides.

“Michael!” Amano looked Michael directly in the eyes. For a moment all the grief and pain seemed to abandon the elder demon’s stare; it was as if his soul was burrowing deep into Michael’s mind, having released all the afflictions of his dying physical body, pulling Michael into focus, telling him to remember what he had to do “Please... take her... and run...”

On that moment, Michael realized what he had to do. He nodded his head and drew one last warm smile at his mentor as dark tears streamed down his face. Summoning as much force of will and courage as he could, to convince himself that he had to do what he was about to, he turned away from Amano and embraced Rachel, locking her tight between his arms with all of his strength, and before she had the chance to overcome surprise, he jumped in the air and flapped his wings as strongly as he knew how

“**NOOOO!!!!**” Michael’s heart ached, his mind agonized from hearing Rachel’s desperate cries as the view of the battlefield gradually became smaller and smaller until he could no longer distinguish the forms on the ground and all he could make out where the multiple, inaudible muzzle flashes that suddenly erupted in a tiny circle, before the clouds overcasted all view of the Earth.

Ryo was staggered by a hard punch to the face, his mind dazed. Both he and Gabriel had dropped their weapons when he had tackled the angel. The sun’s view was obscured by the blue-haired angel’s raging face as the creature threw one punch after the other. Ryo’s battle had been lost... the

humans were waging open war with the demons all around him once more; Amano was going to die, and with him all the answers he could have given to Ryo... with the way things had gotten out of hand, he would probably not even be able to reach Karin's mother and she would be taken by the humans. What reason was there to keep fighting, when everything he had known and believed in for the past year was all part of Raphael's fabricated web of lies? He was no more than another demon... he was part of the very same entity he had been fighting to free humanity from. All those demons he had mercilessly butchered; all of their shadows would come back to haunt his mind for all eternity... every one of their anguished and pained expressions of fear when his sword had ruthlessly cut them down... his own face would be engraved in each of those memories.

Ryo's vision was just a blur of blue and yellow; his hands hopelessly raised before his face only to be violently pushed aside before another punch sent him closer into oblivion. He could hear the commotion around him as the demons realized what had happened to Amano. The sounds of battle seemed somehow muffled by a single demon's howling screams of anguish.

A human's voice was heard as well "Ready!" And another powerful punch dazed Ryo's senses. His eyes slipped shut, luring him to sleep.

"NO!" Amano's voice sounded harsh, piercing through all the confusion lashing at Ryo's numb mind.

"Aim!!" The human screamed louder this time, somehow making his voice perceptible over the raging demon's deafening roars.

"FIRE!!!" The shouting voice was heard one last time, before an explosion of gunshots summoned an image of little Diana's face to Ryo's memory. This was what awaited her if he failed to protect her... a firing squad. Her small, tear ridden face slowly nodding to him in total darkness, her black eyes reflecting the light emanating from his palm, came into view *"I'll come back for you, I promise"* His own voice echoed deep within the dark depths of his mind and suddenly his eyes reopened.

Gabriel's arm was drawn back beside his head, ready to drop down, but Ryo's hand reached up in anticipation and caught the angel's closed fist. The blue-haired leader's surprise was evident in his eyes as Ryo pulled his leg back, and fiercely kicked up, shoving him through the air. Ryo raised himself on one elbow and shook his head trying to clear his mind. He felt that well-known metallic taste overflowing his mouth. His vision regained its focus revealing the mouthful of blood he had just spat out on the ground. The battle all around him was coming to an end. The demonic presences he felt were few and far between, completely surrounded by human and angelic opponents... Gabriel was just ahead of him, having reclaimed his large sword. Ryo needed his own weapon back, if he were to have any chance of winning. He noticed a bright gleam from the left corner of his eye... his faithful companion stood tall, shimmering under the sunlight, a small portion of its blade stuck deep into the ground.

Gabriel had his wings wide open as he dashed with inhuman speed towards his target. Ryo rolled to his left just in time to avoid being cleaved in half by an enormously powerful slash, and with three hasty strides his hand was firmly clasped around the grip of his katana, effortlessly drawing it from the ground. The angelic leader was upon Ryo once again, but this time he did not have the element of surprise helping him. With a swift motion Ryo ducked under a long sideways slash and with a quick sweep he tripped his opponent slightly off balance, before raising himself back up and delivering a fast one-handed slash of his own. Gabriel shifted his weight backwards and blood was spilled into the air from a long horizontal cut all along the right side of his face.

The blue-haired leader stumbled back in bewilderment. Ryo stepped closer and, before his opponent had the chance to recover, he thrust his sword deep into the angel's leg, puncturing it to the bone, before twisting and removing the blade, to watch the creature crumble to one knee. When Ryo was about to go for the killing blow, he sensed a small particle pushing against the air's attrition towards him and swayed back. A bullet almost

brushed his nose, splitting a few of his long white hairs into pieces before his eyes. Two other shots followed that one, forcing Ryo to raise his sword; two swift slashes deflected both projectiles, but the damage had been done already.

Ryo noticed movement from his right side, but he could not react in time. A sharp pain struck him all along the right side of his back. He stumbled forward from the instinctive contracture of his muscles and felt a sudden pointed impact splintering his left clavicle as a slug perforated his shoulder. Flashes of pain lashed violently at his mind. One last bullet was coming, headed directly at his heart. He raised his sword for protection. The projectile hit the chipped edge directly, shattering the blade into pieces.

Glimmering shards of metal flew all around Ryo as an intensely cold sensation invaded him. He watched – as if in slow motion – as the large, bloodied blade of Gabriel's sword shot out of his chest... he held his breath in astonishment for an instant, his mouth closed tight as the coppery taste of blood overwhelmed his senses. The scenery all around him twisted and warped in shadowy trails as gravity took its toll and his body hit a solid surface with tremendous force. He had no clear idea of what was going on anymore... his eyes could only visualize a blurry stone pattern, slowly becoming fainter... all of his thoughts threatened to abandon him as he fought the urge to fall asleep... a warm, wet feeling slowly spread under his body until it reached his neck... his face... his mouth... that familiar taste once again... the taste of metal... of blood.

Epilogue: **«Dream/Reality»**

Ryo opened his eyes in a sudden, unexpected awakening from total emptiness of mind. He was dazed and lightheaded, he felt as if he had been sleeping for a long time. There was no immediate recollection of any recent happenings... how he had fallen asleep... where he had been or what he had been doing. After a few seconds of confusion he remembered the shocking memories recorded in his brain. Gabriel's sword jutting out of his chest; the sharp pain striking at him from every angle; the repulsive taste of blood...

He sat up and frantically felt around with his hands in search of wounds... there were none. He realized his legs were covered under nice, smooth bed sheets, and he was sitting on a soft surface. He looked around... he was surrounded by strangely recognizable walls and furniture. He raised a hand to his face, thinking of rubbing his eyes and massaging his temples to clear his thoughts, but he stopped his motion and just stared at his hand in confusion... his skin tone was oddly colorful, his nails resembling normal human nails.

"Ryo!! Breakfast's ready!" A tenderly remembered female voice talked in a loud cheery tone, from what sounded like a downstairs floor.

Ryo immediately got uncovered and jumped out of bed. He rushed down the stairs, almost tripping on his own feet as he turned around the baluster and headed into the kitchen. He had known the way, and he had known it was *his* kitchen. He was home.

"Ryo!" Ryo's mother exclaimed in surprise, looking at his ecstatic figure, dressed in nothing more than boxer shorts "You startled me! What's wrong?" She said, with a worried look on her face.

Ryo could not manage any words. He stepped forward and quickly embraced his mother, burying his face in her shirt's collar. He was still for a while as her familiar perfume invoked countless nostalgic memories in his mind "You... you're... alive..." He finally said, tears welling in his eyes.

"Huh...?" She sounded utterly confused.

Ryo hesitantly took a step back, staring with unbelieving and amazed eyes at his mother.

"What is it, son?!"

"... Nothing... never mind, I'm... I'm just happy to see you..." A wide, marveled smile would not leave Ryo's face, despite his attempts at concealing it, to stop freaking his mother out.

"... Okay..." Ryo's mother raised an eyebrow "Well, go get ready honey. Or do you want to leave Karin waiting?"

Ryo struggled to fight back the tears that begged to be released from under his eyelids as he considered the idea of seeing Karin's beautiful face again, of listening to her sweet voice once more... of kissing her soft lips one more time. His eyes flinched from the welcome sensation of his skin aching beneath his pinching fingers. Was he really not dreaming?

Ryo strode up the stairs with no second thoughts. He opened his wardrobe and reached for a random set of clothes, without even looking at what they were. After getting dressed he slipped his feet into a pair of loose sneakers and headed for the door, but was stopped in place by a strange vertigo sensation invading his head. All of his surroundings seemed to tremble and somehow misshape as a dark, machinery-filled ambience became visible. A shiver ran down his back. He closed his eyes shut, and when he reopened them he saw only the door leading out of his room. A second of silent consideration was all he could bear. He hurried down the stairs and out onto the streets, unable to resist the urge to feel Karin's touch once again.

“Ryo! Your pancakes!!” Ryo heard his mother calling out to him as he passed by the kitchen door.

“Later, mom!”

All the way to Karin’s house, Ryo was lost in his thoughts. Five minutes alone felt like an eternity when he delved into all the questions drowning his mind. Could it all have been a dream? Was it really possible that everything had been just one long nightmare... had he really awakened from that dreaded reality he was facing? Where he was dying? Or could *this* be the dream? But everything felt so vivid...

The view of the out of focus sidewalk was completely erased from Ryo’s mind as Karin’s melodious voice sneaked through his eardrums and enwrapped all of his thoughts “Hey, Ryo!”

She was standing but a few steps ahead of him, her seraphic smile gracing his every sense with a splendorous sentiment of warm peacefulness and happiness. Each of those small steps felt like a giant leap forward until he was finally able to reach out and entwine his arms around her slender waist. He did not speak one single word, but instead pressed his lips firmly against hers in a passionate acceptance of what was being given to him. No matter what might be the dream or what might be reality, one more chance to be with Karin was something he would wholeheartedly and unquestioningly embrace.

They kissed for a long, precious, unforgettable moment. Ryo enjoyed the feeling of Karin’s feathery hair tickling his brow; he admired the smell of her ambrosial perfume enticing his nostrils; he delighted in the silky touch of her delicate fingers sliding along his face; he adored the divine taste of her angelical mouth enveloped in his own. He was happy.

“Hi...” He said in a deeply longing look after very slowly rupturing the bond between their lips, as if to maintain an everlasting, unbroken connection.

“... Hi!” She answered back with a surprised and slightly blushed face.

They spent the day enjoying each other's company as if for the first time in their lives, as Ryo got reacquainted with his admiration, his affection and his passion for Karin. He suggested they skipped classes, which she reluctantly accepted after having been bombarded with an unending barrage of kisses and words of praise. Ryo took her to visit the Lemuris Castle where they ran through most of the afternoon forging new, loving memories that would replace the last one he had kept from that place.

When nightfall came, Ryo walked Karin back home and dropped her off at her place with a long goodnight kiss. He stood locked in place admiring her as she slowly walked backwards up the stairs, and blew one last kiss at him before entering the building and allowing the door to sever their lingering eye contact. On his way home, Ryo remembered to check his phone, and so received the only piece of good news that had been missing; Michael had sent a reply to his written message, they would meet the next day to catch up. Everything was as it should be.

When he arrived home, Ryo hugged his father like he had not remembered doing since he was only a little boy. He reveled in hearing both his parents recounting how their perfectly routine days had gone by, to the very last detail. The whole day felt like all that Ryo would ever ask for if he could have one last wish granted him before letting go of his life.

Eventually the time came when Ryo had no one else to keep him company except for his pillow. He slowly went up the stairs, and flicked the light switch on. He stood motionless at the doorway for a moment, contemplating the view of his room... the same room he had once felt was empty and dull, now had an impressively warm and inviting atmosphere that made him feel perfectly at home. That made him feel safe. He got undressed, turned the light off and slid under the smooth embrace of his newly made bed. He closed his eyes unhurriedly and in reticence, fearing that he would somehow not awaken back to the same reality.

From the total darkness that filled his sight, an image of a darkly lit room started forming. A room filled with strange mechanical contraptions and what appeared to be laboratory materials. He shivered and his eyes quickly reopened to stare back into the welcoming, empty void of his room...

About the author

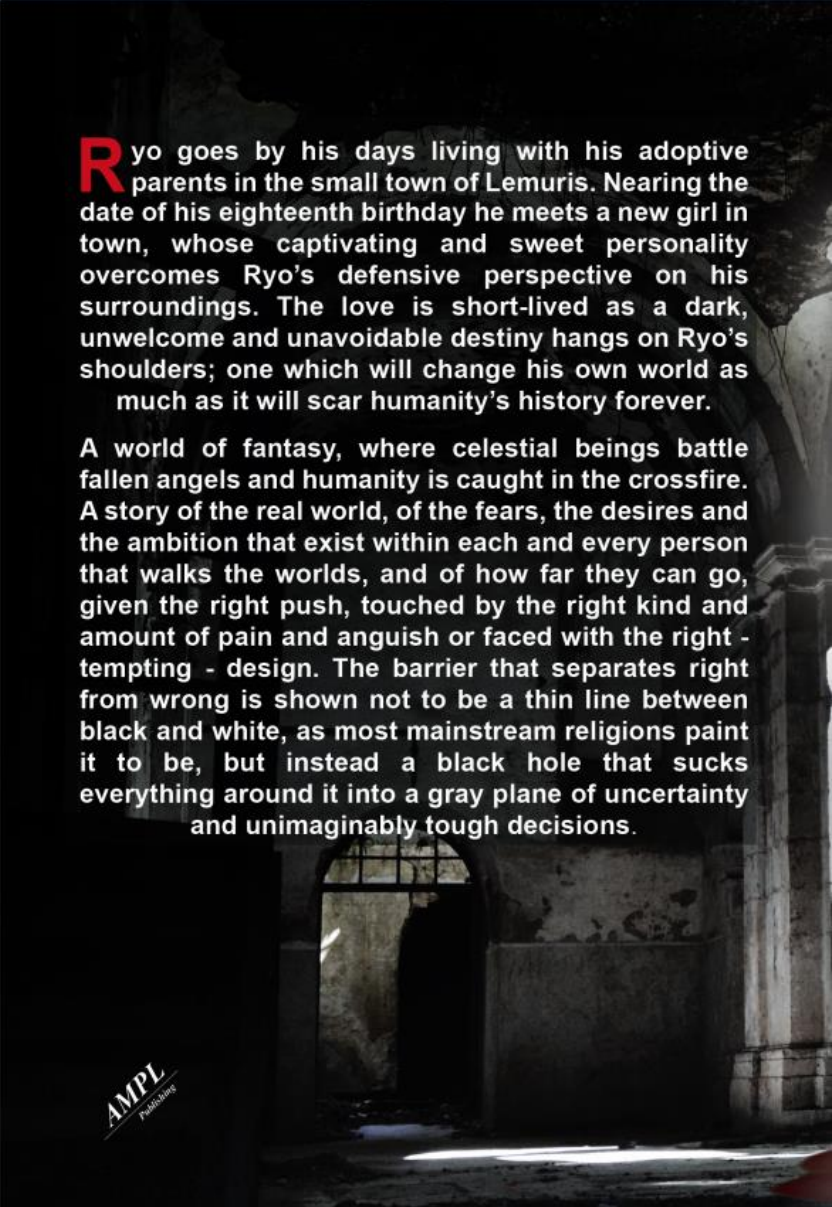
Born 1986, in Hong Kong, China, Emanuel Silva traveled the world as a child with his mother and older brother, finally settling back in his family's home country, Portugal, at the age of six. Having spent most of his childhood being best-friends with videogames, movies and books, he never lost the habit of spending hours on end immersing himself in stories of fantasy and sci-fi worlds.

Emanuel started writing “**Demon’s Blood**” as an experimental hobby, to give use to his creativity and imagination, to try and create his own world from scrap. As the words kept pouring out, it became a larger project, eventually seeing the light of day as his first published novel.

Characters are the soul of a story, for Emanuel, and because of that his writing is usually heavily focused on character development and interactions. Fiction is what he lives for; fantasy, horror and sci-fi blend together to bring life to the worlds he creates.



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Ryo goes by his days living with his adoptive parents in the small town of Lemuris. Nearing the date of his eighteenth birthday he meets a new girl in town, whose captivating and sweet personality overcomes Ryo's defensive perspective on his surroundings. The love is short-lived as a dark, unwelcome and unavoidable destiny hangs on Ryo's shoulders; one which will change his own world as much as it will scar humanity's history forever.

A world of fantasy, where celestial beings battle fallen angels and humanity is caught in the crossfire. A story of the real world, of the fears, the desires and the ambition that exist within each and every person that walks the worlds, and of how far they can go, given the right push, touched by the right kind and amount of pain and anguish or faced with the right - tempting - design. The barrier that separates right from wrong is shown not to be a thin line between black and white, as most mainstream religions paint it to be, but instead a black hole that sucks everything around it into a gray plane of uncertainty and unimaginably tough decisions.